Changing Bodies:
Representations of Metamorphic Comic Characters

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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.

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Abstract

Metamorphic characters, sometimes referred to as shape-shifters or shape-changers, are a staple, continual, and fascinating presence in mythic narratives, early literature, and present day popular culture. With labile, grotesque bodies, ambiguous natures, and the capacity to change at any moment, metamorphic characters remind the human subject of their inherent instability. The overwhelming portrayals of metamorphic processes gloss over the in-betweens, the stages of the process when the metamorphic subject is neither and both.

Metamorphic comic characters are some of the most durable characters in the history of superheroes. The ongoing and diverse narratives of characters such as Mystique, Martian Manhunter, Metamorpho, Element Girl, Shift, and The Hulk provide representations and portrayals of instability, gender politics, and sexuality, which revolve around and centre upon the body. Investigating representations of metamorphic comic characters necessarily led to the investigation of the superhero narrative. Volume 1 of this thesis, Changing Bodies: Representations of Metamorphic Comic Characters, positions the superhero narrative as falling in the genre of the Marvellous-Uncanny which also provides space for Franz Kafka’s previously uncategorised short story, ‘Metamorphosis’. Changing Bodies shows that through the continual re-invention of the superhero narrative, superhero characters are necessarily re-inscribed as posthuman subjects. Metamorphic characters and posthumanism are linked through the figure of the cyborg which has come to
dominate posthuman theory. In drawing upon both the cyborg man/machine and philosophical posthuman theory, Changing Bodies positions the cyborg shapeshifter, The Engineer, as an ideal posthuman subject. The posthuman metamorphic character is embedded in narratives, in mediums and genres, and thus in a world in which they can affect consciousness. When they affect our consciousness they therefore have “real world” effects.

My research of the superhero narrative and metamorphic characters informed my writing of Volume Two of this thesis, Serpent Dawn. Like the superhero narrative, Serpent Dawn combines elements of science-fiction, fantasy, and myth. The relationship between Changing Bodies and Serpent Dawn is embodied in the main character, Acka – a metamorphic character in a hybrid narrative.

Set in the year 2060 with South-Eastern Australia experiencing its eighteenth year of drought, Serpent Dawn is the story of Acka, a nineteen year-old girl living in the run-down Sydney suburb of Kings Hill. Acka has been experiencing some particularly vivid dreams of a snake eating the sun though thinks nothing of them. When her mother dies Acka steals some of her violent half-brother’s money and sets off on an Australian odyssey to meet up with her friend, Priscilla ‘Pussy’ Oakley, in the booming Western Australia town of Fitzroy Crossing.

Travelling by train through the bleak tracts of Western New South Wales to Broken Hill, and then to Adelaide, Acka eventually finds herself virtually broke in the remote South Australian coastal town of Fowlers Bay which is populated by a strange group of Brothers. After slaughtering a beached whale, the Brothers, turn their attention to Acka, who is helped by a transgender woman, Andromeda. The two newly acquainted women barricade themselves in the Fowlers Bay church where Acka is presented with a conundrum which she must solve to be spared. She must
interpret the Brothers’ collective dream, which unfortunately, they can’t remember. Acka does this, though she’s not sure how but suspects it is linked to her recent snake dreams, through a kind of lucid dreaming episode. Angered at Acka’s correct interpretation, the Brothers quickly change their mind to spare her. However Andromeda has snuck away and stolen the head Brother’s immaculate vintage XC Ford Falcon just in time to facilitate their escape.

Acka and Andromeda drive to Perth where they meet Koko, an aboriginal woman who is able to sense people with Dreaming ability. Her senses go into overdrive when she meets Acka. Koko’s suspicions about Acka’s Dreaming ability are confirmed when Acka unknowingly heals a mutated crab.

At Fitzroy Crossing, Acka finds Pussy is unable to follow through on her offer of a place to stay. Instead Acka accepts Koko’s invitation to go to her home town of Kokoberra in Arnhem Land and all three fly there in her Pussy’s Gyrodine.

In Arnhem Land, Acka meets Koko’s father, Padaru, an aboriginal elder of high-degree, who straight-forwardly announces that Koko is correct – Acka definitely has Dreaming in her. Koko then explains she can ‘activate’ the Dreaming in Acka. Activation is dangerous though and only a few ‘activated’ people have survived. Acka decides that even if true, activation is too dangerous. Acka’s changes her mind when confronted with the spectacle of a swarm of flies that takes shape as a smiling replica of Acka’s own face. Koko then activates Acka but is unable to control the powerful forces involved. Over the next day and night, in a protracted and amazing transformation which threatens Acka’s life, she spectacularly changes into the Dreaming being, the Rainbow Serpent.

After first taking respite in the Gulf of Carpentaria, the Serpent rampages through the drought-ridden land of Southern Queensland and Western New South
Wales followed by a huge storm front. The Serpent then splits into several other serpents which help reinvigorate the landscape by creating a new inland sea. Pussy and Koko follow the Serpents in the Gyrodine, but are brought down and stranded when debris thrown into the air damages the aircraft.

The Serpents travel to Sydney, causing massive destruction, transforming the city and its surrounding precincts into a primordial swamp, while at the same time miraculously saving all the inhabitants.

Koko and Pussy are rescued by Padaru and his friend Wulgaru, a dreamtime giant he has ‘sung up’ made of wood, stones, and wax. After they return to Kokoberra, Wulgaru sets off, returning later with an unconscious Acka. When she returns to consciousness, Acka has a heightened awareness of all objects and people around her. She relates that Dreaming beings are coming back to live in our time, to protect the land, and relieve its suffering.
‘Metamorphosis has always been for me one of the basic facts of life. Everything takes on a form, changes, falls apart and reforms in new organisations as part of an endless cycle.’

(James Gleeson in Free, 2004:52)
Introduction

A Brief History of Metamorphosis, A Brief History of Superhero Comics

‘Metamorphosis can be lightning change or the slow gestational change of nature’ (Gleeson in Free, 2004:56).

‘In metamorphosis, the shift is from one form to another without passing via meaning’ (Baudrillard, 2000:40).

For Leonard Barkan, a history of metamorphosis is a ‘history of its attractions and meanings… of its place in the history of culture’ (1986:1). Indeed metamorphic characters are a constant presence throughout the history of literature providing an alluring and dangerous temptation to experience the world of the “other.” Major historical literary works such as Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass* or *The Transformations of Lucius*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s ‘The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’, and Franz Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’ base their narratives on metamorphic characters using the idea of metamorphosis in different ways. The modern shapeshifter, born post 1945 is one who evokes multiplicities through fluid identities and exhibits multiple forms. Figures such as the liquid metal terminators from *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, Seth Brundle from David Cronenberg’s *The Fly*, Odo from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*,
and the god-demon, Glory, from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* represent contemporary metamorphic characters. The shape-changing villain, Mystique, from the Marvel Comics’ *X-Men* series of titles is a postmodern metamorphic character who evokes multiple readings. While it is now generally accepted that Superman and Batman, imbued with over seventy years of history and re-invention, have interpretations beyond their literal representations, the comic characters Mystique, Metamorpho, Martian Manhunter, The Hulk, Shift, and Element Girl also lend themselves to interpretation. As current incarnations of an evolving metamorphic lineage, these characters, whose histories range between fifty-five and five years in length, offer a unique opportunity to compare and contrast representations of metamorphosis through a vivid and ever-changing medium. My analysis of metamorphic comic characters, with Mystique as a focus, is an effort to further “un-tap” the potential of this loaded pop-cultural resource. When previously analysing “run of the mill” monthly title comics I have been surprised by how rich the material is in cultural information and, as this thesis exhibits, my investigation of metamorphic characters was no exception. Like cinema, television, and literature, comics have a cultural currency. It is simply up to those interested to cash it in. This thesis investigates representations of the metamorphic comic characters Mystique, Metamorpho, Martian Manhunter, The Hulk, Shift, and Element Girl, providing them with a literary space in the history of culture alongside their metamorphic predecessors.

The fiction component of this thesis, *Serpent Dawn*, draws upon the themes which *Changing Bodies* explores to produce a unique work of fiction. In writing *Serpent Dawn* and creating the metamorphic character, Acka, I drew upon the freedom of the superhero narrative, which combines elements of science-fiction, fantasy, and myth, while endeavouring not to perpetuate the representational “flaws”
of previous incarnations of metamorphic characters such as the eliding of grotesque mid-points. In essence my aim was to create a metamorphic character in a hybrid narrative. Explicitly, the relationship between the two components is the exploration of the representation of metamorphosis and metamorphic characters.

Irving Massey finds the study of metamorphosis a ‘morbid subject’ (1976:1) because literary metamorphosis is specific in each case, meaning the search for a ‘single cause, motivation or function is… finally unprofitable’ (1976:3). However, as Kai Mikkonen points out, Massey contradicts himself as he continually positions metamorphosis as a critique of language privileging notions of meaninglessness, inertness, and the antilingualistic (1996:331n). Massey’s theory proposes that to enter speech is to speak in someone else’s language. The act of metamorphosis then becomes a withdrawal from the use of an other’s language; the subject’s desire to return to a place of one’s own language where the limits of knowledge, the realities of experience are more readily and easily understood; and where communication is never misunderstood or misinterpreted (1976:26). For Massey the realm of personal language, one’s own language, lies in the realm of dreams – a place strikingly similar to Lacan’s Imaginary. An example of this can be seen in Ang Lee’s film adaptation, The Hulk (2003). Bruce Banner (the Hulk’s human alter ego) continually dreams of his childhood, a certain kind of primal scene where his parents argue, and he describes his impressions of being the Hulk as dreamlike. When Bruce changes to the Hulk, he enters a state of non-language. A mass of libidinal drives, the Hulk has no “speech” apart from rage-filled yells, grunts, and growls which only he understands.
Conversely to Massey’s privileging of one’s own language, Mikkonen writes that metamorphosis ‘has frequently been used to represent a punishment involving a non-linguistic state of being’ (1996:309, my emphasis) such as to which Ovid’s characters and Kafka’s Gregor have been subjected, therefore problematizing the boundaries between language and nonlanguage (1996:309). Again, referring to the Hulk, Bruce Banner’s scientific endeavours finds him “meddling” in technology that should perhaps be best left alone. The accident which turns him into the Hulk, depriving him of speech, is the punishment for his technological meddling. But for Massey this anti-linguistics is a ‘desperate measure’ (1976:187). He writes that metamorphosis ‘takes refuge in the physical… because it is the only place where language cannot follow it’ (1976:187). Presumably this is the language learned and used to enter Lacan’s Symbolic. If Massey is correct, how can a character describe the experience of physical metamorphosis precisely when they can only use someone else’s language; the language of another? This is a topic I return to in Chapter Two which addresses the issues that if the language of another is inadequate to describe the process of metamorphosis, this may be because metamorphosis itself is inherently unstable and difficult to communicate, leading to a glossing over of the physicality involved in the metamorphic process.

Mikhail Bakhtin writes that metamorphosis as an early literary idea was:

a mythological sheath for the idea of development – but one that unfolds not so much in a straight line as spasmodically, a line with “knots” in it, one that therefore constitutes a distinctive type of temporal sequence (1982:113).

The Greek philosopher Hesiod breaks this “sheath” down into a variety of sequences such as the shifts in ages and generations, and the growth stages of grapes and grains.
To Hesiod, metamorphosis was not an individual experience but rather a process that occurred, and was observed, over a period of time. Metamorphosis gains its definition as a ‘miraculous, instantaneous transformation’, in the Roman and Hellenistic era (Bakhtin, 1982:114), a definition which continues to reside in contemporary portrayals. Barkan, who writes extensively on Ovid, posits metamorphosis as ‘the moment when the divine enters the familiar’ (1986:18). As an interpretation of the Roman/Greek myths where the gods interplay with humans, nymphs, demigods, dryads, and naiads who populate the earth, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* has elements of both the instantaneous and temporal. Ovid writes:

> My intention is to tell of bodies changed
> To different forms; the Gods who made the changes

(Ovid, 1955:3).

To tell of bodies changed may have been his intention but this doesn’t constitute the main focus of *Metamorphoses*. Physical metamorphoses take a back seat to the myths in which metamorphosis takes place. Beginning with the Creation, and ending with Caesar’s transformation into a star, the cosmogonic and historical processes in *Metamorphoses* are ‘actualized through a selection of metamorphoses… without connection to one another… deployed in a series lacking internal unity’ (Bakhtin, 1982:114). Ovid has Jove and Neptune frequently appearing in various human and non-human forms in order to seduce beautiful nymphs. Other examples of metamorphic characters and processes include that of the ocean-living Proteus ‘who changes always’ (Ovid, 1983:28), and humans being variously changed by gods as a protective measure (Io, Daphne, Arcady and Argas); as punishment for hubris (Arachnae, Alcithoe and her sisters); for unlawful dalliances with gods (Arcady); villainy (Lycaon, Lyncus); or just plain bad luck (Actaeon). Humans are also
changed due to the mourning of deaths (Cygnus, and the sisters of Phaethon), and depression (Ocyrhoe). These characters change into other humans, animals, and natural objects such as trees, pools of water, rivers, and stars. Jove also appears as a shower of gold and a flame. In Ovid, metamorphosis is depicted as a moral consequence of a character’s actions while also a part of the natural world. However:

by the early fourteenth century, allegorical explanation had explicitly replaced *mutation* as the focus of commentary and Ovidian shapeshifting was labelled heretical (Walker-Bynum, 2001:100-1).

For example, Lycaon then is not changed into a wolf, but his transformation is a ‘moral decline into wolfishness’ (Walker-Bynum, 2001:100). For Caroline Walker-Bynum, metamorphosis is many things, including expressing a ‘labile world of flux and transformation, encountered through story’ (2001:30). This describes well an Indigenous Australian metamorphic subject which is one of the strongest and enduring images of transformation and metamorphosis – the Rainbow Serpent. The Rainbow Serpent has associations with many aboriginal people stretching from Arnhem Land and the Cape York Peninsula of North Queensland to as far south as Victoria and thus is known by many different names. For the Kunwinjku people of western Arnhem Land, Yingarna, the Rainbow Serpent, is the first mother (Taylor, 1990:330) associated with the creation of sites at a macrocosmic level (Taylor, 1990:331). Both male and female, the Rainbow Serpent is a mythological being from the ‘tjukurrpa… the Yankunytjatjara name for what white people call the Dreaming, or the Dreamtime’ (Randall, 2003:3) and lies at the heart of all the Aboriginal nations (Randall, 2003:7).

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1 Yankunytjatjara people are one of the listed traditional owners of Uluru (Ayer’s Rock). Yankunytjatjara tribal land is on the eastern side of Uluru bounded by the Petermann Ranges (west), Musgrave Ranges (south), Basedow Ranges (east), and Lake Amadeaus (north), (Randall, 2003:1).
the ‘great ancestor creator beings… took the shape of many things to create the land and all life forms we see today’ (Randall, 2003:2). For spirits and spirit ancestors of the Dreaming ‘metamorphosis from human to animal was a common feat’ (Isaacs, 2005:33). Recalling Massey’s theory of metamorphosis and the personal language of dreams, there is something subtextual about the time referred to as “the Dreaming” being a time filled with metamorphosis and metamorphic characters. Luke Taylor writes that metamorphosis in aboriginal culture has strong ties to the motif of swallowing: ‘in essence anyone or anything can become Yingarna through being swallowed by her’ (1990:334). Lester Hiatt writes that the metaphor of swallowing and regurgitation in aboriginal myth is suggestive of a kind of transformation without the obliteration of identity (1975:155).

Metamorphosis acquires an openly magical nature in The Golden Ass, becoming ‘a vehicle for conceptualizing and portraying personal individual fate… cut off from both the cosmic and the historical whole’ (Bakhtin, 1982:114). When told to be wary of the witch, Pamphilë, Lucius ignores the warning and investigates her dark leanings. Upon seeing Pamphilë turn into an owl by applying a salve, Lucius convinces Fotis, Pamphilë’s servant girl whom he has recently seduced, to procure some of the salve so he can experience the same transformation. Instead Fotis steals and applies the wrong salve, and Lucius is transformed into an ass. After his travels as an ass, Lucius is returned to human form after pleading with, and agreeing to devote his life to, the goddess Isis. Although an assault on identity, very few metamorphic subjects relinquish their human identity when they transform. A common theme sees the metamorphic character remain themselves “on the inside.” As a metaphor, Pierre Brunel suggests metamorphosis becomes an event that leads to something not wholly different from that which was before (in Mikkonen, 1996:311).
In her theorisation of medieval werewolf stories, Walker-Bynum shows it is the outer physical self that is changed, while the identity, the person, remains self-aware. This is also true of Lucius in *The Golden Ass*. As a consequence of his startling inquisitiveness, Lucius is changed in shape, but Lucius is still Lucius. Similarly, Bakhtin’s writing of the hero of the travel novel applies to Lucius and similar metamorphic characters: ‘even if his status changes sharply… (from beggar to rich man, from homeless wanderer to nobleman), he himself remains unchanged’ (Bakhtin, 1986:11). Massey cites Lucius as having ‘used his metamorphosis not as a means of change, but as a defence against it’ (1976:44). Referring to identity, Walker-Bynum seems to agree when she states metamorphosis expresses ‘a resistance to change that may be what we mean… by the “individualism” of the Western tradition’ (2001:33). For Bakhtin, Lucius ‘has no essential distinguishing characteristics, he … is not at the centre of the novelist’s artistic attention’ (1986:10). As a character he has no particular story arc or character development. Instead his lot is to listen to stories as told by other characters he encounters. Apuleius uses Lucius’s metamorphosis as a device to ‘develop and demonstrate the spatial and static diversity of the world (country, city, culture, nationality, various social groups and the specific conditions of their lives)’ (Bakhtin, 1986:10). As a story of morals, Lucius is simply an observer of everyday life to show the workings, good and bad, moral and immoral, of the “real world.”

Compare *The Golden Ass* with Franz Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’ where the main character, Gregor, withdraws from the “real world” he has experienced as a travelling salesman by turning into an insect. If Lucius, as an ass, ‘must play the most humiliating role… not even the role of a slave’ (Bakhtin, 1982:121) to observe everyday life, then what are we to make of Gregor? As an insect he has become the
“lowest” of forms, unable to work or even care for himself properly. Gregor takes beatings, eats refuse, and resides under a lounge for much of the story. Like Lucius, Gregor’s personal and magical transformation allows him to observe the “real world” of his family’s life, noting their attitudes and foibles as they are affected by growing monetary problems. Gregor though has no benevolent goddess to return him to his human form and therefore his only course of action is suicide by self-imposed starvation.

Robert Louis Stevenson’s ‘The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’ provides another example of a metamorphic subject. Jekyll’s metamorphosis to Hyde is self-imposed and is by no means an accident. Disguised as scientific experimentation, Jekyll’s change is actually of a magical nature, characterised by the “magic powder” which he administers to himself. As opposed to mythological figures who are changed to escape danger or as a moral consequence, and Gregor and Lucius who are benign or at least limited in their ability to affect their situation, the metamorphic subject in ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ is the aggressor. Jekyll/Hyde’s actions drive the narrative. Hyde mixes freely, or somewhat freely, amid society and indulges in the guilty pleasures of which his more moral and public countenance of Jekyll cannot. In opposition to Bakhtin’s assertion that metamorphosis of the individual does not affect or engineer change in the external world, Jekyll and Hyde are not just observers of everyday life or the real world, but active participants – Hyde opens a bank account and leases an apartment in Soho. Further and in contrast to Gregor and Lucius who are for the most part relegated to the margins of society as passive observers, Jekyll and Hyde become the observed. Hyde’s two recorded acts of criminality, the trampling of a little girl and the murder of Danvers Carew, are both observed by third parties late at night and his repugnance stemming from his
appearance, which cannot be pinpointed by those whom encounter him, is always a noted subject. In a genealogical hierarchy, the transformations in Ovid, and of Lucius, Gregor, and Dr Jekyll, are physically regressive to worse states of being, tapping into the lower animalistic nature of humans – which is against the notion of clearly defined boundaries of self and other. Indeed they are characterised by that of the animal. Hyde is described as ape-like. Lucius is an ass, literally. Gregor is an insect. Even Stoker’s Dracula has the ability to change into a bat and a pack of rats. Other obvious examples are Seth Brundle in the film *The Fly*, the figure of the werewolf (and all lycanthropy) and the animism of the Australian Aboriginal myths.

The act of metamorphosis is one of change, transition and transformation. Metamorphic characters occupy a liminal space, a border, one which society deems should not be crossed. The ability to shift from one form to another, or from one to an *other*, places the character in a precarious position. Mary Douglas writes:

> Danger lies in transitional states… because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others (1966:96).

The act of metamorphosis is therefore a transgressive act, the metamorphic character transgressing bodily, cultural, and social boundaries. Transforming to the subhuman or non-human violates the boundaries of the clean and proper human body, and is punishable by death (or can only be redeemed through divine intervention).

However, James Trilling writes that in more recent times:

> Transformation is no longer something to be feared… not because it has ceased to be frightening, but because it has ceased to be real. The old myths of human limitation, and the lessons and punishments that
enforce them, including transformation, have lost their power. Nowhere is this more clearly to be seen than in… Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis”… The horrendous events take place in the opening sentence. There is no prior transgression, no divinely appointed limit on human behaviour (1998:101).

Gregor has crossed the boundary between human and non-human simply ‘by leading an ordinary bourgeois life – or for no reason at all’ (Trilling, 1998:101). As a statement about the human condition it ‘negates everything that transformation has meant since classical times. Therefore ““The Metamorphosis” marks the end, not the rebirth, of its theme’ (Trilling, 1998:101).

The Metamorphosis of Metamorphosis

So if Kafka is the end of metamorphosis as a theme, what are we to make of metamorphic tales and characters after Kafka? Although death as a consequence of transformation is not a deterrent to seeking out metamorphosis, it is still unsafe, fraught with danger, moral lessons, and punishments. In David Cronenberg’s The Fly (1986), Seth Brundle’s human form literally slowly disintegrates as he takes on more and more characteristics of a fly. Seth operates outside of convention, not following proper procedure by using himself to test his prototype teleportation device when previous experiments on animal subjects have failed. Note again how metamorphosis is invested with links to the animalistic. Seth’s test on a primate leaves the animal virtually turned inside out. Similarly, when Seth ultimately devolves to an abject human/fly hybrid, his human body parts having fallen away, his insides literally become his “outside.” However, recalling the idea that metamorphosis is simply an

2 Trilling here refers to Kafka’s story as ‘The Metamorphosis’ rather than its correct title of simply, ‘Metamorphosis’.
outer change, the climax of the film shows that Seth still retains an interiority of humanity. When he becomes fused with the teleporter, the shame and horror of what he has become overwhelms him and he encourages his girlfriend to kill him. Although there is a certain amount of hubris involved, the main genesis of metamorphosis here is also magical, embodied by the “magical” teleportation device which fuses Seth’s genes with a fly. Although at first it seems he is rewarded with the “superpowers” of strength and endurance for his innovation and bravery, metamorphosis in *The Fly* is ultimately a punishment for not doing things the proper way, and in the finality of Seth’s change into a fly, also one which involves him assuming a non-linguistic state.

Kathleen Anne Perry asserts a creature in a metamorphic state is at once itself and something else. The two contradictory states ‘remain permanently united and irresolvably opposed’ (1990:15). An exception to this, and perhaps a culmination of the idea of metamorphosis, is Dirk Strasser’s short story ‘Waiting for Rain’ (1994) in which the central character believes he has really been an alien “on the inside” all his life – in this case a plant-like alien called a Remellian. By choice he undergoes the process of transalienation – chemically turning into an alien. As the story progresses, he slowly forgets how to be human, while at the same time experiencing the growing thoughts and feelings of a Remellian, articulated through human description. His experience of the human becomes dreamlike. Using Massey’s argument, he may now be experiencing his own language. The more Remellian he becomes, the less human traits and feelings he has and the less he cares about human interaction. Eventually he forgets speech, the idea of human communication, and can’t remember to do the things which are human. He is, in fact, forgetting how to *be* human. This is exactly what a metamorphosis including change of identity would be like – the absence, loss,
and essentially the “death” of human-ness and all its associated characteristics, in the form of the inability to express in human terms. Walker-Bynum suggests: ‘If there is real replacement, we can after all both lose and transcend the self’ (2001:32). In ‘Waiting for Rain’ this is indeed what happens – the self is completely lost. Metamorphosis here is not punishment, but an informed expression of self; a transcendence, placed squarely, naturally, within the self. The transformation also marks a reversal of identity – the outside changes to match the inside, rather than the superficial outward change leaving the cognitive “I” inside. Though a little known short story, for me ‘Waiting for Rain’ is unique in brilliantly executing the idea of real metamorphic change.

**Superhero Comics: No Longer Kids Stuff, Never Really Was**

Before embarking on a headlong rush into the theorisation of metamorphic comic characters, I feel it is prudent to discuss the background and history from which these metamorphic characters have been produced.

Superhero comics, or more specifically superhero narratives, provide a mythic realm that feeds and crosses over into various areas of generalised pop culture, most notably that of film and television. In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson writes:

> like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social contexts. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it (1981:3).

Similarly, the characters I theorise in this thesis are impossible to separate from the history and culture in which they are embedded. While on the surface they would
seem to provide little, if any, insight into contemporary culture, seen as they have been for so long as simply pulp children’s entertainment, I would argue (as do others) that because comics are an ongoing medium produced on a monthly (sometimes weekly) basis, and even though storylines are worked out in advance, they have the ability to comment almost immediately on current events. This is achieved by releasing a special edition of a comic or inserting current events into the currently running storyline. A prime example of this was the 2001 September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York. This sort of tragedy also brings into question the validity of superheroes – if they are everywhere and so powerful, how could they allow this tragedy to happen? I would argue that more than any other literary form, the comic genre can be at the forefront when depicting, reflecting, or reacting to, elements of contemporary culture and its social contexts. They provide a history of contemporary popular culture while also being a product of that same culture.

Generally associated with children from their inception, comics quickly garnered an adult readership. Gerard Jones writes that by the end of the 1940s fifty million comics a month were being sold in America and cites a study showing:

over half the readers were twenty or older, that adult readers averaged eleven comics a month, that nearly half the readers were female, and that white-collar workers read the most comics of all (Jones, 2004:237).

A 1991 study (Pearson and Uricchio) concluded that from the early seventies onwards, the average comic reader’s age spanned from the late teens to the mid-twenties and beyond, generally because the readership of the late 1960s and early 1970s had followed their favourite characters and titles as they matured, a trend
which has continued to the present. The difference between the readership of the 1940s and the present is that in the 1940s adults were reading stories primarily written for children, whereas now adults are reading adult stories. DC’s Vertigo line of comics, which blend elements of fantasy and horror, carries a “suggested for mature readers” caution on their covers and has done so since the mid 1980s. Contemporary mainstream comic titles frequently involve storylines dealing with sexuality and drugs. It is now generally accepted that the predominant readership of comics is adult as in evidence in the DVD review of *Marvel: Then and Now: A Night with Stan Lee and Joe Quesada, Hosted by Kevin Smith* which clearly separates the adult and children audiences:

> Granted, we all know that the comic buying audience in the U.S. is largely comprised of adults, and we know that the viewers of this disc will most likely be adults, the stories as told by Stan are probably things that some parents might like to share with their kids, or may be things that some youngsters might want to hear for a school project. As funny as Smith’s frequent profanity can be, it does make the regular track a very “adults only” affair; kudos to the initiative for recognizing that there might also be alternative audiences for this and for making that concession (Brownfield, 2007).

Children are now the “alternative audience” when it comes to, at least here, stories concerning the history behind the production of some very well-known characters.

There is something strange going on in the fact that this distancing of comics from children has to continually be re-stated. Along with the continual debate around the deficiencies of terms such as “comics,” “graphic novel,” or “sequential art” for the medium, I am sometimes left wondering who the purveyors, readers, producers,

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3 The “Harry Potter phenomenon” of adults reading books primarily written for children seems to me to have resonances with the adult reading audience of 1940s comics.
and disectors (myself included) are trying to convince. When the idea of comics being a legitimate art form is no longer a debatable point (and I think that will be sooner than later), what they are described as, or who they are for, will also no longer be an issue.

The figure of the superhero and the superhero narrative are clearly separated through their appearance in different media, such as film, toys and clothing. Douglas Wolk in his book *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (2007) poses a similar theory when he says that children (and no doubt teenagers and adults) first identify or become interested in the superhero *character*. Comics are what the adolescent will come to (hopefully if you are a publisher of comics) once they have been educated about superheroes through film, television (including cartoons), advertising, video games, and merchandising. The following fan letter from *Mystique* #24 (the final issue) illustrates this point while also reiterating that it is adults reading the comics:

My parents, who had a huge collection of comics… always encouraged me to read the many issues surrounding me… A few years later I saw the *X-Men* movie… after I saw the movie I began to like the character Mystique. The more I found out about her, the more I liked her… then I began to collect every comic book, toy, game, statue, and book featuring this amazing, blue shape-shifter… (Scott, 2005:24).

Movies obviously have a greater earning and profit potential than comics and treating superheroes as marketable products in different mediums allows the comic companies to continue to produce the comics themselves. Thus there has been an
explosion of movies based on comic book characters over the past few years and that trend is set to continue going by the list of those currently in production or pre-production. This is mainly due to, I believe, the success of *X-Men* (2000) and the way that it was not treated like a comic. As a lucrative market, the amount of recent movies based on superhero characters is not surprising, and with the production of *Iron Man*, Marvel now make their own movies as compared to previously licensing their characters to other studios. It is no surprise that Marvel comics are currently outselling DC by a considerable margin.

The medium in which comics are presented is also evolving. Multiple issue storylines are quickly bundled into collected edition graphic novels for readers who don’t buy monthly single issues and are not interested in searching for back issues. Comic companies have realised the spending power of the maturing comic readership and are producing new forms of presentation accordingly. The readership of the 1960s and 1970s would be well into middle age and would account for the proliferation of hardback editions of classic titles. DC and Marvel are now catering to several demographic groups. The prestige which is associated with some of the classic comics that have been produced has been recognised by DC in the production of *Absolute Editions*:

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6 As of April 2008 Marvel held 39.78% (Dollar Share) and 44.16% (Unit Share) of the comic market as compared to DC who had 27.22% and 30.26% respectively. (‘April 2008 Sales Chart & Market Share Report’, 2008).
DC Comics Absolute Editions set the standard for the highest quality, most in-depth presentation of classic graphic novels. Each oversized volume is presented in a slipcase and includes unique additional material making each Absolute Edition a cornerstone of any serious comic collection (‘Review’, 2006).

Marvel has introduced an ‘Omnibus’ series of hardback books which reprint the classic early Spiderman, Fantastic Four, and Silver Surfer comics (to name a few) in their original four colour format glory. DC’s Absolute and Marvel’s Omnibus Editions can literally be called “comic books.” Obtaining the original first and early editions of classic comics can be prohibitively expensive for anyone other than the extremely dedicated (and wealthy) collector. These editions have become an investment like the purchasing of artworks. The Marvel Omnibus series allows the comic fan to experience the comics in their original form, and possibly in a better form as the paper used is of a much higher quality than would have been used originally. Previously they were only available as, sometimes crudely reproduced, black and white reprints such as Marvel’s Essential series, and DC’s Showcase Presents series. These titles also become reference books available in libraries, which for someone such as myself makes the research and reference of comics more accessible and decidedly cheaper.

The comic readership crosses over to the creative side of comics, as Scott Bukatman states: ‘the lines between creators and consumers have been very permeable, and today’s fanboy reader may be tomorrow’s writer, artist, editor, or publisher’ (1994:96). Fanboy is necessarily the important term here. Male writers and artists dominate the field of superhero comics. While storylines are becoming more sophisticated and many characters are no longer just caricatures, the representation of
female characters still tends to emulate, if not overtly mimic, masculine traits. Superhero comics are predominantly written by males for males (adolescent and otherwise). As Gerry Alanguilan, Top Cow inker, suggests, ‘mainstream comics are written mostly with the male adolescent fantasy thing in mind, whether subconsciously or not... Probably this one reason is why the medium attracts mostly boys’ (Contino, 2000). Superhero comics have been moving along steadily for seventy years with the only blips in their timeline being public moral outrages at their sometimes suggestive content. This then suggests, or more assertively, proves that the superhero “formula” works. If superheroes provide reassuring ideas, images, and role models for young (and not so young) males, why would comics want to undermine that? Those in the field admit that comics are a male dominated genre. Veteran comic writer Dan Jurgens notes, ‘There’s a complete lack of material for those few women who find their way into a comic shop… We’ve failed 50% of our potential audience in every way possible’ (Contino, 2000). How do comics repeal their masculine fantasies to appeal to a wider female audience without alienating their male audience? Steve Lieber, artist of Whiteout, believes to get women interested in comics:

First we’d need to make comics that deal with love, family, work, health and conspicuous consumption in ways that are as reassuringly trashy, bland, and formulaic as the prose, films and television programs that most women now eagerly consume (Contino, 2000).

Gerry Alanguilan provides another avenue:

I would not presume to know what women want so I think it would be better to ask women this question. Make a survey perhaps, and ask
them what are the things they would want to see in a comic book? (Contino, 2000).

Jessica Linker in an article praising superhero comics and their content, may already have the answer: ‘What does appeal to me as a female? One word: Emotion. Superhero comics are emotional’ (2000). Bukatman states the infusion of romance discourse into *X-Men* comics extended their appeal beyond the superhero subculture (1994:117) but they ‘tend to wallow in over-obvious emotional allegories’ (1994:128n). All of which suggests that what appeals to females already exists, at least in some superhero comics. Where have they gone wrong then? Lieber supplies a perhaps simplistic explanation, following from his previous statement:

Second we’d have to make the comics available everywhere that women shop. Finally, third we’d have to do what everyone else who successfully markets to ‘most women’ does – cynically prey on their dreams and fears (Contino, 2000).

An interesting idea perhaps, but suggests that women shop “somewhere else” other than men, and are uninformed consumers. Well, he is a superhero artist after all.

The ‘modern mythology’ (Reynolds, 1992) of the superhero is a resource of significant cultural interest of which the study, and body of theory, has been steadily growing. While early analytic work conducted was largely confined to the figures of Batman (Pearson and Uricchio, 1991) and Superman, the work of Richard Reynolds (1992) and Bukatman (1994) expanded the field to include analyses of *X-Men, Doom Patrol* and Howard Chaykin’s *American Flagg*. In 1999 the *International Journal of Comic Art* was founded, and in 2002 the University of Florida instituted an annual conference devoted to comic theory. The major publications that presented the superhero narrative as literature to a wider pop culture audience were the 1986
releases of Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen*. While there were other great works before these, *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* heralded the first comics that were regarded, and more importantly regarded themselves, as “serious” literature. Both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* have been applauded for their serious attention to story, character, ideas of media manipulation, and postmodern commentary on cold war politics. These two comics paved the way for arguably the work that introduced comics to a whole new and wider audience – Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman*, which in turn opened avenues for further intriguing comic titles of both the superhero and the non-superhero narrative. This “literary” comic has been supplemented by works such as *Arkham Asylum* (1989), *Marvels* (1994), *The Invisibles* (1994-1999), *Astro City* (1995-98), *Kingdom Come* (1996), Warren Ellis’s run on *Planetary* (1998-2004), Mark Millar’s run on *The Authority* (1999-2002), *The Filth* (2005), and *Justice* (2006-07) (to name a few) all with postmodern elements of their own. Alan Moore continues his interrogation of the superhero in the titles *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Top Ten, Tom Strong*, and *Promethea*, from his *America’s Best Comics* line which plays with genre storytelling and avant-garde layouts. These works mark a further development in the comic book as a distinctive artistic and literary form.

Theorising characters in ongoing comic titles is like trying to stand on ever shifting sands. The ongoing nature of the comic as a medium sees characters written and drawn by any number of writers and artists even in the short term, which leads to different characterisations, interpretations, and depictions, of those characters. Likewise, stories are reinterpreted and reinvented continuously – of which the origin

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7 Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* could also be included here, though I don’t use it simply because it is not a superhero comic.

8 Alan Moore’s own *Miracleman* is one such comic. The storyline of superheroes who take making the world a better place into their own hands predates the same idea in *The Authority* by almost twenty years.
story is the most obvious. A character’s origin – the story of how the character came
to acquire or first manifested their powers, accepting or denying the responsibility
that comes with them – is often written and rewritten periodically, incorporating
more and more disparate elements. However the emergence of collected editions,
reprinting storylines by writers or writer/artist teams, give some storylines stand
alone qualities allowing them to be textually theorised on their own merits aside from
comic continuity. Comic continuity could be labelled an oxymoron as over time the
stability of comic universes tend to move toward entropy, which then requires
“realignment” through major events. Without proper research of a character and their
history, newer stories or characterisations can conflict with older ones, creating
continuity errors. Editors and fans alike come up with explanations for these
anomalies, known as retcons (retroactive continuity), where conflicting facts or
storylines are “fixed.” More recently the answer to conflict within a character’s, or a
title’s, history has been simply to start again, retelling the stories for a new
readership and at the same time as a re-visioning for the established readership.

Comic companies now seem comfortable that readers can accept that different
incarnations of individual superheroes exist alongside one another in different titles.
It also, hopefully for comic producers, will result in an increase in sales.

So where is my own investigation into this subject positioned? My intention
is to bring my study to an essence in itself, what every metamorphic character has in
common – a body. All subjects – sexuality, gender, transformation – are embedded
in the body. While trying not to perish under the large field of work devoted to the
body, I will try to chart a course through these heavily mapped waters of form,
morphology, metamorphosis of the body, and metamorphic characters. This thesis
discusses how metamorphosis is something that happens to, and can be understood through, the body. My investigation runs along the lines offered by Walker-Bynum:

The exploration of body-hopping and metamorphosis… reflects less a desire to shed body than an effort to understand how it perdures, less an escape into alterity than a search for the rules that govern change (Walker-Bynum, 2001, p109).

*Changing Bodies* investigates representations and portrayals of metamorphic comic characters through ideas of instability, gender, and sexuality, using theories that revolve around and centre upon the body. In doing this it was necessary to define the genre to which the superhero narrative belongs, and this is discussed in Chapter One, ‘The Genre of the Superhero Narrative: The Marvellous-Uncanny’. This chapter defines the new working genre of the Marvellous-Uncanny as specifically related to superhero narratives explicated through the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and John Frow. It covers how the superhero narrative has re-invented itself while keeping its archaic elements and thus fulfils Bakhtin’s requirements for a literary genre. From this investigation I have derived a new circular model of genre by using and extending the work of Tzetan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson, and Christine Brooke-Rose. As a consequence of this investigation I posit that through the reinvention of genre, the superhero narrative has produced posthuman characters.

Chapter Two, ‘Bodies in Motion: Portrayal of Metamorphic Characters’ investigates metamorphosis itself, posing such questions as: How has the portrayal of corporeal metamorphosis changed in comics? This chapter presents the way in which metamorphosis has been depicted, and introduces the metamorphic comic characters who are theorised – Mystique, Martian Manhunter, Metamorpho, Element Girl, Shift, and The Hulk. These characters have ongoing narratives, providing a wealth of
material to draw upon. Touching on the idea of the grotesque, I also explore how metamorphosis is described and represented through image and text, focusing on how the midpoint of a transformation - where the character is neither what it was nor what it will be, but paradoxically also both – always seems to be lost in the transition.

Mystique, a shapeshifting mutant, is the character I primarily use to compare and contrast the other metamorphic characters. My investigation of Mystique covers every instance of her appearance up to December 2007 in twenty-seven Marvel Comics titles. Chapter Three, ‘The Feminine Mystique: Feminism, Sexuality, Motherhood’, is devoted to a feminist perspective of Mystique’s representation as a foster mother to daughter, Rogue; the depiction of her relationships with her lover, Destiny; her sexuality which is intertwined with her relationship with Destiny; and her altercations with the female superhero, Ms Marvel, whom she is defined in opposition to.

Chapter Four, ‘Metamorphic Comic Characters and Posthumanism’, provides an overview of posthumanism and posthuman theory using the theories of Ihab Hassan, Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, and Robert Pepperell. I present how the literal figure of the cyborg has come to dominate posthuman debates, and how this applies to metamorphic comic characters. In this chapter I outline how comic characters such as those from the comic title, The Authority, can be theorised as posthuman. I draw upon both the cyborg man/machine and philosophical theory – that of embedded consciousness – to position the shapeshifter, and specifically The Authority’s, The Engineer – a cyborg shapeshifter – as a more suitable representation of a posthuman subject than the cyborg. While the subjects of genre, metamorphic characters and posthumanism may not appear to have a certain linkage, it is my
endeavour to show that, in a posthumanistic way, superhero characters are embedded in narratives, in mediums and genres, and thus in a world in which they can affect consciousness. Once they affect our consciousness they therefore have “real world” connotations and effects.
Chapter 1

The Genre of the Superhero Narrative:

The Marvellous-Uncanny

‘A literary genre, by its very nature, reflects the most stable, “eternal” tendencies in literature’s development. Always preserved in a genre are undying elements of the archaic. True, these archaic elements are preserved in it only thanks to their constant renewal, which is to say, their contemporisation. A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre. This constitutes the life of a genre. Therefore even the archaic elements preserved in a genre are not dead but eternally alive; that is, archaic elements are capable of renewing themselves. A genre lives in the present, but always remembers its past, its beginning’

(Bakhtin, 1984:106).

The Superhero: The Figure, The Narrative, The Medium

Comics and comic books are almost inseparable from the figure of the superhero. While in years past crime, romance, and horror comics were a staple part of comic book fare, these now represent only a small portion of the comic book trade which is dominated by the garishly costumed superhero. Stemming from “low-brow” pulp origins, comics share their position in popular culture with science-fiction, a genre
which Rosi Braidotti writes of as having the ‘imagination of disaster and the aesthetics of destruction… the more extensive the scale of the disaster, the better’ (2002:186). The DC Comics crossover storyline *Crisis on Infinite Earths* comes to mind as only one extensive disaster to be portrayed in comics (there is generally one epic crisis every year or so).

First though I wish to distinguish which comics I am talking about here, because the term, comics, is all-encompassing. A comic is not a genre (except by way of paratext), it is a medium, and an “in-between” medium at that – not cinema, not novels, not short stories, not (completely) literary, not simply art, not simply scripts – and yet incorporating aspects of all these. This conglomeration of modes may be why it has been so difficult for comics to find an encompassing term of their own other than the begrudgingly accepted, graphic novel. However, comics as a medium draws from all these conventions while simultaneously influencing them. For my purposes here comics are the medium in which superhero narratives are primarily, but not exclusively, told. More specifically, they contain narratives which invoke the figure of the superhero in its many forms. Similarly, I would also apply to the superhero narrative what Braidotti writes of science-fiction, that it is ‘mercifully free of grandiose pretensions… and thus ends up being a more accurate and honest depiction of contemporary culture than other, more self-consciously “representational” genres’ (2002:182).

In his book *Genre*, John Frow writes that in genres which tell stories ‘set within a recognisable world, the thematic content will be kinds of action, the kinds of actors who perform them, and the significance that accrues to actions and actors’ (2006:76). Frow explains that these actions can be world-historical occurrences,

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9 In this instance I am also excluding serialised comic strips that appear in newspapers, even though superheroes appear in these forms.
sustained adventures, or one-off events while the actors will be recognisably human or non-human. The world formed and containing these actors and actions has a ‘particular organisation of space and time and a particular… degree of plausibility’ (Frow, 2006:76). This can be referred to as what Frow terms the thematic content expressed as a ‘recurrent iconography’ (2006:75). The thematic content of the superhero narrative is that which makes it instantly recognisable to readers. Thus the superheroic figure can be represented in any number of ways while not specifically presenting the reader/viewer with the conventions that we come to associate with the superhero. This can be seen in evidence in television shows such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Heroes, and Bionic Woman, and M. Night Shyamalan’s film Unbreakable (2000). Of course this also calls into question what constitutes a superheroic figure. While Reynolds (1992) points out seven conventions which were established in the first Superman story (in Action Comics 1938) – lost parents, the man-god, justice, the normal and the superpowered, the secret identity, superpowers and politics, and science as magic – these have become less relied upon as the genre has evolved. Reynolds himself notes that these only construct a ‘first stage working definition of the superhero genre’ (16). I reject the idea of the superhero as a “genre” in its own right. As I am elucidating here, the superhero/superheroic figure is a tool which expresses the thematic content of the superhero narrative.

I have always regarded the superhero narrative as one that is difficult to pigeonhole as a genre, as it incorporates and combines many modes of fiction, such as fantasy, science-fiction, myth, and horror, in a realistic setting. Thus a cyborg vampire appearing in an X-Men comic would not be unusual. Neither is Captain America battling the Nazis (which he did), or Batman fighting Al-Qaeda (which he
will if Frank Miller has his way). In this chapter I wish to position the superhero narrative in two different ways. First, using Bakhtin and Klock, I make an argument for the superhero narrative as a literary genre. Second, again using the work of Bakhtin, as well as Todorov, Brooke-Rose, Jackson, and Frow, and through developing a new model of genre, I position the superhero narrative as residing in a new genre category: the Marvellous-Uncanny.

The Characteristics of a Genre

Frow writes that ‘the patterns of genre… are at once shaped by a type of situation and in turn shape the rhetorical actions that are performed in response to it’ (2006:14). Genre ‘embodies the type of recurring situation that evokes it, and… provides a strategic response to that situation’ (Coe et al in Frow, 2006:14). Frow continues:

texts translate (activate, perform, but also transform) the complex meanings made available by the structure of genre, which in turn translates the information structurally embedded in the situation to which it responds (2006:16).

For me, Frow describes and communicates that the essence of genre is changeable and metamorphic in the fact that structure and situation inform each other but also have the power to transform each other in a constant continuation. This is how genres change and re-invent themselves. If we are to follow Bakhtin then this is how genre must work for innovation and repetition to continually evolve while remaining the same. Of course genres do not re-invent themselves literally, rather it is the responses

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10 Announced by Miller himself in February 2006, *Batman: Holy Terror* had yet to be published at time of writing. Miller described the project as ‘a piece of propaganda’ (Goldstein, 2006).
in the form of choices made by authors in their texts that inform the process. All
genres are destabilised by the eternal question which authors ask as the instigator,
and inspiration, for all narratives – What if…?

Frow’s model of genre is a reflexive model ‘in which texts are thought to use
or perform the genres by which they are shaped’ (2006:25). Though, he also writes
that genre classifications are ‘necessarily unstable and unpredictable… because…
they are themselves uses of genre, performance of or allusions to the norms and
conventions which form them and which they may, in turn, transform’ (2006:25).

**The Superhero Narrative as a Literary Genre**

Returning to Bakhtin’s quote which I have used at the start of this chapter, the
elements he ascribes to the literary genre describe the ever evolving superhero
narrative perfectly and in my opinion thus constitute it as a literary genre. To
explicate this I refer to the “ages” which constitute the evolving stages of the
superhero narrative. The Golden Age dates from the first appearance of Superman in
*Action Comics* #1 (1938) to its near demise between 1945 and 1950 (Sassienie,
1994:21). The explosion of superhero comics in this time (dominated by the DC
pantheon of characters), had simple storylines where heroes always triumphed and
were never personally conflicted. The Silver Age is generally regarded as beginning
with the re-publication and rejuvenation of the hero, The Flash, in DC’s *Showcase* #4
(Oct. 1956). This was in no small part prompted by Dr Frederic Wertham’s diatribe
against horror comics which led to the adoption of a ‘Comics Code’ that effectively
killed off the prolific horror comic market and led to the toning down of romance and
The Silver Age was dominated by the emergence of the Marvel pantheon of characters created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the 1960s, those being *The Fantastic Four* (1961), *The Incredible Hulk* (1962), *Spiderman* (1962), *The Mighty Thor* (1963), *X-Men* (1963), *The Avengers* (1963), *Iron Man* (1963), and *Daredevil* (1964). The stories are characterised by the introduction of heroes with personal and/or “real life” problems. From this point in their history, the comic eras become more difficult to demarcate. Depending on what is regarded as the information underpinning the defining of an era – Paul Sassienie seems to take the popularity of the superhero comic, and thus sales, as his measure, while Geoff Klock is more interested in their thematic content – the Silver Age either finished in 1969 (Sassienie, 1994:69), the early to mid 1970s, or continued until the mid 1980s with the publication of *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Watchmen* (1986-7) (Klock, 2002:3). Reynolds could not decide whether *Watchmen* was ‘either the last key superhero text, or the first in a new maturity of the genre’ (1992:117). Klock suggests that they were both. Either way these two texts ushered in the era of the self-reflexive, re-visionary superhero narrative which constituted a maturing of the genre. Responses to these texts via other superhero narratives, and responses to those subsequent texts, have been produced regularly up to the present.

If thematic content is the marker, then the defining lines between eras are not strict. There is debate about when the current age started and finished (if at all). The Bronze Age, spanning the early/mid 1970s to mid/late 1980s, is characterised by stories dealing with social problems such as drugs, poverty, violence, and America’s

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11 His book *Seduction of the Innocent* led to a US Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency in the United States (Apr. 1954) where Wertham gave testimony blaming comics for most of society’s ills.

12 With sales of the top selling comics currently averaging between 100-150,000 a month, by way of Sassienie, comics are not in an era but between, going by sales of *Dazzler* #1 in 1981 (400,000 copies). The closest to this is *Captain America* #25 a tie in with the Civil War crossover story selling 290,514 (Mar. 2007). Current sales are doing even worse now than 1990 when *Spiderman* #1 (August 1990) had an initial print run of 2.35 million (Sassienie, 1994:117).
involvement in Vietnam. Probably the most notable development is the introduction of superhero characters of different ethnicities, notably those of African-American heritage – Storm from the X-Men, and the Green Lantern, Jon Stewart, to name only two. We are currently in the Modern Age, late 1980s to present, although comic writer Warren Ellis has another take, referring to the ages as “movements.” He situates the third movement as starting somewhere between Frank Miller’s run on *Daredevil* (May 1979 – Feb. 1983) and Alan Moore’s *Marvelman* (Mar. 1982 – Aug. 1984), which came to a close around 1997. He hints at a coming fourth movement (2000:11). Ellis’s third movement functionally coincides with the emergence of the direct sales market through dedicated comic shops, and the first comic, *Dazzler* #1 (Mar. 1981), to be released solely through the direct sales market. It also coincides with the emergence of new formats such as the first mini-series (Jul. – Sep. 1979), the first graphic novel, and first maxi series (both 1982) (Sassienie, 1994:106).

While the superhero narrative was always a genre, for me it did not become a literary genre until this last, modern era emerged. As Klock (2002) demonstrates, using Ellis’s third movement, the re-visionary comic narrative begins with *The Dark Knight Returns* and finds its logical path through *Marvels, Kingdom Come, Astro City, Stormwatch,* and *The Authority,* to Warren Ellis’s *Planetary,* a superhero narrative that comes to terms with its own fictional history:

*Planetary* shows comic book history as a battle with an earlier version of itself – pulp novel characters struggling with Golden Age superheroes, Silver Age heroes killing off Golden Age icons (Klock, 2002:154).
Klock suggests that due to the emergence of Silver Age heroes and narratives, the
previous era’s narrative can never be told again: ‘Planetary stages the repression of
the old, the “impossibility” of writing the earlier form, when the new form literally
kills the old’ (2002:159). This may be true for the Golden Age DC Comics heroes,
though Alan Moore has attempted, and I think successfully, captured the style and
essence of the Golden Age in his Tom Strong title.

however is an alternative view to that of Ellis’s vision of the meaning and influence
of the previous era’s superheroes. Justice sets the Justice League heroes of the DC
Comics universe against the collected efforts of their villainous counterparts. The
story begins with a similar premise to Grant Morrison’s JLA: New World Order,
Ross and Waid’s Kingdom Come, and Warren Ellis’s The Authority, where the
question is asked: If superheroes are so powerful why don’t they make the world a
better place? This is the question Lex Luthor asks the citizens of Earth when he
bands together a number of supervillains who seemingly have turned over a new leaf,
and with their own powers and talents are doing what superheroes have failed to do –
improving the world for its citizens by making changes on a global and personal
scale. This is of course a front for a bolder scheme where the villains intend dividing
humanity down the middle. Brainiac will take the “weaker” humans and turn them
into machines to populate his home world, while Lex Luthor will rule the remaining
“elite” humans, after of course they have dispatched the Justice League and its
members. In Justice the heroes and villains appear in their most recognisable,
nostalgic costumes with all their sidekicks in tow – Robin (Batman), Aqualad
(Aquaman), Speedy (Green Arrow) – indicating that Justice, like Kingdom Come,

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13 Alex Ross was also the artist of Kingdom Come and Marvels.
sits outside normal DC continuity, and not without good reason. After the Justice League triumphs in stopping the enslavement of humanity, a further more moral drive is revealed. The heroes are fighting for a future in which a future form of humanity, a form which those heroes are unable to imagine, can flourish. This suggestion is expounded in the final pages of the final issue where adult versions of DC’s Legion of Superheroes look back in time at Superman landing on the roof of the Daily Planet. The message is quite clear. The battles which the heroes of a previous era fought have enabled the subsequent heroes to come into existence and flourish. Far from killing them off, it is implied that contemporary heroes are indebted to those of the previous era, and by way of association, all those which have subsequently come into existence including those invented at Marvel. In *Justice* Bakhtin’s archaic elements remain, and Frow’s reflexive model is also in effect. *Justice* comments on its own origins as a genre, subsequent and future readings of the genre, and the recurring situation of good vs. evil, hero vs. villain, is renewed. With the superhero narrative evolving at such a rapid pace, the genre could only reinvent characters as posthuman. This is an idea I will return to in Chapter 4.

**The Superhero Narrative: Which Genre?**

To which genre does the superhero narrative belong? Before I explain the superhero narrative as a new genre and as constituting an important element in a new model of genre, I will first endeavour to explain why it does not align with existing genres.

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14 The armour Batman sports in the later stages of the story which resembles that of the Batman in the *Batman Beyond* animated series which is set in a future when Bruce Wayne has relinquished the mantle of the Batman to another person also suggests that *Justice* may be set “sometime” in the future. His figure then is another trope of Batman, and the armour which is black with red trimmings and bat logo also suggests links to the black and red Batmobile of the 1960s *Batman* television series.
The Menippea

The superhero narrative has superficial links to the traditional literary genre of the *menippea* found in ancient Christian and Byzantine literature, and medieval, renaissance and reformation writings. The menippea:

moved easily in space between this world, an underworld and an upper world. It conflated past, present and future, and allowed dialogues with the dead. States of hallucination, dream, insanity, eccentric behaviour and speech, personal transformation, extraordinary situations, were the norm (Jackson, 1981:14).

The superhero narrative shares with the *menippea* its concern with current and topical issues; the wide use of inserted genres; moral-psychological experimentation; a representation of the moral and psychic states of man; insanity of all sorts – split personality, unusual dreams; passions bordering on madness (Bakhtin in Morris, 1994:191-2); and an ‘extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention’ (Bakhtin in Morris, 1994:189). These menippean “norms”, as Jackson explains, are ‘temporary suspensions of coherence’ (1981:16), stemming from its links with the carnivalesque. In contrast the superhero narrative has many of these temporary disunities as continuous themes. The superhero narrative presents itself as a realistic realm. Superheroes are the norm and villains are the disrupting influence. It is the interloper, the villain or strange occurrence that brings something stranger over and above the normal disunities of the superhero world. The overriding principle of the menippea is ‘the creation of extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a truth’ (Bakhtin in Morris, 1994:189). Again, while some superhero narratives may well embody this idea, it is not something which could be said to define the narrative.
The Fantastic

The modern Fantastic comes into its own in the nineteenth century when a supernatural economy of ideas was giving way to a natural one (Jackson, 1981:24). The cosmology of heaven and hell was facing redundancy, and the cosmos was becoming internalised as an area of non-meaning (Jackson, 1981:18). The main idea Todorov explores of the pure Fantastic is that it creates a hesitation in the reader. He explains that few texts remain in the genre of the pure Fantastic for the duration of the narrative because stories of the pure Fantastic resist final explanations. Todorov’s investigation of Fantastic narratives branches out towards the genres of the Fantastic-Uncanny and Fantastic-Marvellous, which serve as eventual explanations for the hesitation which the Fantastic narrative invokes. However I also see the genres of the Fantastic-Uncanny and Fantastic-Marvellous as an end unto themselves. In this a narrative may start in the Marvellous and move through the Marvellous-Fantastic, finishing in the Fantastic, the hesitation being at the end, leaving us uneasy and unsure of everything we have just read or viewed. The revelation at the end of Shyamalan’s The Sixth Sense sends us rushing back through the film to experience “what really happened.” The explanation is of a supernatural origin though we cannot dismiss the idea that the child is psychologically disturbed and that the events are in fact only occurring in his mind.

On a broad scale the superhero narrative has elements of the Fantastic. We should not confuse the common usage of fantasy, such as we might call J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings or Robert Jordan’s Wheel of Time series, with the Fantastic of which most notably Todorov has theorised. Ideally these fantasy
narratives come under the umbrella of the Marvellous. Jackson, who frustratingly uses the terms fantasy and fantastic interchangeably, writes that:

fantasy is not to do with inventing another non–human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, recombining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently “new”, absolutely “other” and different (Jackson, 1981:8).

Similarly the superhero narrative does not invent a non-human world, though it accedes to allowing elements of the non-human and while the superhero narrative does invert elements of this world to produce the strange and unfamiliar this again does not constitute the totality of its elements. Jackson positions the fantastic as a paraxis – a spectral region, an imaginary world, that is located between the totally “real” and “unreal.” Like the superhero narrative, the Fantastic is ‘un-real’, existing ‘in a parasitic or symbiotic relationship to the real,’ but ‘cannot exist independently of that “real” world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite’ (Jackson, 1981:20). This parasitic/symbiotic relationship I explicate later in this chapter to develop a circular model of genre and which functionally links all genres as having similar relationships to the real.

The superhero narrative incorporates the real into the Fantastic. The superhero narrative definitely resides between the Real and the Unreal, in Jackson’s paraxial realm. However Jackson’s paraxial Fantastic realm shades and threatens the real while the superhero narrative does not. Therefore I see it as a non-threatening paraxial realm. In the traditional fantasy story the narrative takes place against the backdrop of the “real”, creating what George Bataille refers to as ‘a tear, or wound, laid open in the side of the real’ (in Jackson, 1981:22).
The superhero narrative is part of an alterity of merged worlds. To demonstrate my point, the comic world has the invented cities of Metropolis (home of Superman), Gotham (Batman), Keystone (The Flash), Coast City (Green Lantern), Atlantis (Aquaman), yet when they are brought together as a team they are “The Justice League of America.” In the Stormwatch title of the late 1990s the Stormwatch team clashed with rebels and villains from the fictional island of Gamorra but at the same time were held accountable to the United Nations. Thus in these narratives our world has been torn open and the Fantastic elements have been inserted. Once this is done, our world merged with the Fantastic becomes polysemic where the impossible is possible. The “real” becomes fantastic in a strange shift into the paraxial space between the “real” and the “un-real.” The superhero narrative provides familiarity with the real (events happening in a world like ours) and disassociation from the real (but could not happen in our world), leaving the reader with a level of safety.

Moreover, as Jackson emphasises, the Fantastic is a mode which the superhero narrative uses, though not in the same manner as that of nineteenth century literature. The Fantastic in the superhero narrative is not disturbing and does not create a hesitation in the reader. Rather it is used to exhilarate and produce excitement and wonder. The Fantastic narrative relies on the overt violation of accepted possibility (Irwin in Jackson, 1981:21), existing ‘only against a background to which it offers a direct reversal’ (Rabkin in Jackson, 1981:21), while also playing upon the ‘difficulties of interpreting events/things as objects or as images thus disorientating the reader’s categorisation of the “real”’ (Jackson, 1981:20). This is the major difference between the superhero narrative and the Fantastic narrative. In the superhero narrative the background is not overtly violated by events or people. The
reader is not disoriented at all as everything in the superhero narrative is accepted as real.

The Marvellous

The genre of the Marvellous is an immediately definable place of ‘rich, colourful fullness’ (Jackson, 1981:42) produced from a supernatural economy investing ‘otherness with supernatural qualities’ (Jackson, 1981:24). Characterised by a minimal functional narrative, the Marvellous has a narrator who is omniscient and has absolute authority (Jackson, 1981:33). In a supernatural economy ‘otherness is transcendent, marvellously different from the human’ (Jackson, 1981:23), while in a secular economy otherness is ‘read as a projection of merely human fears and desires transforming the world through subjective perception’ (Jackson, 1981:23). The creation of the superhero and a city for them to protect merges these supernatural and secular economies. The superhero, created through a desire – out of a lack of order – is marvellously different from the human though not unrecognisably so. The superhero is an overriding influence, a protector of society and morals, doing for the public what they cannot do themselves. However the Marvellous narrative is seen to transport the reader to an entirely different world or secondary universe (Jackson, 1981:42). These realms are only linked to the “real” through allegorical or conceptual association (Jackson, 1981:43). This is not the realm of the superhero narrative although it does have elements of science fiction, romance, magic, and supernaturalism that characterise the Marvellous.
**Superhero Narrative: The Marvellous-Uncanny**

In this section I draw distinctions between the superhero narrative and Kafka’s short story, ‘Metamorphosis’, in support of my claim for both to be situated in the genre of the Marvellous-Uncanny. Brooke-Rose writes of ‘Metamorphosis’:

> We are in the Marvellous, since a supernatural event is introduced at the start, yet is accepted at once and provokes no hesitation. The event is nevertheless shocking, impossible, yet becomes paradoxically possible, so that in a sense we are in the Uncanny (1981:66).

The superhero narrative is much like ‘Metamorphosis’ inasmuch as a strange event provokes no hesitation in the reader or the characters of the text when trying to offer either supernatural or natural explanations because everything is already ‘abnormal and bizarre’ (Brooke-Rose, 1981:67). Like the Fantastic narrative, the superhero narrative establishes its reality initially as mimetic (“realistic”, presenting an “object” world “objectively”) but then moves into another mode which would seem to be Marvellous (“unrealistic”, representing apparent impossibilities) were it not for its initial grounding in the real (Jackson, 1981:20). The superhero narrative positioned initially as mimetic, set against a realistic setting (such as our world), moves towards the Marvellous when a strange event (a man being able to fly) that causes no hesitation, which is impossible. But paradoxically it is also possible, and thus Uncanny (because the world is not specifically ours – a merged world). Brooke-Rose alludes to this generic anomaly of certain narratives as being unable to be placed in a specific genre in her book *Rhetoric of the Unreal* where she reinscribes Todorov’s linear model (Figure 1.1). Todorov’s model travels from Uncanny to Marvellous with the pure Fantastic as a line in the middle (representing its limited narrative possibilities). Brooke-Rose takes Todorov’s model and makes it circular by placing
Realistic fiction between the Uncanny and the Marvellous, with the Fantastic again only occupying the limit between the Fantastic-Uncanny and the Fantastic-Marvellous (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.1 Todorov’s Model of Genre

Figure 1.2
Brooke-Rose’s Model of Genre
She sees this model as an answer to science fiction’s use of realistic narrative forms. If as in Brooke-Rose’s diagram Realism fills the gap between the Uncanny and the Marvellous, this pre-supposes (via Todorov) that the Fantastic is somehow directly opposed to realism, which is simply unfounded. That is, even the Fantastic has elements of Realism not withstanding ordinary human activities (a point Brooke-Rose does actually take into account). Further, by turning Todorov’s linear model into a pie chart in which she places Realism in-between the Uncanny and the Marvellous to take into account Darko Suvin’s argument for science fiction as its own genre, she nevertheless falls into the trap Todorov fell into in making a model to distinguish between literary modes. She finds that her extrapolated Todorov model does not account for Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’ which is ‘Uncanny + Marvellous’ (Brooke-Rose, 1981:84), remaining a generic anomaly which Todorov dismissed simply as a genre of its own. But if we rearrange Brooke-Rose’s circular diagram, placing Realism in the centre and combining the Marvellous and Uncanny into the new hybrid genre of the Marvellous-Uncanny (Figure 1.3), like the hybrid genres of Fantastic-Uncanny and Fantastic-Marvellous, Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’, and the superhero narrative, can finally have a place where it has a parasitic/symbiotic relationship with each of the surrounding genres. The Marvellous-Uncanny explains supernatural events as having them accepted as the norm. The metamorphic characters of superhero narratives and Kafka’s metamorphic Gregor thus reside in the same place.
The emergence of the superhero narrative, constituting a genre even before being recognised as one, makes way for metamorphic characters such as Mystique, Metamorpho, and Martian Manhunter to be produced. The genre itself has produced characters to exist in these narratives. So to explain the characters, the genre had to exist, the previous narratives had to exist, to enable the characters to be produced, and indeed, allow them to be produced. I would even go so far as to say that, using the same argument as just presented for the superhero narrative, the genre of the Marvellous-Uncanny would be home to the mythic narrative, and Reynolds description of the superhero narrative as a modern mythology resonates further than originally intended. The superhero narrative and the characters which inhabit these narratives can be recognised as part of a lineage of heroic and god-like characters.

What I am also suggesting is that all genres in this model have a parasitic/symbiotic relationship with realism. Thus in this model the further from realism the narrative goes, in any genre, the more “pure” it becomes, eventually
passing into the absurd. As an example, a pure science fiction story (Marvellous) would perhaps be a novel written in an alien language that is unable to be interpreted.

For display purposes I have given each genre equal space in this model and they are demarcated by straight boundaries. This of course is misleading. A genre such as the pure Fantastic, which Todorov positioned as a line between Fantastic-Marvellous and Fantastic-Uncanny, would actually have less “space” allotted to it in the model as the amount of narratives applying to this genre are limited. Similarly the boundaries are not strict but blurred and fluid capable of expanding and contracting as more narratives inhabit certain genres. Ideally groups of narratives with similar themes would be identified as clusters within “boundaries.” This model has the ability to expand to incorporate new stories that fit somewhere “between” other stories already in a genre following Bakhtin’s idea that genres ‘grow together, inosculate, or knit together’ (Morson and Emerson, 1990:293). An example would be cyberpunk and its off-shoot steampunk with their relation to science-fiction and therefore the Marvellous. The model simply expands outward, becoming as big as it needs to be.

This model also provides for sub-genres within classifications. Thus within the Marvellous-Uncanny could be the sub-genre of Fantastic/Marvellous-Uncanny. Bakhtin again explains: ‘Each new genre merely supplements the old ones, merely widens the circle of already existing genres. For every genre has its own predominant sphere of existence’ (Morson and Emerson, 1990:301). This model can also account for Bakhtin’s oxymoronic category of the ‘realistic-fantastic’ which would lie on a threshold somewhere between pure realism, which I would position as a point, a limit, at the centre of the circle, though one which can never be reached or represented, and the other expanding liminal boundary of pure fantastic.
Chapter 2

Bodies in Motion:

The Portrayal of Metamorphic Characters

‘Throughout Western literature the body recurs as an expression of…
anti-order’ (Segal, 1997:11).

‘American literature is filled with shape-shifters: characters who terrify because, rather than appearing overtly on the side of evil, they flow back and forth, frustrating attempts to stabilise binary oppositions’ (Larson, 2004:191).

Metamorphosis is a corporeal process involving movement of form and boundaries. The body becomes malleable material to be modelled, sculpted, pulled and pushed in awkward directions. As a spectacle, a visual sensation, metamorphosis is grotesque, producing forms that fall outside of language, outside of expression, and beyond the known human. Walker-Bynum views the concept of metamorphosis as ‘a constant series of replacement changes, or… little deaths’ (2001:30). As a subject changes from one form to another, each new form is replaced, living only for an instant before death. Metamorphosis represents a type of chaos that dissolves boundaries, that creates instantaneous new species which immediately become extinct; disrupts and creates new types of character. The process can be enjoyable, providing a sense
of euphoria through re-birthing, or even transcendence, though more often it is a painful assault of quick violence. The superhero narrative provides many examples of metamorphic characters and because of its visual nature, many opportunities for different depictions of the metamorphic process. Early depictions of transformation in the superhero narrative set up the way it will be repeated for many years to come.

Following a path from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to present representations in the superhero narrative, this chapter explores portrayals of metamorphic subjects.

To determine from where metamorphosis itself is derived and the difficulty of representing metamorphosis, techniques and terms used in animation and morphing, both analogue and digital will be used. I will show how contemporary depictions build upon previous representations, and as technology advances the metamorphic process is made more “realistic” (especially in film). In this chapter I provide basic background details and histories of the key metamorphic characters I will be theorising – Mystique, Metamorpho, Shift, Element Girl, The Hulk, and Martian Manhunter.
psionically shift the atoms of her body to duplicate any humanoid of either sex, wearing any kind of clothing. She can precisely duplicate another person’s retina pattern, finger, palm and skin-pore patterns, and vocal cords. Mystique’s power grants her age retardation, increased healing, and immunity to drugs and poisons (‘Mystique’, 2007).

This ability allows her to metamorph into mermaids, humanoid monsters (Figure 2.2), cover her body with a spiky exoskeleton (Figure 2.3), and even morph wings.

![Figure 2.2](image1)

**Figure 2.2**
Mystique transforms into a monster
(Mackie, Battle, and Thibert, 1997:6)

![Figure 2.3](image2)

**Figure 2.3**
Mystique with exoskeleton
(Mackie, Matsuda, and Milgrom, 1996a:41)

With her ability to mimic the shape and vocal patterns of almost anything, and blend in with her environment, coupled with her metamorphic ability, Mystique exhibits the characteristics of an insect. Elizabeth Grosz, through Roger Caillois, suggests that ‘the mimicking insect lives its camouflaged existence as not quite itself, as

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15 The use of comparing the abilities of insects to humans with superpowers is frequently used. Superman’s powers were at first explained in terms of a grasshopper’s ability to jump many times its own height and length. The Wasp and Blue Beetle are two other insect inspired superheroes, and while Spiderman was bitten by a radioactive arachnid, the idea still applies.
another’ (1995:281). Braidotti writes the insect is: ‘a generalized figure of liminality and in-between-ness’ (2002:150). In Deleuzian terminology insects are ‘multiple singularities without fixed identities’ (2002:149). In posthuman Deleuzian terms Mystique is thus a becoming-woman-insect, a mutation. Braidotti cites Grosz who sees the insect as a ‘highly sexualised “queer” entity, capable of titillating the collective imagination especially on the issue of sex and death’ (2002:158). That metamorphic characters are so often associated with insects or have the traits of insects is no surprise. Insects are most often associated with metamorphosis – the changes from larval stages to hatching – and are disturbing, grotesque, and fascinating at the same time.

In the Mystique series Mystique demonstrates an ability to move her internal organs around inside her body to provide herself with body pockets: ‘I’ll shapeshift a pouch… behind my stomach’ (Vaughn and Lucas, 2003c:9).16 Exhibiting further metamorphic qualities, she can also change her body to a thin rubbery substance that allows her to float on the concussion wave of an explosion (Figure 2.33) Mystique’s ability is limited in that she cannot duplicate the powers of other mutants, or imitate non-humanoid beings such as animals, plants or inanimate objects. As Raven Darkhölme, Mystique worked as the Deputy Director of the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) in both the Ms. Marvel (1978-9) and Uncanny X-Men (1979-82) titles. At the same time she was the leader of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. In X-Factor (1986) she became the leader of the United States Government backed Freedom Force team (a reworked version of the Brotherhood). More recently in the Mystique series she has been an indentured operative of the X-Men patriarch, Professor Xavier.

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16 In one scene in Mystique #15 she morphs her arms into metal wings. This may have been a misunderstanding on the part of the artist, interpreting wings, such as those of a bird, to be wings like those of an aeroplane.
In the Marvel Comics Universe being a mutant is a genetic trait. The latent powers of a mutant emerge from within a pseudo primal scene, generally during puberty, their abilities manifesting sometimes uncontrollably, and usually spectacularly. This is the moment when the mutant is “birthed” and will go a long way in deciding if they are hero or villain. As the next evolutionary stage of humanity, mutants therefore are transformed “for no reason at all,” having no choice in the matter, and no prior transgressions as possible causes. Mutants thus effectively represent the classic other. As Jackson writes: ‘otherness is designated as otherworldly, supernatural, as being above or outside the human’ (1981:53).

Mystique’s origins as a mutant are left undisclosed, leaving an intriguing absence in her origin story. Of her origin all that has been told is that she is over eighty years old, becoming a mutant when she turned twelve: ‘A blue mutant, with these mutant eyes’ (Milligan, Larroca, and Miki & Martinez, 2005b:17, emphasis in original).17

In this respect Mystique also represents a typical other:

Anyone whose origins are unknown or who has extraordinary powers, tends to be set apart as other, as evil. Strangeness precedes the naming of it as evil: the other is defined as evil precisely because of his/her difference and a possible power to disturb the familiar and the known (Jackson, 1981:52-3).18

The spectacle of witnessing a character’s origin or primal scene is strong in the superhero narrative due to it being a visual medium. A character’s origin is seen and read at the same time, thus becoming known to the reader/viewer. Without a known origin Mystique has no fixed point of reference. She is a character built upon a non-

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17 It should be noted that you can’t really “become” a mutant; rather Mystique would have always been a mutant. More correctly her mutant ability would have manifested when she turned twelve.

18 Originally the X-Men were proclaimed as ‘The Strangest Heroes of All!’
existent place and story. The comfort of knowing how she “came to be” is removed. She simply independently exists. This scopic drive to know is linked to both knowledge and control or domination (Braidotti, 1994:67). Mystique’s shapeshifting ability subverts the idea of seeing as knowing, because how can she be known if we cannot see who she is or where she comes from? We look where there is nothing to see. She cannot be known through a practice of looking. In this respect Mystique is doubly troubling:

The fact that the female body can change shape so drastically is troublesome in the eyes of the logocentric economy within which to see is the primary act of knowledge and the gaze the basis of all epistemic awareness (Braidotti, 2002:80).

In a further sense Mystique’s true form needs to be blue. This is a sign of her identity, the visual mark that identifies her. Otherwise as a shapeshifter we could not necessarily know who she is or recognise her.

Mystique’s sexuality is also a locus of attention (explored further in Chapter Three). Her long time lover was the seer, Irene Adler a.k.a. Destiny. Mystique and Destiny’s lesbian relationship was hinted at in the X-Men titles for many years, but was finally confirmed in the comic miniseries, X-Men Forever (2001). Interestingly, on the Marvel webpage devoted to Mystique there is no reference to Destiny as her partner/lover. Mystique has also had sexual relationships of varying degrees with male humans, and the male mutants, Forge, Wolverine, and Sabretooth. In this

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19 Forge is a shaman and mutant hero of the Marvel Universe who can ‘intuitively create almost any device imaginable using his mutant ability - an uncanny and almost empathic ability to understand machines and to perceive “mechanical energy”’ (’Forge’, 2007).

20 Wolverine, a.k.a. Logan, is a mutant hero of the Marvel Universe. He possesses the ability to regenerate damaged or destroyed areas of his cellular structure at a rate far greater than an ordinary human: superhumanly acute senses; and a skeleton which includes six retractable one-foot long bone claws: three in each arm housed beneath the skin and muscle of his forearms. The nearly indestructible metal Adamantium has been artificially bonded to Wolverine’s entire skeletal structure, including his claws. As a result, Wolverine’s bones are virtually unbreakable (’Wolverine’, 2007).
thesis I position Mystique as predominantly lesbian despite her bisexual portrayal, an issue I deal with in more depth in Chapter Three, citing the work of Terry Castle in her book *The Apparitional Lesbian* as support. Like a comic book battle, Mystique is a locus of excitement, danger, excess, contradiction, and complexity. She is a labile figure who fights against constraints placed upon her by both comic and “real world” authorities who have given her attributes and abilities of which they are constantly trying, though unable, to control.

21 Sabretooth, a.k.a. Victor Creed, is a mutant villain of the Marvel Universe possessing various superhuman attributes that are the result of genetic mutation and artificial enhancement. Sabretooth’s primary mutant power is an accelerated healing factor that enables him to regenerate damaged or destroyed tissue with far greater speed than an ordinary human. Sabretooth also has superhumanly acute sight, hearing, smell, and taste, and some degree of superhuman strength (‘Sabretooth’, 2007).
Metamorpho, Shift, and Element Girl

Metamorpho


After exposure to the Orb of Ra in an Egyptian pyramid, Rex was transformed into Metamorpho, the Element Man, with the ability to change into any element or compound contained in the human body. This allows him to turn parts or the whole of his body into a variety of gases or objects such as blades, springs, or hammers (Figure 2.5). Rex’s dashing good looks were ruined during the
transformation as were his intentions of marrying his beautiful girlfriend, Sapphire. In the newest incarnation of his origin story, Rex is the host of the reality television show, “Treasure Quest.” After re-merging with Shift (see below), Metamorpho has more evolved powers of transformation.

![Figure 2.5](image)

**Figure 2.5**
Two typical manifestations of Metamorpho’s ability
(Waid, Nolan, and Boyd, 1993a:16)

Shift

Shift is the ‘rogue offspring’ of Metamorpho’s ‘chaotic cellular makeup’ (Winick, et al, 2004b:12). While saving members of the Justice League of America, Metamorpho’s body was scattered in pieces over North America (Morrison, Porter, and Dell, 1997). One of these pieces spontaneously generated into life becoming a clone of Metamorpho though with large gaps in his memory. This new Metamorpho had a less human looking face, and less vibrant body markings which blend into each other (Figure 2.6). Shift is also a more evolved Metamorpho with the ability to transform into any element he chooses. Though Metamorpho does not consider Shift a son (as essentially they are the same being), the relationship is portrayed as that of father/son, Metamorpho providing advice to Shift on several occasions. In the *Outsiders* ‘Pay As You Go’ (2007) storyline, Shift found the guilt of being
responsible for the deaths of forty-four people too much, and re-merged with Metamorpho by literally jumping into his chest. The result was another evolution of Metamorpho with a look somewhere in-between the two characters (Figure 2.7). Metamorpho absorbed all of Shift’s abilities, memories, and experiences and can feel Shift within himself as a sentient presence.

Element Girl

Element Girl, a.k.a. Urania Blackwell (Figure 2.8), first appeared as a counterpart to Metamorpho in Metamorpho #10 (1967). She volunteered to be exposed to the Orb of Ra and received a coloured body, disfigured face, and abilities, similar to Metamorpho. After a number of adventures together, Element Girl fell in love with Metamorpho, becoming a rival to Sapphire for Rex’s affections. While the last issue of Metamorpho (#17 Mar./Apr. 1968) has Rex and Element Girl together, the storyline is clearly not complete. After the original Metamorpho series finished, Element Girl was not seen again until an appearance in Gaiman’s Sandman #20 (Oct. 1990). Unable to leave her apartment because of her hideous appearance, she had tried to commit suicide on several occasions but her body’s natural defences had made the act impossible (Wallace, 2004:104). She was eventually helped to her demise by the character, Death. Although only a minor character compared to the others documented here, Element Girl’s story contrasts strikingly to Metamorpho’s and is discussed in Chapter Three.
Figure 2.6
The real Metamorpho (right) confronts Shift
(Winick, Raney, and Hanna, 2004a:164).

Figure 2.7
Evolved Metamorpho
(Winick, Clark, and Thibert, 2006:67)

Figure 2.8
Element Girl
(Haney et al, and Fradon et al, 2005: Cover Image)

Accidentally teleported to Earth and then subsequently stranded, J’onn assumed the human identity of detective, John Jones, using his prodigious Martian abilities which include but are not limited to, shape-shifting, intangibility, eye-beams, and flight, to fight crime. J’onn has used his shapeshifting ability to assume various human aliases around the world (as well as one cat) in order to observe human nature, and thus understand the human race better. One of the more
interesting findings in researching the history and portrayal of the Martian Manhunter was the minimal use of his shapeshifting ability. Although expense, availability and volume of material was an obstacle in researching every Martian Manhunter appearance in comics, the survey of researched material suggests this would carry across every title in which he appears. Having said that, one of the more interesting representations of a shapeshifter was that of the Martian Manhunter caught in mid-morph, apparently dead (Figure 2.10), explicating the idea that no form ever fixes finally – except in death.

Figure 2.10
Martian Manhunter dead in process
(Krueger & Ross et al, 2005:10)

2 More correctly his ability is used mostly to show a more human appearance than his native Martian appearance.
Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the Hulk is one of the world’s most recognisable comic characters, first appearing in *The Hulk* #1 (May 1962). After being exposed to Gamma Rays, the sudden release of adrenaline brought about by stressful situations triggers Dr Bruce Banner to change into the Hulk. The transformation increases his size and strength, though reduces his intellect. The Hulk has little or no recollection of his life as Bruce Banner. The Hulk is a character with origins derived from Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde – the emergence of an uncontrollable, ego-driven being from the relatively stable and scientific mind of a doctor. Although there have been times over the Hulk’s forty-five year existence when Bruce Banner’s ego emerges to control the Hulk’s rage, the classic dichotomy of rage versus intellect

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23 It should be noted that the transformation of the Hulk was initially triggered by the onset of night, the stress situation trigger was a later addition no doubt decided upon by the problem of travelling across time zones which was seen in *Hulk* #2.
has generally remained that of the original incarnation. I use Stan Lee’s incarnation from the years 1962-69 (Hulk #1-6, Tales to Astonish #60-101, and Incredible Hulk #102-117) and the Ang Lee film adaptation The Hulk (2003), to provide comparative and contrasting figures to theorise.

The above characters listed represent the ramifications of change. Mystique’s metamorphic ability is represented as evil and other; the Hulk’s changes come with a subsequent loss of control; Metamorpho’s transformation from good-looking treasure hunter to disfigured hero is a result of greed and hubris; Element Girl suffers the consequences – a loss of individual identity – for making the wrong choice for the wrong reasons. The Martian Manhunter is an alien, and therefore other, representing a non-human, so it is okay for him to be a shapeshifter because he is an alien, as opposed to Mystique, who is human and therefore crosses the boundaries of the human and is coded evil. Martian Manhunter and Metamorpho are male and therefore coded good. Element Girl, while good, represents a disrupting influence on the potential common male/female family unit. She is forward, bold, and other in appearance, pre-dating Mystique’s similar qualities. But she is a woman before her time and suffers for her actions.
Animation and Mid-Points

Figure 2.12
Frank Miller’s sketch of Batman illustrates the idea of implied movement
(Miller, Janson, and Varley, 1996:215)

Comic superheroes are action figures so the capture of dynamism and movement is
crucial to their representation on the flat, two dimensional plane/surface of the
printed page. The implied movement of characters drawn for analogue animation is
captured by the lines of the characters being drawn, traced, and retraced. A similar
process takes place in the production of comic images, Figure 2.12 providing an
example. A drawing which looks posed, which has a “static” quality, betrays
authenticity because it betrays the impression of movement. To imply movement and
add life to a drawing ‘the identity of line should be unstable’ (Klein, 2000:23). From
a blizzard of lines only the most distressed will be selected, the others erased. The
result suggests control, non-waste, stability. These finished drawings are ‘a traced
memory. Traces like these can be very unstable…’ (Klein, 2000:24), also implying
mystery, ‘a phantom presence, as if a hundred pounds were hidden’ (2000:24).
However even in the midst of this control, lurking beneath, there is instability. Traced memories surfacing are the unstable lines of identity, implying movement, undermining the “stable” character. Norman Klein describes the metamorphosis of analogue animation characters as *ani-morphing* (animated metamorphosis):

> Ani-morphing can be defined as an animated cycle where metamorphosis takes place – for example, a walk cycle where a creature changes species. The body and proportions will be exaggerated, with “extremes” on either end. But frames inside, called “in-betweens”, stabilize the action, make the switch more convincing (2000:22).

These in-betweens produce a ‘condensed’ narrative about decay or loss… the loss of control, the loss of the past, the loss of representation’ (Klein, 2000:24). So whereas the stable end-points suggest control, the in-between frames which stabilise the action sequence, suggest a *loss* of control. The in-betweens, on their own or in sequence, are a representation of otherness. As Jackson writes, this otherness is that ‘which is behind, or between, separating forms and frames. Otherness is all that threatens “this” world, this “real” world, with dissolution’ (1981:57). The corporeal boundaries of an ani-morphed character are ruptured, surfacing as abject movement and relocation, becoming misshapen, transgressing its fixed boundaries. These sequences of metamorphosis are:

> pocket fables unto themselves, brief and easy to insert. What’s more, when they dominate – as ruptures that fall in sequence – what results is a journey into an underworld. By underworld I mean a hidden place, an antiworld, where many atmospheres meet. Metamorphosis, then, is the surfacing of the hidden: entropy as molting, melting, melding, mutation (Klein, 2000:24-5).
The key phrase here is, the surfacing of the hidden: entropy as… mutation. Mystique is, of course, a mutant. The very idea of the “hidden” mutant and the manifestation of their latent powers lends itself to the idea of the surfacing of the hidden. In the first X-Men movie, the Senator Kelly character tries to introduce legislation to deal with the growing mutant population “problem.” Mutants, once hidden amongst the general population, are now surfacing and thus increasing in number. The genesis of metamorphosis is underneath, in a hidden place, an unstable underworld of mutation. At any time the surfacing of the hidden may occur dissolving corporeal boundaries. An example of this in literature is ‘The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde’. The fact that Jekyll’s alter ego is Mr Hyde makes the surfacing of the hidden reference more pertinent. The surfacing of the hidden for Mystique, is any number of characters/identities or humanoid shapes with which she has come into contact, residing somewhere in her psyche, populating their own internal underworld. The surfacing of the hidden in ani-morphing sequences is self-conscious animation that reveals the intrusion of the drawing hand behind the animated “flesh.” The animated characters are thus observably shown to be animated characters. The semblance of realism is dispensed with to show the malleability of the character, but in doing so also reveals a glimpse of the other residing within. At any moment in animation an ani-morphing sequence may take place and this unpredictability is frightening. The metamorphic character, transforming from one to another, is abject, causing a desire to look, and a fascination that repels. For the metamorphic subject, the impossible constitutes their very being (Kristeva, 1982:5). The emergence of an uncanniness, massive and sudden, such as Jekyll/Hyde, Bruce Banner/The Hulk or Mystique’s true form emerging from another form, familiar in a forgotten life, becomes radically
separate and loathsome (Kristeva, 1982:2). An example of this is when the character Ariel from the 1999 comic *Darkchylde* describes the demonic presence in her being:

> Something very evil lives beneath my skin and it has been feasting on my soul for seventeen years… It is crawling, scratching, beneath the surface, wanting me to let it out… so I do. I have no choice (Queen, Gorder, & Alquiza, 1999:88).  

A similar example can be seen with the Hulk. Ironically, in this example the Hulk finds the presence of Banner at the centre of his being as loathsome when the Hulk sees a picture of Bruce Banner: ‘*That face!* I… *I know* that face!! But it is *weak*… *soft!! I hate* it! *Take it away!*’ (Lee, Kirby, and Reinman, 2003:17).

In an ani-morphing sequence an *ani-morph* is the midpoint, what Klein calls a ‘lapse or hesitation’, where the creature (or character) is neither of the end-points, and ‘does not look like what it was, or what it will be’ (2000:22). Whereas analogue animation uses a series of drawn images (in-betweens) to represent metamorphosis, digital morphing uses a continuous material substratum (Fisher, 2000:117) between the source and target to produce a sequence of metamorphosis. Similar to Klein’s midpoint as lapse or hesitation, Kevin Fisher describes the midpoint in digital animation as a lapse ‘from the order of known things’ and sees this as the *difference at the centre* of transformation between the source and target: the 2-D or 3-D starting and finishing images or objects in the morphing process (2000:118). Like the definition of the Fantastic narrative as described by Todorov, the hesitation is incorporated into the structure of the work. Fisher continues:

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24 The accompanying image in the comic has spiders crawling from Ariel’s mouth.
Most important, this lapse (or lack) of formal definition is still figured in full three-dimensional extrusion, and the paradoxical presence of *being-without-thing-ness* blinks at us like some denuded metasubstance stripped of the overdetermined trappings of symbolic designation and fixity (2000:118).

This being-without-thingness is the middle of a transition and represents rupture, dissolution and disorder. The body moves from order to disorder to order again; solid shape to misshapen to solid shape, stable to unstable to stable; defined to undefined to defined. To become other, one must become *neither and both*, as exemplified in Figure 2.13, a frame from *X-Men* (2000) where Mystique is in the process of shapeshifting from one form to another. When Mystique shapeshifts she lapses from the order of known things and becomes a being-without-thingness. Stripped of designation and fixity, Mystique is in fact a denuded metasubstance. Like Klein’s ani-morph, Mystique becomes ‘solid and absent at the same time’ (Klein, 2000:24) her shapeshifting appearances forming uncanny ruptures that fall in sequence. Her “real” body is absent, dissolved when she is in the form of another, but her solid corpus remains. Compared to “normal” humanity her blue form itself is a lapse from the order of known things – a being-without-thingness. Mystique’s blue form functions as a constant midpoint, as a lapse from the order of known things, residing somewhere between human and something completely unhuman. In this, the process and the shapes presented can be described as grotesque. For Massey ‘the characteristic issues of metamorphosis… tend to be gross and shocking’ (1976:17). Narratives involving metamorphosis tend toward the grotesque of form either in body or actions after the change as, ‘the grotesque is concept without form… the word nearly always modifies such indeterminate nouns as monster, object or thing’ (Harpham, 1982:3). For Geoffrey Harpham the true home of the grotesque ‘is the
space between… this mid-region is dynamic and unpredictable, a scene of transformation or metamorphosis’ (1982:8), occupying ‘a gap or interval; it is the middle of a narrative of emergent comprehension’ (1982:15). Harpham would seem to be talking about the midpoint of a morph when he writes ‘the interval is generally so brief, and so easily bridged by memory and anticipation that we do not recognize it’ (1982:16).

For metamorphic characters, each new identity acquired, each new form, is a traced memory constituting the unstable lines of identity that are the genesis of metamorphosis. Metamorphosis represents a repressed, inherent instability in the subject. The desire to create a totality, a stable identity, is a denial and resistance to the inherently unstable nature of the subject. The idea of instability and identity is well portrayed by the character, Shift. Believing he is actually Metamorpho (as do the readers), Shift’s assumptions are ripped asunder when the real Metamorpho turns up to reveal Shift is only a being who has spontaneously generated from a piece of him, the original Metamorpho. Metamorpho says: ‘This… meaning me… is real. You’re the cat with the identity problem’ (Winick, Raney, and Hanna, 2004a:164). Once again we see the idea of the impossible constituting Shift’s being – the impossibility that he does not own his very specific identity. Metamorpho intended to reclaim Shift by re-incorporating him into his body. However with Shift having his identity suddenly removed, his reaction translates bodily and he literally “breaks down.” He declares: ‘I’m not real… But if not… if I’m not me… who… what am I?’ (Winick, Raney, and Hanna, 2004a:170). As he starts to cry his body outline bubbles and becomes fluid, some parts dissociating themselves from his corpus (Figure 2.14).
Figure 2.13
Example of Mystique as midpoint and a being-without-thingness
(X-Men, 2000)

Figure 2.14
Shift dissociates (Winick, Raney, and Hanna, 2004a:170)
Without a solid identity, or an essential self, not even in name, his foundations removed, his stable lines of identity erased, Shift lets go of ‘all control of his cellular make up’ (Winick, Raney, and Hanna, 2004a:176) dissipating into a seething mass of matter– an ‘elemental consommé’ (Winick, Raney, and Hanna, 2004a:177) (Figure 2.15). To return Shift to a humanoid form Metamorpho has to ‘stabilize him’ (Winick, Raney, and Hanna, 2004a:178). Shift’s breaking down portrays the consequences, and dangers, of not having a stable identity (even if the concept of a stable identity is in fact a fallacy), without which there is the real possibility of dissolving into an uncontrollable, unidentifiable, elemental mass. Metamorpho convinces Shift to return to a stable state. In doing so Shift asks Metamorpho to ‘make me whole… please’ (Winick, Raney, and Hanna, 2004a:179) which Metamorpho does by reconstructing him from the molecular level. He then becomes a ‘blank slate’ (Winick, et al, 2004b:13) which is quickly written upon. Realising he is not Metamorpho he “evolves” the ability to manipulate all elements and takes the name, Shift. Fellow Outsiders team-mate, Indigo, states that ‘once his actual nature was revealed… he discovered that a different set of parameters existed’ (Winick, et al, 2004b:107), for to be without parameters would no doubt lead to a repeat dissolution. Once the fallacy of a stable identity is rekindled, he is free to pursue a relationship, and ultimately sex, with Indigo. In the portrayal of sex between Shift and Indigo, Shift is shown in a similar state of dissolution, indicating again a loss of control of his unstable molecules, equating with the little death and the point made by Walker-Bynum that metamorphosis is ‘mutation… a constant series of replacement changes, or… little deaths’ (2001:30).
During a storyline where he is responsible for the deaths of forty-four people, Shift voluntarily re-merges with Metamorpho. Confronted with, and unable to deal with, the final fixed form of death in such numbers, he essentially surrenders to dissolution in a kind of suicide, relinquishing both form and identity. Shift’s once again unstable identity succumbs to Metamorpho’s more stable one, pointing to the idea that the more stable identity and form is the proper, and ideal, form of existence.

The Tesseract and the Lithochronic Surface

While analogue animation presents the appearance of a continuous image, digital animation actually is continuous, there being no break between images. The continuous material substratum in morphing programs is visualised as a tesseract.
While the tesseract is always a continuum ‘it need not necessarily be occupied by the same object at both ends’ (Fisher, 2000:117). In geometrical terms a tesseract is defined as a hypercube. Historically the term has a broader definition as the four-dimensional extension of any quotidian three-dimensional object (Fisher, 2000:106) which ‘reveals itself within the third dimension only through time’s passage’ (Fisher, 2000:115). Time is essential when describing fourth dimensional objects because it is through time they can be best perceived. A tesseract is best described as an object’s ‘virtual volume expressive of a characteristic shape in space-time’ (Fisher, 2000:116), where ‘things properly reveal themselves as processes…’ (Fisher, 2000:105). An example is a photo taken of a waterfall:

long exposures of which produce images of a strange, ghostly substance that is in fact the tesseract of water: what is to be seen is not the water itself, but the virtual volume it occupies during the whole time-interval of the exposure (Frampton, 1983:76).

One of the key ideas running through comic writer Grant Morrison’s *The Invisibles*, and indeed much of his work, is how to represent and explain four dimensional objects and concepts. Much of this (as a place) is referred to as “outside” and often as “outside of time.” Morrison demonstrates this in his idea of the ‘time maggot’ – the positions someone occupies as they move through time (Figure 2.16).

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25 A hypercube is ‘the four-dimensional extension of a normal three-dimensional cube possessed simply of height, width, and breadth… The fourth dimension literally implies a fourth direction in addition to the x,y, and z axes that give our 3-D world volume beyond the 2-D plane’ (Fisher, 2000:106). The fourth direction is essentially perpendicular to the x,y, and z axes, i.e.: all directions, at the same time.
One of the underlying evil presences of *The Invisibles* is based on H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos, whose creatures, which exist outside of time and space, are so alien they are unable to be described properly by human language. When confronted with these monsters, viewers are so shocked they tend to go insane.

As metamorphic characters transform they create a tesseract (disturbing space) going over their “allowable” space, being fantastic and disturbing at the same time. Fisher writes:

> It is through attempts to maximize the plastic possibilities of cinema that the tesseract returned to the cinema not only as mechanized operating principle but as a sculptural tool attempting to assert control of the object in duration (2000:116).

When in metamorphic process Mystique becomes a four dimensional object – a tesseract, asserting control of her boundaries, of herself, as “object in duration,” both
source and target. The *lithochronic surface* is derived from the idea of the tesseract. In 1942 the cubist/surrealist artist, Oscar Dominguez, documents that a lithochronic surface represents the enveloping surface formed by the ensemble of all the points, instants and positions an object/subject can assume between two designated moments (starting and finishing). A lithochronic surface can be generated between any two or more connected objects (still or moving). This surface opens ‘a window into a strange four-dimensional world by constituting a kind of *solidification of time*’ (Dominguez in Lippard, 1971:109). Similarly, Fisher explains that this surface graphically connects the two objects travelling the formal distance between them through time (2000:117). Mystique, as a subject who has continuity through time, and like every other object that occupies space through time, forms a tesseract when she morphs from source to target. Mystique as a metamorphic subject, who does not occupy the same form at both ends of her metamorphic continuum, occupies a meta-spatial virtual volume. A normal human has a limit to their designated virtual volume. As Mystique can metamorph into (virtually) anything humanoid, she has the potential to occupy an unlimited virtual volume. She is in effect, a *potentiality*. In doing this she could be said to be occupying more space, more volume than she is allocated or allowed. She has the potential to occupy spaces outside of normal boundaries, boundaries that can change at any moment. She is able to create an unknowable, uncontained, almost impossible *lithochronic surface*. Her representations in comics and films, while quite different from each other, exemplify her surface as the ultimate lithochronic surface.
Corporeality

How has the corporeality of metamorphosis been portrayed and expressed? What sort of bodily sensations are experienced by metamorphic subjects? The following examples present transitions where the body is absent from the process, to being at least minimally involved. The process of metamorphosis tends toward grotesque forms of the body so it is not surprising that some portrayals, especially those of film, reveal shocking and grotesque images.

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* presents many examples of metamorphic subjects changing from one form to another. One such example is Ocyrhoe who wishes to be a horse because she knows the future, and through Jove’s will is transformed:

Her arms were forelegs, and the fingers fused
With the nails formed horny hooves; her mouth
Grew larger, and her neck stretched out, her gown
Swept into a hairy tale, her hair a mane
Falling on her right shoulder: she was changed
Completely, voice, appearance, even name

(Ovid, 1983:49).

In this example even the changing of Ocyrhoe’s name is required for a complete transformation. Another example is presented when Jove turns Lycaon into a wolf in punishment for serving him human flesh:

foam dripped from his mouth; bloodthirsty still, he turned
Against the sheep, delighting still in slaughter,
And his arms were legs, and his robes were shaggy hair

(Ovid, 1983:10).

In the third and final example from Ovid, Daphne is changed into a tree:
Her limbs grew numb and heavy, her soft breasts
Were closed with delicate bark, her hair was leaves,
Her arms were branches, and her speedy feet
Rooted and held, and her head became a tree top

(Ovid, 1983:19-20).

Ovid’s descriptions of simple, virtually instantaneous, magical transformations from one thing to another, subject to object, human to animal, offer no insight into the physicality of the transformation or the bodily sensations involved. Simply the body is vehicle for transformation, but is actually absent, as observed by the lack of sensations portrayed.

Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass* provides a more lengthy description as Lucius watches Pamphilē transform into an owl:

As I watched, her limbs became gradually fledged with feathers, her arms changed into sturdy wings, her nose grew crooked and horny, her nails turned into talons, and soon there was no longer any doubt about it: Pamphilē had become an owl (Apuleius, 1954:88).

And further when Lucius turns into an ass:

the hair… grew coarser and coarser and the skin toughened into hide. Next, my fingers bunched together into a hard lump so that my hands became hooves, the same change came over my feet and I felt a long tail sprouting from the base of my spine. Then my face swelled, my mouth widened, my nostrils dilated, my lips hung flabbily down, and my ears shot up long and hairy. The only consoling part of this miserable transformation was the enormous increase in the size of a certain organ of mine (Apuleius, 1954:90-1).
Apart from the mental discomfort apparent in the above mentioned transformations, the descriptions of physical sensations, like in Ovid, are surprisingly absent suggesting a physically painless transition. Nor do the descriptions of the transformations offer a view or feeling of the process or the in-between grotesqueness of being-without-thingness. There is nothing to suggest that the characters occupy a mid-point at any time of the process. This approach is used in early comic depictions of metamorphic processes. Figure 2.17 shows a depiction of the Martian Manhunter transforming without midpoint and visually disregards any grotesqueness. The change, indicated by the circles in the background, is portrayed as magical and even mesmerising. This is reinforced with text describing the transformation as a ‘lightning change’ (Miller, and Certa, 2007:401). This is also evidenced in several portrayals of Mystique’s metamorphic process. Mystique’s transformations in Ms. Marvel (1978) are portrayed with what could be described as shimmering (Figure 2.18) or phasing effects (Figure 2.19), again projecting a magical rather than physical transformation. Forms of this portrayal have been used extensively in narratives with shapeshifters. Other background or surrounding effects such as stars (Figure 2.23), bright flashes (Figure 2.27), or swirls of light (Figure 2.28, 2.29), provide the transformations with a magical quality like that in Ovid, suggesting something that is not based in the body, or has no physical ramifications. The two endpoints are clear cut figures, invoking the characteristics of stability and control, completely disregarding and eliminating the abjectness of viewing the gap, the interval, the grotesque midpoint and sparing us the knowledge of our own unstable bodies. The surfacing of the hidden remains just that – hidden, off screen, and unseen.
Figure 2.17
Martian Manhunter transforms without depiction of midpoint
(Miller, and Certa, 2007:401)

Figure 2.18
Mystique’s shimmering transformation effect
(Claremont, and Mooney, 1978:23)
Figure 2.19
Mystique’s phasing transformation effect
(Clarmont, Mooney, and Villamonte, 1978:16)

Figure 2.20
Mystique, pictured with her lover, Destiny (far left), changes without mid-point
(Clarmont, and Silvestri & Green, 1989a:22)
Figure 2.21
Another Mystique change without mid-point
(Moore, Epting, and Milgrom, 1995:4)

Figure 2.22
Martian Manhunter change without mid-point
(Ostrander, and Mandrake, 1999:4)
Figure 2.23
Martian Manhunter outline depiction of metamorphosis
(Samachson, and Certa, 2007:30)

Figure 2.24
Mystique: Half and half portrayal
(Claremont, Hamilton, and Bryant, 1988:28)
From instantaneous transformations, the next method of multiple outlining is used extensively in the portrayal of shapeshifters. The well drawn character is shown inside several outlines to indicate the forms passed through in the transformation to the final, stable endpoint/form (Figure 2.23). Another portrayal of the metamorphic process is that of the character being drawn as half one person/object and half the other. This is done in several ways. In Figure 2.24 Mystique’s changing form involves her appearing half as Mystique and half as another person. In this portrayal there is no integration of the two forms, no flow between the two shapes. Rather the impression is that of a blind being rolled back. Metamorpho and Element Girl are also portrayed in a similar manner. Commonly, the object which Metamorpho has transformed into is shown in its full capacity and to alert the reader to the fact that the object is indeed Metamorpho, his head is stuck on, or appears as, part of the object, such as in Figure 2.25. Referring to body image but also useful for my purpose here, Paul Schilder states that ‘the positions in between the two primary
positions are neglected and even the movement is neglected… we are not interested in the continual flow’ (in Weiss, 1999:18).

The portrayal of the metamorphic process continually evolves throughout comics while essentially remaining the same. An example from The Hulk (Figure 2.26) provides a three stage/frame process where the two final or endpoints of the process – Bruce Banner and the Hulk – are depicted in their entirety with the middle frame showing a combination of the two.

Walker-Bynum states that in the werewolf stories Bisclavret, Mélion, and Guillame de Palerne the reverse metamorphosis – from wolf to man – takes place in private indicating that ‘the horror of shape-changing itself’ (2001:95) should not be seen by other characters. This is taken to the nth degree with Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’ where there is no description of Gregor’s transformation at all which takes place before the story begins, possibly when Gregor is asleep, again suggesting a painless transformation, or at least one of which Gregor is ignorant of any physical sensations. Early portrayals of the Hulk’s changes use a similar method where the transformation, at least of the most recognisable part of the body, the face, is taken “off-screen” by having his face covered by his hands or his back turned to the reader as shown in Figure 2.26. Also in this figure the first panel uses the outline method previously mentioned above. In other instances, virtually all of the Hulk’s body is taken off-screen, his transformation occurring underneath rubble for example with only a hand protruding from the wreckage to indicate the change. This again alludes to an instantaneous change, removing a bodily process. In Figure 2.27 of a changing Hulk, there is a combination of the two previous methods mentioned. The depiction is a three stage change with the midpoint blotted out by the white borders of the panel, while the separation of the middle face by the panel borders make this a
half and half depiction. Early renditions of Bruce Banner changing to the Hulk developed the stages of transformation moving from three stages to five, and then to eight (Figures 2.27, 2.29 and 2.30) but the theory remains the same. In these depictions there is no continuous movement, only static states of being without process.

Figure 2.26
Combined outline and “off-screen” Hulk change
(Lee, Ditko, and Roussos, 2003:163)

Figure 2.27
Hulk in five stage transformation with midpoint eliminated by the panel border
(Freidrich, Severin, and Giacoia, 2003:161)
Figure 2.28
Mystique change with obscured mid-point
(Moore, Dezago, Duursema, and Milgrom, 1994:28)

Figure 2.29
Painful Hulk transformation (Lee, Trimpe, and Severin, 2003:365)
However, not all depictions of the metamorphic are portrayed as painless and or disregarding the body. In ‘The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde’ Stevenson describes the transformation involving the actual physical sensations and feelings of changing forms, placing the body at the forefront:

The most racking pangs succeeded: a grinding in the bones, deadly nausea, and a horror of the spirit that cannot be exceeded at the hour of birth or death. Then these agonies began to swiftly subside, and I came to myself as if out of a great sickness (1996:143).

Once changed, Jekyll finds the associated sensations somewhat more enjoyable, indicating the attraction to continue his dark experiment in the future:

There was something strange in my sensations, something indescribably sweet. I felt younger, lighter, happier in body; within I was conscious of a heady recklessness, a current of disordered sensual images running like a mill race in my fancy, a solution of the bonds of
obligation, an unknown but not innocent freedom of the soul (Stevenson, 1996:143-4).

The transformation in the Hulk, like Jekyll and Hyde, was also represented as becoming more physically painful (Figures 2.29, 2.30). *Darkchylde* goes into vivid detail of the bodily trauma Ariel experiences when transforming from a girl into a demon:

It’s something quite close to Hell having your bones twist, snap and change shape. Having your skin stretch until it feels like it’s going to rip, right as your blood reaches its boiling point. In many ways it isn’t *like* dying and being born again… it *is* dying and being born again. Being born into the body of a nightmare *walking* (Queen, and Gorder & Alquiza, 1999:120, emphasis in original).

*Figure 2.31*
Ariel transforms into Fang, a demon from the Nightmare realm
(Queen, and Gorder & Alquiza, 1999:121)
The comics have the added onomatopoeic sounds of her body rearranging to accompany Ariel’s transformation (Figure 2.31). Reminiscent of a birthing process, a phallic “fanged penis” emerges from her stomach. Unlike Jekyll and Hyde, there is no indescribably sweet feeling for Ariel after her painful change, only the temptation of dissolution, to allow her ‘very essence’ to be ‘consumed by the dragon’ (Queen, and Gorder & Alquiza, 1999:129). She does however share with Jekyll and Hyde the “heady recklessness”, and the “solution of the bonds of obligation” when she wreaks devastation on the town of Salem. What is interesting here is something that has not been used before – the metaphor of rebirth and resurrection.

There are two instances in the Mystique series where Mystique’s extreme shapeshifting transformations cause her bodily trauma. The first is when she changes into a two-faced, four-armed humanoid (Figure 2.32). Before she undertakes the change, she states: ‘Last time I pulled this stunt it nearly killed me. But I figure I can hold this form for about two minutes before it rips my brain in half…’ (Vaughn, and Lucas, 2003d:14, emphasis in original). This transformation, or form as it is described, suggests that it is an in-between form, where her body is neither and both, an incomplete change, and one which her body wants to complete. Mystique trying to resist the change results in physical damage to her body. The other form which caused her pain is when she transformed into a rubbery figure, like that of Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four (Figure 2.33). This form allows her to ride on the concussion wave of an explosion but also causes her damage. She explains to Forge: ‘I’m still recovering from that little stunt. Don’t think I’d be able to ever do it again…’ (McKeever, Garcia, and Fernandez, 2005b:20, emphasis in original).
Figure 2.32
Two-faced, four-armed, Mystique
(Vaughn, and Lucas, 2003e:15)

Figure 2.33
Mystique doing the ‘Mr Fantastic’ thing
(McKeever, Garcia, and Fernandez, 2005a:20)
What happens when Mystique loses control of her body? An instance of this occurs in *Mystique* #9 where she has become virally infected, which is again indicative of her body being damaged in some way. The sickness interferes with her ability to effectively hold her shape/appearance, allowing previous identities and forms to surface through and across her body (Figure 2.34). When asked by an associate who does not quite recognise her, Mystique replies: ‘It’s me… and the last dozen or so jerks I shapeshifted into. My body has a tough time maintaining one appearance when it is fighting off infection’ (Vaughn, and Ryan, 2004:4). This sequence indicates that Mystique’s body acts as a kind of thermoplastic (or muscle) memory, retaining previous forms into which she has shifted.

![Figure 2.34](image)

**Figure 2.34**
Mystique trying to fight off infection
(Vaughn, and Ryan, 2004:3)
As stated previously it is film which has shown and evolved the metamorphic process and while film depictions are not my primary focus, depictions of metamorphosis in film follow examples I have set out above and have produced more stunning depictions which show the changing body through the use of special effects and digital film technology. Consider the transformations of the Hulk in Ang Lee’s *Hulk*, and Jekyll to Hyde and back in the film, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Accompanied by camera shakiness and flashes of light similar to depictions in comics, the changes are not continuous or seamless and again evoke the idea of an instantaneous, magic process. The grotesque in-betweens are blurred and shaky, sometimes even missing, taken off-screen literally, so that we should not be privy to the metamorphing body. Of course with digital technology the film can be slowed and paused. Doing this (especially for the Jekyll/Hyde transformation) does reveal “snapshots” of the grotesque subject, as stable renditions in sequence, though this is not the original intention of the film.

One of the most famous metamorphic changes of all time combining on-screen bodily change and pain is that of David Kessler’s transformation into a werewolf in the film *An American Werewolf in London* (1981). The most striking thing about this special effects tour-de-force is that, at least in several sections, David Kessler’s body is shown extending and transforming in front of our eyes. There are no in-betweens, the movement is continuous, the fluidity of the body normally represented as stable and rigid draws us to its inherent instability and malleability. The scene is gross and shocking as David’s body and face contorts, stretches, grows thick hair, and makes any number of excruciating noises while David rolls on the floor in pain. There is nothing magical or instantaneous about this change. The body is front and centre of the transformation. Other transformations in films such as *The
"Fly" (human to fly) and "The Thing" (human to alien), exemplify what happens when bodies undergo horrific changes. The horror invoked comes from the explicit depiction of how easily the idea of the “stable” human body is (literally) ripped apart. These depictions are also against the will of the subject, so as a viewing audience we are somehow sympathetic to the unforgiving plight of the characters from these movies. This is in contrast to Mystique who has a conscious command over her metamorphic ability. During one of Mystique’s transformations in X-Men (2000) small leathery pseudopods extend from her body accompanied by the subtle sounds of her body morphing (Figure 2.35). Digital technology used in the X-Men films has influenced the depiction of Mystique’s shapeshifting in comics. Mystique’s changes in the Mystique series (which was published after the release of X-Men) are very visceral and fluid, reminiscent of the changes exhibited in the X-Men movies (Figures 2.34, 2.36).

Figure 2.35
Example of Mystique’s metamorphic ability portrayed in film (X-Men, 2000)
The depiction of metamorphosis provides a corporeal example of unstable identity. It is the depiction, or lack of, bodily sensations and grotesque mid-points of metamorphic processes which draws our attention to the inherent instability of the human subject. Traditionally, portrayals of metamorphosis have glossed over the transitions; taking them off-screen to allay any fears we might have that we are not completely stable subjects. Confronted with the horrifying metamorphic in-betweens, the surfacing of the hidden, the inherent malleability of the body is exposed. Yet, in an abject way, it also fascinates. As we have moved into the postmodern era, which is characterised by theories revolving around unstable identity and multiple selves, depictions of metamorphosis have become more visceral, exposed, and “real” if you like, especially in film where digital technologies offer a widening range of depictive possibilities. However the portrayal of metamorphosis necessarily imbues us with the fear that we are something of a being-without-thingness, without form or substance. And further it presents us with an even worse fate – that we may end up like Martian Manhunter in Figure 2.10 – dead in process – without discernible form or identity, unrecognisable – neither and both – stripped of symbolic designation and fixity. It is then perhaps fortunate that we have Mystique and her coterie of shape-changers to run the risk for us.
Chapter 3

The Feminine Mystique:

Feminism, Sexuality, Motherhood

‘Women in general are out of control and feminism… is to blame’

(Warner, 1994:3).

‘She, in fact, may no longer be a she, but the subject of quite another story: a subject in process, a mutant, the other of the Other, a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis’ (Braidotti, 2002:11).

‘Forge: I have the power to fix anything… but I couldn’t fix her’


Forge, a member of X-Factor and one time love interest of Mystique, may not have had the power to fix Mystique, but as a shapeshifter and dangerous female presence, there have been a number of plans used to keep her “fixed.” Douglas writes:

Danger lies in transitional states… because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others (1966:96).
Douglas’s theory pertaining to the idea of ritual transition in tribal society applies just as well to Mystique, whose presence is ‘destructive to existing patterns… has potentiality’ and through the use of her mutant ability ‘symbolises both danger and power’ (1966:94). This power and danger in tribal societies is garnered unconsciously. Mystique however has conscious control of her shapeshifting ability. She willingly and rationally disrupts order by continually being in a transitional state, giving her access to, and command over, special powers and energies. In essence, her presence condemns order and pattern. As female; lesbian; mutant; and villain, Mystique evokes ideas of flow, grotesqueness, abjection, and otherness – the classic marginalised female/feminine other. She is alluring, openly sexual, enigmatic, and as such incites ambivalence. As an untamed, hostile, out of control, out of place woman, she ‘must be leashed, or else will wreak havoc’ (Warner, 1994:4). Mystique operates outside of sanctioned mutant society as an “evil” mutant. The distinction for her, and other “evil” mutants, is that after having entered a transitional/marginal state, they have not returned, instead revelling in its danger and power. This “anti-social” behaviour becomes their continued proper expression. Their powers represent a danger to society and their use is disapproved. Those who use these powers are ‘malefactors… and all good men would try to hound them down’ (Douglas, 1966:99).

Controlling Mystique’s body, and thus her powers and abilities, is means enough to control her. When controlled, unable to shapeshift, she becomes stable and predictable, which necessarily ensures control. Confined to her singular, blue, female form, she is incorporated into a masculine ideal; a patriarchal ideology. In the *X-Factor* series, Mystique is forced to become a member of the X-Factor team after being implanted with a micro-chip that stops her from shapeshifting into the forms of
certain X-Men. In this regard, as Douglas writes, bodily control is an expression of social control. A similar method is employed in the Mystique series where she is forced to work for the X-Men’s patriarch, Professor Xavier. The subtext of controlling Mystique is a campaign of resistance to instability – the maintenance of control and order. Mystique is aligned with ‘pollution powers’, which are not ‘part of the psyche and which are not to be bought or learned by initiation and training’ (Douglas, 1966:113). As a ‘polluting person’, who is ‘always in the wrong’, she has ‘crossed some line which should not have been crossed’ (Douglas, 1966:113). An example of her polluting presence from Mystique #7 is reproduced below, where Mystique is an abject presence threatening to circumvent Professor Xavier’s ethics and authority, thereby polluting the school with unsanctioned information:

Mystique: Wow, if only those brats knew that their pacifist Prof. had his own underground espionage network. I wonder what they would think about your ethics. Maybe I should swing by the school and give them a little guest lecture sometime?

Xavier: If you ever set foot within five hundred yards of my institute, you will live just long enough to regret it. (Vaughn, and Ryan, 2003:12-13. emphasis in original).

Parallel with her ambiguous nature Mystique also holds ambiguous working roles. Working as the leader of the U.S. Government sponsored Freedom Force, and later in the Mystique series as an indentured operative for Professor Xavier, Mystique exhibits double loyalties; she is an intruder who must operate in a system in which she does not belong (Douglas, 1966:102). While in these positions Mystique’s ‘true intentions remain her own’ (Vaughn, and Ryan, 2003:5). This double role:
is difficult to play coolly. If anything goes wrong, if they feel resentment or grief… their ambiguous status in the structure… makes them appear as a danger to those belonging fully in it… the existence of an angry person in an interstitial position… is dangerous (Douglas, 1966:102).

Dangerous persons must be brought into line by exerting control, such as when in a tribal community accusations of witchcraft are a warning to bring the accused’s feelings into line with the correct situation (Douglas, 1966:102). Mystique shares with those accused of witchcraft their ambiguous roles and dangerous status. Similarly, whenever Mystique becomes angry or threatens (perceived or otherwise) the patterned social structure, she must be reminded, through overt or covert threats, that her rebellious feelings are not in line with the correct situation. Consider the following example of Mystique’s argument with her superior, Val Cooper, when required to work with Forge:

**Mystique:** I won’t lift a **finger** to help that murdering **swine**!

**Cooper:** Considering your own history, **Mystique**, as former head of the terrorist **Brotherhood of Evil Mutants**, you’re **hardly** in a position to throw stones.

**Forge:** Moira MacTaggart’s Research Center is under attack…

**Mystique:** What’s that to me? Let Xavier’s mutants take care of their own!

**Cooper:** This is a heaven sent opportunity for Freedom Force to establish some serious credibility among the mutant community… by going to the **rescue** of people who used to be your bitter foes. You can’t afford to pass that up.
Mystique: I suppose this has absolutely nothing to do with wanting Forge here back designing weapons for “Uncle Sam”.

Cooper: Would it hurt to get on his good side too?

Mystique: Because of him, Cooper, my foster daughter, Rogue, not to mention all her fellow X-Men were killed. And you expect me to work with him?

Cooper: I expect you, Mystique, to do as you’re told.

(Claremont, and Silvestri & Green, 1989a:29, emphasis in original)

Mystique is in fact the perfect exception to Douglas’s rule. She is a malevolent, anti-social, disapproved person in an interstitial position using conscious, controlled power (Douglas, 1966:105).

**Heroes and Villains: Faces of Feminism**

The superhero realm is dominated by the masculine. As Julie D. O’Reilly succinctly points out, most heroines, especially true of Golden and Silver Age characters, are mere extensions of their male counterparts (2005:273). Apart from Wonder Woman, many of the female characters’ monikers are suffixed with the adolescent title of girl – Supergirl, Batgirl, Element Girl, for example – as opposed to the male characters’ man. While the male hero graduates from boy to man, the female hero remains stuck in a kind of permanent adolescence. For example, while Peter Parker is still a teenager his rise to the level of superhero sees him becoming Spiderman. In contrast Jean Grey of the X-Men was still only Marvel Girl when Professor Xavier deemed the X-Men worthy of hero status. For the male readership (of all ages), the male superhero is to be idealised and aspired to, while the female superheroine, the girl, is to be gazed at, dominated, and acquired. If the superheroine is merely an extension of
the superhero, then becoming a superhero also means “getting the girl” – the male superhero naturally attracts his female counterpart, and in doing so reinforces his own status as the primary hero. As Grosz states:

male self-definitions require and produce definitions of the female as their inverted or complementary counterparts. This implies… an analysis of the ways in which masculine or phallocentric discourses and knowledges rely on images, metaphors and figures of woman and femininity to support and justify their definitions. It also… implies an exploration of the disavowed corporeal and psychic dependence of the masculine, with its necessary foundation in women’s bodies, on the female corporeality it cannot claim as its own territory (the maternal body) (1990:74).

Element Girl is one of these female others to the male hero’s one. A minor comic character at best, her portrayal is telling in both the Metamorpho and Sandman titles in which she appears. Her appearances in the original Metamorpho series portray her as a headstrong, confident, intelligent, and resourceful woman. As rival to Sapphire for Rex’s affections (citing their similarities as freaks would make them a perfect couple) she provides a stark contrast to the spoiled, rich, and passive, Sapphire. In her coloured and changing body Element Girl is definitely presented as other, and in her desire for Rex’s affection she can also be seen as an interloper who tries to break up the potential family unit. Rex had always planned to marry Sapphire before becoming the disfigured Metamorpho. Element Girl’s confident nature is attributed to her role as superhero, though while fighting alongside Rex she constantly tries to convince him of her worth. At one point in the series Element Girl’s life hangs in the
balance and the comic readers are invited to decide whether she should survive.\textsuperscript{26}

She did and by the time the \textit{Metamorpho} series was cancelled, Metamorpho and Element Girl’s relationship seemed to be in the ascendancy. Seen again many years later in \textit{Sandman} #20 her circumstances are quite different. Unwanted as an operative at her former agency, unable to procure other ongoing work due to her appearance, and with Rex nowhere to be seen (or even mentioned for that matter), she has essentially become a shut-in. With her self-esteem seriously low, she is certainly no hero, and the story shows the reality/absurdity of a hero without an income, and who is unable to work because they have no recourse to a secret identity. While Gaiman’s story does comment on the abundance of pneumatically enhanced female characters that populate contemporary comics as eye candy for male readers, there is a more disturbing subtext playing out. Gaiman’s depiction of Element Girl reads that once a woman’s youthful looks, and therefore her usefulness, are gone, she will effectively be abandoned by society. However Gaiman does not address how this problem can be overcome. His solution to her predicament is to make her suicidal. Without looks or a job it seems there is little else left for Element Girl, who is now well and truly a woman, to do. When she finds that her own body prevents her from committing suicide, the character, Death, is introduced to help dispatch her. Gaiman it seems is determined to get rid of her one way or another.

In Metamorpho’s ongoing appearances in his personal storylines, it is Sapphire who continually re-emerges as Rex’s true love, even though she remains a continually passive character. Interestingly while Metamorpho’s appearance is hideous he is not affected enough to shut himself away. This would not be the actions of a hero. He simply makes use of a mask. Rex is concerned with his looks

\textsuperscript{26} Such a gimmick was used again to decide whether Robin would die or live during the storyline ‘Death in the Family’ (in \textit{Batman} #426-9, Dec. 1988 – Jan. 1989). The verdict was close, but the comic fans voted for him to die.
but this is not the sum total of his identity. Nor does he lose Sapphire’s love after his transformation. Indeed Rex ends up with two women fighting over his disfigured form and affections, a situation which would rarely occur if the genders were reversed. Element Girl, once not needed is reduced to her appearance. She makes use of silicate masks which she can produce using her ability, however these masks are solid and tend to fall off. Masks composed of her own elemental makeup quickly rot.

In the *Metamorpho* limited series (1993), archaeologist Jillian Conway, like Element Girl before her, also voluntarily exposed herself to the Orb of Ra, gaining similar metamorphic powers, though without the altruistic attitude. Conway has Element Girl’s same problem of being unable to keep a human face, and has the similar disfigured appearance of Metamorpho in the original series. It seems that the active women in Metamorpho’s life and adventures pay a steep price for their actions usually beginning with disfigurement. This is a problem which seems to have evaded Metamorpho himself, his appearance becoming more normal by the *Metamorpho* (1993) mini-series. But of course, as a man, Metamorpho is judged on his actions not his looks.

Male heroines outnumber female heroines in the superhero universe. Wonder Woman is the only female in the rejuvenated Justice League, (DC Comics). While the X-Men is a little more for affirmative action – Emma Frost, herself a former villain, runs the Xavier school (as of *X-Men* #203, Nov. 2007) – males still outnumber females, and the X-Men do not look like becoming the X-Women (or X-Womyn) anytime soon.\(^{27}\) In *X-Men* #174 (Oct. 2005) the current X-Men members debate whether to allow Mystique membership. The female character, Polaris, remarks: ‘Personally I think it would be good to have a few more women in our line

\(^{27}\) The DC comic *Outsiders* (#16-33) has a majority of female members, 5 to 3 in favour.
up’. To which Wolverine replies: ‘Ey, let’s not turn this into a women’s rights thing.’ (Milligan et al, 2005b:22, emphasis in original). Indeed to do so would upset and possibly destroy the patriarchal/masculine hierarchy of the superhero universe.

Braidotti writes:

> at the end of the last century female emancipation was blamed for the moral decline of culture and eventually the fall of Western civilisation. Disapproval of the “new woman” was expressed in monstrous images of depravity, mutation, degeneration and perversity (2002:199).

This thinking was embodied by the mythical figure of Lamia:

> who was thought to have been a bisexual, masculinised, cradle robbing creature and therefore to the men of the turn of the century perfectly representative of the New Woman who, in their eyes, was seeking to arrogate to herself male privileges, refused the duties of motherhood, and was intent on destroying the heavenly harmony of feminine subordination in the family (Dijkstra, 1986:309).

The creation of Mystique and Ms. Marvel (a.k.a. Carol Danvers, and Mystique’s early nemesis), in 1978 comes amid the turbulence of second wave feminism and the changing social roles of women. Carol and Mystique represent two types of new feminist woman. Carol (Ms. Marvel) is a “typically” attractive female, sporting blonde hair and blue eyes. She represents an emerging woman who has the independence to pursue her own career and live alone. Carol was fired as editor of Woman magazine however, because she would not follow the magazine’s editorial guidelines, which was to be ‘another Good Housekeeping with maybe a dash of Vogue and Glamour, run by a traditional editor’ (Claremont and Vosburg & Zeck,
On her firing at the magazine, Carol was not replaced by an up and comer at the magazine, but an older, more traditional, woman. There are some clues that remind us that Carol holds a few “old-fashioned” traditional female values close, such as equating her job/superhero status with shopping and looking good, revealed in the following passage:

*It’s early evening by the time Carol returns to her Greenwich Village apartment, her day split between a futile search for Death-Bird… and a madcap afternoon shopping spree.*

**Carol Danvers:** Well, today isn’t a *total loss*. I got fired and *lost* a dangerous super-villain, but I treated myself to some *dynamite* new clothes and a snazzy *hair-do* (Claremont, and Vosburg & Zeck, 1978:10, emphasis in original).

Disappointments for Carol are easily brushed off with a good bout of retail therapy. Perhaps this tells us more about the attitudes of writer, Chris Claremont, than it does of the Danvers character.

Bukatman writes that the hero’s creation is always precedent and so the hero summons forth his own nemesis (1994:104). As a figure, the villain of the superhero narrative represents change, upheaval, with intent to disrupt society and social order, causing a lapse from the order of known things. Villains have no other purpose than to bring about chaos – a complete dissolution of boundaries. In a similar manner Patriarchy summons forth Feminism as its natural villain. For patriarchal culture, feminism’s new women, both Carol and Mystique, are villains who are and left to slug it out between themselves. As Mike Barnett, Carol’s suitor, proclaims: ‘By hook or by crook, I’ll have you as my *wife*… and then I’ll *end* this Ms. Marvel craziness *forever!*’ (Claremont and Vosburg & Zeck, 1978:16, emphasis in original).
Replacing “Ms. Marvel” in this statement with “feminism” and the thoughts of men at the time would be readily apparent. In fact what has occurred here is a kind of doubling of the feminist other of which the doubling of their titles, Ms. Marvel, and taking poetic licence to Mystique’s moniker – “Ms. Tique” – makes apparent. Ms. Marvel, the obvious feminist because she has taken on the title of Ms., is the friendlier feminist, who while moving along and up the career ladder, is still concerned about traditional “feminine” things like shopping and hairdos. Mystique is the violent and unknowable, unpredictable feminine seeking power through co-opting masculine means. The depiction of these females suggests that if feminists knock each other out, then Carol’s suitor, Mike, won’t need to end this crazy feminism – they’ll do it for him themselves. As I discuss later in this chapter, this is exactly what happens between the powerful female triumvirate of Mystique, Destiny, and Rogue.

The first *Ms. Marvel* series ended shortly after issue #22 (Feb. 1979). However Mystique’s thirty year story has continued to weave its way through numerous titles to the present, essentially becoming a presence beneath that of the Marvel Universe which regularly surfaces to disrupt the social fabric. Looking back we could say that Mystique has won this battle of the new feminist women. More disturbing is the new woman who Mystique represents, embodying a list of men’s anxieties about women and feminism. She is a villain; a lesbian with (at that stage) no known children of her own, who relies on deception to infiltrate positions of power. As Renée Hoogland argues the lesbian emerges in the mainstream cultural imaginary at the very moment when traditional social structures are under attack or

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28 *Ms. Marvel* was revived as an ongoing title in May 2006.
when dominant systems of power/knowledge are being shaken to their foundations. Such upsurges Hoogland suggests are:

directly linked to the changing position of women in society… as part of an anxious response to the undermining effects on hegemonic power structures brought about by an increase in female socio-economic and symbolic agency (1997:56).

As years have passed however, the roles Mystique has taken have been less than impressive from a feminist perspective. Two personas she has used her shapechanging ability to become are the supermodel, Ronnie Lake; and a senator’s wife, Mallory Brickman, a role she uses to manipulate those around her. The feminist Mystique resurfaces every now and then, albeit minimally, to rail against female oppression indicating that she may well take up her feminist role anew someday. For example, commenting on the mutant character, Prudence. Prudence can transfer her consciousness into the body of any woman she sees allowing her to temporarily control them. Mystique clearly finds this self-defeating:

Pretty lame power when you’re living in a patriarchal society. How can you spy on the world when you can’t even look like the jerks running it? (Vaughn, and Lucas, 2003c:16, emphasis in original).

In one sentence Mystique sums up the difficulty of women in a society run by men, especially those of the superpowered kind. To be taken seriously you have to at least look like a man, if not act like one. Controlling women is clearly a waste of time, because women have little or no control over society’s affairs. This statement also has a further effect as an indication of patriarchal power. Mystique is conceding that women have no agency in political and social affairs. Effectively they are a benign
presence, who have to look, and therefore act, like men in order to achieve any type of agency, which you might say is doing her a disservice. In an economy of sameness the notion of what is womanly or associated with females must become more pronounced to have an effect.

**X-Men: Social Control**

‘there have been a lot of comics where dangerous female characters are “tamed” and/or reformed. I think we have to ask ourselves why we compulsively need to “fix” complicated women, when we would never dream of doing the same thing to Wolverine, Punisher, John Constantine, etc.’ (Vaughn in Singh, 2003).

To control is to dominate, command, exercise restraint or direction over. Control is mastery. Political, social, and symbolic systems are harbourers of control insisting on coherence and order. Control of the body is a sought after ideal. Elite athletes are lauded for their control over their bodies, taking their honed physiques and minds to faster, further, and higher frontiers. As Susan Bordo writes regarding the psychology of self-control of body builders and anorexics:

there is the reassurance that one can overcome all physical obstacles, push oneself to any extremes in pursuit of one’s goals… the thrill of being in total charge of the shape of one’s body (1988:99).

The more one tries to control the body, however, points to a fear of vulnerability, instability, and failure. The body is at various times an uncontrollable entity – a litany of involuntary muscle movements, abject noises, and emissions. Controlling the body is a way of warding against, or rejecting, the instability of the human
condition. To be “out of control” is socially frowned upon. An “out of control” individual is feared because of their unpredictability and absence of rationality. They sit at the other end of the spectrum where control of mind and body are tenuous. As out of place, dangerous others, metamorphic characters sit at the borders of control. If they cannot be despatched then they must be controlled. Brian Vaughn, writer of the first thirteen issues of the *Mystique* series, states in the quote at the start of this section, that there is a history of fixing dangerous, bad women in comics. Some “fixed” female villains from the Marvel Comics Universe are Rogue, Polaris, Emma Frost, Psylocke, and Scarlet Witch. These fixed female villains who have rejected their evil ways have symbolically and effectively been neutered. This is not to say that male villains have not been subject to redemption, it is more the manner in which the female villains have been neutered. Few female villains exist in relationships (that is romantic, either heterosexual or homosexual) and thus exert a great deal of independent power. Once they relinquish their evil natures, they become love objects for male characters and their independent power is neutralised. Their relationships often take priority over the use of their abilities and skills, sometimes interfering with them. Therefore their journey (in a heterosexual sense) is complete. Their out-of-controlness has been quelled, in effect, becoming good girls operating for patriarchy. This realignment of female villains, especially in the X-Men titles, works in an oedipal fashion. Female villains fail to recognise the “law of the father”, this being Professor Xavier in the X-Men universe. By recognising the father’s authority and becoming X-Men, they transfer their desire from the mother to the father. Once they become X-Men, the women must transfer their affection again, as in the Oedipus complex, to another male, generally another member of the X-Men.
As stated earlier, the hero summons forth his own nemesis. Therefore the social system which includes the good mutant superhero who uses their powers in a controlled manner necessarily requires that same system to produce bad or evil mutants with uncontrolled and dangerous powers. Both hero and nemesis have control of their powers to a greater or lesser degree. The control here is over the sanctioned use of power. Sanctioned use of power is controlled, unsanctioned use is uncontrolled.

Professor Xavier is head and founder of the School for Gifted Youngsters.\textsuperscript{29} His is a position of authority and has the power to “bless.” Possibly the most powerful telepath on the planet, his mutant ability is also one of control. Adolescent and pre-adolescent mutants are ‘temporarily outcast’ (Douglas, 1966:96) before they are pinpointed by Professor Xavier who initiates them into “mutanthood.” Through his school, a place away from and outside society, the mutants are guided through puberty which accompanies the surfacing of their latent mutant powers. Indeed they cannot have a place in society at this stage in case their powers unsuspectingly erupt and cause damage or death. Xavier’s school teaches young mutants the ability of control over their own powers. This term at Xavier’s school constitutes what Douglas calls a marginal period which separates ritual dying and rebirth:

For the duration of the rite they have no place in society. Sometimes they go to live far away outside it. Sometimes they live near enough for unplanned contacts to take place between full social beings and the outcasts. Then we find them behaving like dangerous criminals… To behave anti-socially is the proper expression of their marginal condition (1966:96-7).

\textsuperscript{29} His school is also known as The Xavier Institute of Higher Learning.
Leaving home to go to Xavier’s school constitutes ritual dying and an entering of the marginal state. Powers evoked in marginal states are either internal/uncontrolled/involuntary or external/controlled/voluntary. Douglas writes of the internal powers being involuntary, which for mutants they are. Mutants can do nothing about their genetic mutation, and before they learn to control their powers are at risk of involuntarily excessive use. Speaking of an emerging mutant’s powers, the mutant ‘may be quite unaware that he possesses them or that they are active’ (Douglas, 1966:98). An example is when the flame power of the young mutant, Rusty Collins, uncontrollably manifests resulting in an innocent woman being burned (X-Factor #1, Feb. 1985). Professor Xavier teaches young mutants to control their mutant powers on behalf of the social structure (Douglas, 1966:99). The mutant as a categorical mistake is thus ‘resituated as a force of social cohesion’ (Bukatman, 1994:119). To humans, any mutant using their power is unsanctioned and anti-social. Good mutants (X-Men) have passed their tests and use of their power is sanctioned by Professor Xavier. It is during the training to become X-Men that their anti-social behaviour is exhibited, that they do not use proper etiquette and destruction of property ensues. An example is Kitty Pryde (variously known as Sprite and Shadowcat) who continually flaunts rules or bothers to follow appropriate orders. At Professor Xavier’s school mutants become a “new person.” Having undertaken the rituals of schooling and physical tests that show they can control themselves, they have the option to return to society without posing a threat, or become a member of the X-Men where they ‘protect society from malefactors against whom their danger is directed’ (Douglas, 1966:96). On show is what this marginal period of teaching, tests, and transition produce – a stable, controlled, “complete” mutant. Graduation marks the student’s re-birth, not just as a whole, stable subject, but ritually as a
member of the X-Men. While there is always the possibility of a mutant’s powers developing further, or becoming suddenly uncontrollable (examples of this are Phoenix’s transformation into Dark Phoenix, and Wolverine’s berserker rages) the overriding tenet for graduation is the controlled use of power for the right reasons and purposes.

Genetically speaking, all mutants have crossed some line which should not have been crossed. Indeed the only thing separating “evil” mutants from X-Men is their articulated social structure. Using Louis Althusser’s ideology of state apparatuses, Xavier’s school operates like other social institutions. As David Harris writes of students:

> the successful ones may emerge with a heightened sense of themselves as worthy and capable individuals, even though the whole process has involved… a deep submission to the authority of those who control the system (1996:182).

Xavier controls this system and it is to his directions which students must submit. The X-Men of the 1960s all wore the same costume/uniform. On graduation the X-Men students were allowed to choose their own costume and “secret” identity, which basically aligns with being allowed to “choose” their individuality as a member of the X-Men. As Professor Xavier states, ‘It’s time they looked like individuals… not products of an assembly line!’ (Claremont, Byrne, and Austin, 1990:7). Under Althusser’s system this is actually a ‘misleading notion of individuality’ (Harris, 1996:182). Coupled with both men and women being X-Men, and the division of labour in superhero groups being basically undifferentiated, X-Men are reduced to an economy of sameness, eliminating/erasing the female other. Genetically the X chromosome is that part of human DNA which produces females. Considering the Y
chromosome is that which produces the male, it would be more correct for the X-Men to be called the Y-Men. It is no wonder that villains are uncontrolled forces. They have not been interpellated by Professor Xavier’s school. Indeed if all mutants went to Xavier’s school, there would be no villains as all mutants would become “individuals.” There would therefore be no need for the X-Men!

Sexuality

Kaja Silverman notes that clothing and dress is an important cultural implement for affixing sexual identity (1986:146), and Mystique’s clothes/costumes support this theory. As a representation of her sexuality, Mystique’s clothes change throughout her career depending on the comic title in which she appears, and as a result identifies to the reader what to expect from her sexually. Her first costume in which she was seen from approximately 1977 to 1995, covers her breasts and upper torso tightly, while her groin is covered by a long flowing skirt that is side split to the waist that would hardly hide her genitalia in any situation, (Figure 2.28) and emphasises her breasts as fetish objects. As a villain she holds the attributes of the phallic woman (not the least because she can transform into a male) represented by the fact that at any moment her skirt may reveal an actual phallus, which is no doubt an entertaining but horrifying possibility for her heroic foes (and fans). The skulls on her belt are also indicative of the horror beneath. As a member of the X-Factor team (X-Factor, 1995 to 2003), and therefore coded good, her clothes/costume change from exhibiting threatening polyphallic qualities to a more feminised, appealing figure (Figure 3.1). Like many other female heroes, and like much of the 1990s (and current) superhero comic art, Mystique is drawn as a coloured nude, expressing a closed, smooth body, that is sexually appealing to males. She becomes, as Jean
Baudrillard argues, a phallic effigy, a safe reflection of the masculine rather than an opposition. When Mystique gets her own series (2003-05) her costume consists of a cropped black leather top, black leather pants and gloves, and heavy black boots (Figure 3.2). Leather is associated with toughness and masculinity as well as erotic connotations suggestive of danger, seduction, and sado-masochism. As Sherrie Inness suggests, masculine clothing is indicative of a woman’s ‘capacity for action and leadership’ (1999:25). Keeping these associations in mind, leather is implicitly linked to lesbianism, and as such Mystique’s attire would indicate her again being aligned with lesbianism.

Figure 3.1
Mystique as unthreatening phallic effigy
(Mackie, Matsuda, & Williamson, 1996:18)
If the X-Men as mutants are positioned as other to humans, mutant villains must be positioned further again, as other. Destiny and Mystique’s relationship is beset by a wild array of perverted and/or transgressive otherness. Firstly, theirs is a lesbian relationship. Destiny is ‘the only member of the Brotherhood Raven calls friend’ (Claremont, Byrne, and Austin, 2001a:18). Mystique calls Destiny ‘my friend’ (Claremont, Byrne, and Austin, 2001b:6) and ‘my dear friend’ (Claremont, Byrne, and Austin, 2001b:21). By Uncanny X-Men #254 (1989), Destiny says of Mystique: ‘This is Raven as I know her, the spirit-soul within my dearest friend – full of strength and courage and passion – that I have loved from the moment we met’ (Claremont, and Silvestri & Green, 1989a:19). This passage is told as Destiny is having a vision and is effectively talking to herself, thus the love of which she speaks could be interpreted as platonic love. In Uncanny X-Men #265, the villain, The
Shadow King, refers to Destiny as Mystique’s ‘leman’ (Claremont, Jaaska & Rubinstein, 1990:18), an archaic word meaning:

1. A person beloved by one of the opposite sex; a lover or sweetheart; occas. a husband or wife.
2. In bad sense (cf. paramour): One who is loved unlawfully; an unlawful lover or mistress. In later archaistic use chiefly applied to the female sex.


Upon discovering Destiny is dead the Shadow King remarks of Mystique: ‘how delightfully heart-broken she must be’ (Claremont, Jaaska & Rubinstein, 1990:18). In *X-Men Forever #3* Destiny is referred to as Mystique’s ‘companion’ (Nicieza, Maguire, and Pepoy, 2001a: Inside front cover). Finally in the preamble to *X-Men Forever #5* Destiny is referred to as Mystique’s ‘lover’ (Nicieza, Maguire, and Pepoy, 2001b: Inside front cover), although the print is so small on the inside front cover, I suspect many would not have bothered to read it. Still, for the reader, this poses another set of questions. As Judith Butler states, that to claim this is what I am, is to suggest a provisional totalization of this “I.” (1991:15). While Butler is discussing the coming out of lesbians, once the term is proclaimed it only brings forth another confusing set of questions: ‘before, you did not know whether I “am”, but now you do not know what that means’ (1991:16). For Butler it means that coming out necessarily means reproducing the closet from which the coming out has been performed, and in effect this coming out must be continually repeated, for being “out” always depends to some extent on being “in” (1991:16). Mystique has never come out the same way, for example, as the gay male superhero, Northstar, famously did (discussed later in this chapter).
In his essay ‘Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes’ (1925: 243-258) Sigmund Freud writes that the clitoris is a small penis and is responsible for a female’s inherent bisexuality and sexual ambivalence. Even though Mystique has been referred to as bisexual and has had, and been implied to have had, sex with different males, it is her enduring and loving relationship with Destiny that marks her meaningfully as lesbian. In her book, The Apparitional Lesbian, Terry Castle tackles the same circumstance with the actress Greta Garbo. Castle writes:

Why not refer to her, more properly, as a bisexual? Because I think it is more meaningful to refer to her as a lesbian… while Garbo sometimes makes love to men, she would rather make love to women (1993:15).

Castle positions the lesbian relationship as essentially subverting patriarchal culture:

to theorise about female-female desire… is precisely to envision the taking apart of… patriarchal culture. Female bonding, at least hypothetically, destabilises the “canonical” triangular arrangement of male desire… and ultimately – in the radical form of lesbian bonding – displaces it entirely (1993:72).

Destiny and Mystique are approximately the same age, but Mystique ages slower due to her mutant genetics. Therefore Destiny appears visibly older than Mystique indicating, for all visual purposes, a relationship involving a significant age difference, its presence destabilising the normalised ideal of heterosexual relationships in superhero comics which (as in many facets of popular culture) are dominated by the young, beautiful, and sexy. Destiny is also blind adding a physical disability to their already complex relationship. With her blindness and mutant
ability of precognition, Destiny recalls the figure of Tiresius, the prophet of Greek mythology, whose wisdom is frequently called upon. As a seer, Destiny possesses specific and powerful knowledge to which patriarchy is not privy. However Destiny and Mystique’s powerful dual opposition to patriarchy (which discussed later in this chapter becomes a triumvirate with Rogue) cannot be allowed to flourish. Castle argues that the central lesbian bond is undermined or broken by having one of the principals die (1993:85). Simply:

One woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one. Passion is excited, only to be obscured, disembodied, decarnalized… Panic seems to underwrite these obsessional spectralizing gestures: a panic over love, female pleasure, and the possibility of women breaking free – together – from their male sexual overseers (1993:34).

In *Uncanny X-Men* #254 Destiny foresees her own murder. The perpetrator is symbolically revealed in *Uncanny X-Men* #255 as Professor Xavier’s psychotic/autistic son, Legion, representing an out-of-control figure in opposition to Xavier’s controlled and controlling nature. Destiny’s death, as a violent obliteration of the unnameable abject (Hoogland, 1997:56), is required for Mystique to leave her lesbianism behind and achieve “normality.” Destiny’s death also removes the prospect of a patriarchal panic, derived from the ability of female pleasure exerting itself through homosexual love to overthrow the patriarchal system. As Castle points out, this type of lesbian character execution is nothing new, the comic continuing a narrative convention that has roots in eighteenth and nineteenth century art and literature. This process of derealization is where lesbianism, or even its possibility, is represented only to the same degree as it is made to disappear through the ‘infusion
of spectral metaphors’ (Castle, 1993:34). The rendition of Mystique transforming in Figures 2.19 and 2.28 evoke the idea of the spectral. Destiny returns after her death as a spectral presence who speaks through her killer, Legion (Moore et al, 1994:27). Similarly Destiny also speaks through her extensive volume of diaries which, like the books of Nostradamus, are full of premonitions of major future events and have been used in several storylines as a very convenient plot device. There is still, however, the matter of her and Mystique being unacknowledged as lesbians. In my research for this thesis I have not come across the term being used in any of the comics in which Mystique has appeared. Being called “lovers” is not the same thing, and as stated in Chapter Two, at time of writing (June 2008) there has been no mention of Destiny as Mystique’s partner/lover on the Marvel webpage devoted to Mystique. For Butler this is a type of oppression that works covertly through being ‘neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law’ (1991:20). Lesbianism is not prohibited in political discourse because it is not named or acknowledged as occupying a discursive site and is thus excluded from discourse itself. This is in stark contrast to the openly gay character, Northstar who spectacularly revealed his homosexuality in Alpha Flight #106 (Mar. 1992). Northstar however has never been associated with a long term relationship or lover. In Uncanny X-Men #431 (Austen, Tan, and Avalon Studios, 2003), the reformed villain Juggernaut trades quips with Northstar. In a conversation lasting two and a half pages, Juggernaut’s brusque demeanour plays well against Northstar’s cool wit, as they debate and

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30 At the time a member of the Canadian Superhero team, Alpha Flight.

31 It should be noted though, that Alpha Flight ran for another twenty-five issues before being cancelled. Revealing Northstar as gay may have simply been a ploy to lift flagging sales.

32 In the Ultimate Marvel Universe Northstar has a relationship with the X-Man, Colossus. Set outside of the Marvel Universe continuity, the Ultimate Marvel Universe series of titles is a modernized re-imagining of the Marvel Universe, which began from scratch in 2001 with new versions of each character.

33 Normally a villain, Juggernaut was at the time a member of the X-Men.
debunk heterosexual myths about homosexual males, brought about by Juggernaut’s
devotion and protective attitude towards a mutant child:

Northstar: You’re not doing anything *untoward* with the boy, now
are you?

Juggernaut: Come on, Northstar, I like *girls*. Present company
excluded.

Northstar: Did you… did you just call me a *girl*?

Juggernaut: Well… you like *boys*, don’t you?

Northstar: No, I like *men*. Present company excluded.

Juggernaut: Whoo, now I’m *deeply* wounded. I may never recover
from the painful *shock* of being rejected by a guy.

Northstar: You wouldn’t be the *first*.

Juggernaut: What’s your deal anyway? Why can’t you just like
*girls*? Seems it’d be a lot *easier* in the long run.

Northstar: What’s *your* deal, anyway? Why can’t *you* just be *nice*
to people and get along with someone over the age of
*fifteen*?

Juggernaut: Hell, you gonna *fly* this thing, mister swishy-wishy, or
just give me crap all day?

Northstar: I’m just going to give you crap all day…

Juggernaut: You know, Northstar, a *LOT* of women find me *very*
attractive.

Northstar: I have *better taste* than most women. Having a difficult
time recovering from the painful, emotional *shock* of
being rejected by a guy?

Juggernaut: That’s not what I’m sayin’. I’m just sayin’ I can be
attractive. I clean up good.

Northstar: It sounds like you *want* me to find you attractive, even
though you’re not interested in men.

Juggernaut: It’s an odd sort of catch-22, isn’t it?

(Austen, Tan, and Avalon Studios, 2003:18-22, emphasis in
original)
This passage addresses the myth of gay males as sexual predators of young boys, the effeminate (or not) nature of gay males, and the idea of heterosexual men wanting to be found attractive by gay males. In contrast such a conversation has never occurred in the X-Men titles discussing and dispelling the myths and fallacies regarding lesbianism, thus providing evidence for Butler’s theory.

During the New X-Men’s ‘E is for Extinction’ storyline (#114-7 Jul. – Oct. 2001), Professor Xavier notoriously “outed” himself to the world as a mutant, and his Institute was reinvented as a mutant sanctuary. As Bukatman states, mutants are analogized with marginalised groups such as the gay community (1994:121), a point made plain by Beast in New X-Men #134 (Jan. 2003). In order to hurt his former girlfriend, Beast told her he was gay. Being a reporter, she subsequently outed him to the world. But to Beast it hardly makes a difference that he is not gay:

I’ve been taunted all my life for my individualistic looks and style of dress… I’ve been hounded and called names in the street and I’ve risen above it… I’m as gay as the next mutant. I make a great role model for alienated young men and women. Why not? (Morrison, Quitely with Grant, and Avalon Studios, 2005:14).

I would note here that this quote itself perpetuates a stereotypical representation of what constitutes being gay. What is elided is the actual defining issue – sexuality. Superheroes perform and display hypermasculine and hyperfeminine roles and forms. Butler theorises gay and lesbian identities as being implicated in heterosexual norms:

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34 New X-Men was the title for X-Men during Grant Morrison’s writing tenure.
heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that “it knows” its own possibility of becoming undone: hence, its compulsion to repeat which is once a foreclosure of that which threatens its coherence. That it can never eradicate that risk attests to its profound dependency upon the homosexuality that it seeks fully to eradicate and never can (1991:23).

In this Butler claims that the failure of naturalised heterosexuality can become:

an occasion for a subversive and proliferating parody of gender norms in which the very claim to originality and to the real is shown to be the effect of a certain kind of naturalized gender mime (1991:23).

I will return to this idea in a discussion of posthuman gender in Chapter Four. The superhero narrative is certainly one of a proliferating parody of gender norms. Whether in their normal role in society, such as Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne for example, or performing their hypermasculine/hyperfeminine superhero gender roles, superheroes always effect a certain kind of naturalized gender mime. For as heroes they symbolise the ideal of a certain kind of gender. As a continuing character in the Marvel Universe, Mystique acts as a destabilising presence, demonstrating how the heterosexual is dependent on the homosexual to give it credence. The superhero universe is constructed on the distinction of binary oppositions. Mystique is a transgressive character who destabilises this binary construction as villain/woman/lesbian/mother/shapeshifter. Likewise the villain can never be fully eradicated because the hero depends upon the villain for a meaningful existence. The repetitive reproduction of the heterosexual superhero masks its failure. The excess – for surely superheroes are excessive in everything they do – can never eradicate the risk of evil, the nemesis, or adversary, returning. The villain is the homosexual upon
which the hypermasculine/hyperfeminine heterosexual superhero’s performance is implicated and which must be eradicated over and over.

Sharon Stone’s bisexual character, Catherine Tramell, in the film *Basic Instinct* (1992) offers an interesting parallel to Mystique. Using Freudian psychoanalysis, Lynda Hart relates how Catherine accedes to the order of heterosexuality by sparing Nick (Michael Douglas) at the end of the film. Throughout the film Catherine moves through the Freudian stages of Hate (preliminary to love), and Narcissism (ambivalence where the sexual aim is to incorporate the object), to finally attain Love (represented by sparing Nick). In the ambivalent stage love is ‘hardly to be distinguished from hate in its attitude towards the subject’ (Freud, 1915:139). *Basic Instinct*, Hart writes, is an ‘allegory for the “becoming of woman” according to the teleology of the instincts that begins with autoeroticism and ends with “genital organization”, that is, heterosexuality’ (1994:132). The process can be seen in Mystique’s relationship with Forge.35 Mystique at first hates Forge for allowing Destiny’s death after entrusting Destiny into his care. She is then increasingly ambivalent towards him as he helps her in the time after Destiny’s death. Their relationship never becomes firmly established, never definitively advancing further than kissing.36 In this context however, kissing would constitute the culmination of Mystique acceding to the order of heterosexuality. Destiny, again through her precognitive ability, gives her blessing to the relationship she has foreseen between Forge and Mystique: ‘Love her, Forge. As I have. With all your heart’ (Claremont, and Silvestri, & Green, 1989b:18). In doing this she allows, and in essence pushes, Mystique’s ascension towards

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35 Interestingly, Forge’s first appearance in *Uncanny X-Men* #184 sees him look undeniably camp: he wears a tight, striped, big collared polo shirt, tight shorts worn high, one glove, carries a walking cane, and sports a remarkable resemblance to Queen’s Freddie Mercury.

36 There is certainly nothing in the comics that suggest their relationship was as devoted as Mystique and Destiny’s.
heterosexuality. Interestingly, this process is the opposite of what Castle terms ‘post marital lesbian fiction’ where ‘it is the failure of the heroine’s marriage or heterosexual love affair that functions as the pretext for her conversion to homosexual desire’ (1993:85-6). Mystique’s liaisons with Forge, Sabretooth, Azazel, and to a lesser extent Wolverine, in storylines written after Mystique’s lesbianism had been established, have her moving towards the becoming woman marked by heterosexuality. And yet Mystique also recedes from heterosexuality as is implied by several instances in the Mystique series. In Mystique #7 (Dec. 2003), a man in an airport walks past an attractive woman, muttering, ‘Have mercy’ (Vaughn, and Ryan, 2003:19). The man, as it turns out, is Mystique in a male form. Another reference to her lesbianism is in Mystique #19 (Nov. 2004) where she is presented with a pen once used by Oscar Wilde.37 Both sequences are an intertextual wink to her queerness. When in X-Men #172 (Aug. 2005) Mystique tries to seduce Rogue’s boyfriend, the X-Men member, Gambit, in a twisted effort to help Gambit and Rogue’s relationship, she remarks: ‘The idea repels me as much as it does you’ (Milligan et al, 2005a:31). With Mystique, like Catherine Trammell, ‘despite her more obvious “bisexuality”, her real love is clearly reserved for women’ (Hart, 1994:129). These examples and her lack of a continuous male love interest show Mystique has clearly failed to become a woman in the heterosexual hierarchy.

37 One wonders how many readers would understand this reference if not familiar with Mystique’s long comic book history, or indeed the life of Oscar Wilde.
Mystique and Motherhood

‘the bad mother is always present as an issue, as a threat, as an excuse… we pick and choose bad mothers to suit our times’


Charles Segal cites the female body in Ovid as being characterised by its status as a visual object, its passivity, its appropriation by the male libidinal imagination, and its role as a vessel to be filled by male seed to continue a heroic lineage (1997:23). Like the mythic world of Ovid, female superheroes are frequently used to produce offspring, thereby continuing a heroic lineage, even if the female is a villain. Even with tremendous powers, a woman’s role is still reduced to producing children. For Mystique, this theory is exemplified in her biological mutant son, Nightcrawler (a.k.a. Kurt Wagner, examined in detail below), and a human son, Graydon Creed.38 The concept does not extend to two women producing offspring independent of a male. In an aborted storyline in the mid 1980s, Mystique and Destiny were to be revealed as Nightcrawler’s parents. Assuming a male form, Mystique was to impregnate Destiny who would then give birth. On the audio commentary of the ‘Nightcrawler’ episode on X-Men: The Legend of Wolverine (DVD) animated series, Chris Claremont states:

My thought was, Mystique is a shapeshanger. Why can’t she be his Dad, and have her partner in life, Destiny, be the mother? Which I thought would be really cool. But everyone thought it was a little too creepy for words (Claremont, 2003).

38 Graydon Creed is the offspring of Mystique and the mutant villain, Sabretooth a.k.a. Victor Creed.
Mystique is unable to occupy the role of a sexual male because it is too creepy for words, and images too it would seem. Therefore Mystique as a character affects the “real” world, threatening, the social order outside of the comic – that of readers’ sensibilities.\textsuperscript{39} Mystique and Destiny raising a birthed child together as lesbians (as opposed to the fostering of Rogue) is a lapse from the order of known things, the common family unit. Indeed the idea of self-sufficient females doing the job by themselves poses an imminent threat to patriarchal culture not minimally because of naming rights and the bypassing of the male as the producer of the heroic seed. Mystique and Destiny would have instigated a parthenogenetic matriarchy representing a major challenge to Professor Xavier’s patriarchy. These women have then specifically occupied Barbara Creed’s function of the monstrous which is to ‘bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability’ (Creed, 1993:11). Creepy, disturbing, eerie, unsettling, uncanny – a woman occupying the male’s procreative role is positively monstrous. In this action Mystique occupies and mimics the role of a male, while also performing the role biologically and genetically. To illustrate this point, Trilling writes that naturalism employed in the production of ornamentation in the nineteenth century implied a convincing imitation and was therefore inherently deceptive. The greater the degree of naturalism of the ornament, the more unnatural and therefore monstrous it became (1998:96). The fact that Mystique can exactly replicate retinas, fingerprints, skin-pore patterns, and vocal cords, makes her mimicry entirely convincing. Therefore her exacting mimicry makes her as a copy entirely unnatural and thus monstrous. And as Trilling notes, monstrosity to the rococo designers is ‘the threatened dissolution of

\textsuperscript{39} Chris Claremont, the writer, could also be seen to be forgetting his place, thinking that as writer he actually had control over characters and storylines.
form itself” (1998:90). Mystique in this male role threatens to dissolve the actual role of male progenitor.

As a lesbian mother with a “penis”, a phallus, Mystique invokes a powerful and fascinating ideal of the other who has the power to castrate. Lesbians circumvent the idea of women as specifically geared towards motherhood because they take on the power equals pleasure equation that has been categorised as specifically male (Otero, 1996:276). As Freud again theorised, when not connected to heterosexual vaginal sexuality women as sexual beings are seen as male as well as nefarious (1925: 253). This is the lesbian’s precarious position as she specifically rejects the idea of (male) penetration, foregoing the vaginal sexuality that (psychoanalytically) equates with motherhood for the pleasure based centre of the clitoris. Thus lesbians are also not equated with motherhood because they bypass heterosexual vaginal sexuality becoming theoretically male, nefarious, and suspect, because they usurp the male domain of sex solely for pleasure, traits which have been bestowed upon Mystique.

Using the classification system of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, Braidotti cites monstrosity defined in terms of excess, lack, or displacement of organs (1994:78). She goes on to position woman as monstrous using these terms:

Woman/mother is monstrous by excess; she transcends established norms and transgresses boundaries. She is monstrous by lack: woman/mother does not possess the substantive unity of the masculine subject. Most important, through her identification with the feminine she is monstrous by displacement; as a sign of the in between areas, of the indefinite, the ambiguous, the mixed (1994:83).
Mystique as woman/mother/mutant exhibits/embodies monstrousness to the point of actually shifting into a monster at times (Figure 2.2). Her metamorphic ability defeats the idea of a fixed bodily form. In the case of extra limbs (Figure 2.32), or that of other unknown things she exhibits the quality of excess. She lacks in the area of being woman but also psychoanalytically as a lesbian. And she certainly can displace her organs as exhibited in *Mystique* #2 (Jul. 2003) when she shifts her vital organs into her lower extremities.

Mystique becomes “normalised” when she is associated with motherhood and biological offspring. What is disturbing however is that the depictions of Mystique as a mother are reductive, and again monstrous. The worst example is Nightcrawler’s origin story, ‘The Draco’ (*Uncanny X-Men* #428-34, 2003-04), where Mystique is unconditionally identified as Nightcrawler’s biological mother. In this storyline Mystique is desperately trying to have a child with a German Baron, who as it turns out is infertile. She then embarks on a quest to become pregnant by sleeping with as many men as possible before resorting to in-vitro fertilisation, which also fails. This is an almost perfect explication of Freud’s female oedipal complex where Mystique tries to have a child as a means of replacement for the penis she will never have. When she does finally fall pregnant to the mutant, Azazel, the Baron suspects foul play and Mystique promptly murders him. Once Mystique gives birth to the blue baby who will become Nightcrawler, she is discovered as a mutant. In an effort to save herself from an angry mutant-hating mob, she proceeds to throw the newborn over a waterfall during her escape. Miraculously Nightcrawler manages to survive.

Apart from the obvious and appalling continuity and character errors this story exhibits, the story showcases the worst female stereotyping, depicting Mystique as promiscuous, unfaithful, deceptive, a murderer, and after trying so hard to have a
child, as maternally indifferent – all monstrous acts. As Segal explains: ‘the sexually aggressive female is not only dangerous but potentially monstrous, or capable of producing monstrous effects’ (1997:21). Writing about Scylla from *Metamorphoses*, whose lower regions are transformed into ‘barking creatures’ (Ovid, 1983:340), Segal may as well be writing about Mystique:

> Her monstrous metamorphosis confuses bestiality and humanity on the one hand and associates female sexuality and maternity with monstrosity on the other (1997:31).

In a heterosexual ideal, Mystique’s dereliction of her motherly duty in this instance can only be explained by her lesbianism. ‘The Draco’ storyline suggests that even when lesbians have children via heterosexual means, the motherly instincts associated with heterosexual motherhood are either absent or fabricated. Mystique in her monstrous actions and lesbianism – itself a rejection of patriarchal values which the common family unit takes on – contravenes the ‘most fundamental criterion of femininity – maternal love’ (Warner, 1994:7). Positioned as a lesbian first (although never stated explicitly) it is impossible for Mystique to ever be a good mother until she properly aligns herself with heterosexuality.

Leo Bersani writes that the project behind the organization of *Wuthering Heights* is to document a ‘frenetic attempt to create family ties – or to put it another way, to tie the self up in an unbreakable family circle’ (1984:202). Bersani’s theory describes Mystique’s and Nightcrawler’s convoluted (and contrived) parental

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40 An article titled ‘Why must superheroes be so potent?’ on the comic website www.newsarama.com cited several examples of male heroes being raped by female supervillains in order to obtain super-powered children. A follow up article, ‘My Baby Mama is a Supervillian’ on http://othermag.org/blog/?p=339 asked “Why so many pregnant supervillains?” While neither article actually answers the questions, the answer to me is quite obvious in a psychoanalytical sense. For a female supervillain, becoming pregnant to a male hero is acquiring the ‘love object’ that is lost when she has to transfer her allegiance from the mother to the father, because the hero represents patriarchal law. The issue of rape is also highly charged. As a violation of the body predominantly occurring to women the idea of a male, especially a powerful male, being raped by a woman transfers the stigma attached to this violent crime to a woman and makes her even more diabolical. The idea is also present that she is “stealing” the male’s seed or essence.
storyline well. Mystique has no heritage of her own. As shown in Chapter Two, Mystique has no visible origin story. Placing her within a familial unit provides writers and readers with a familiar structure with which she can be understood, an anchor which constantly keeps her fixed. Stripping Mystique of her lesbian relationship reduces her to a normalcy. This normalcy makes it easier for the writers (and fans) to engage with the character, and perhaps makes her even more likeable.

Continuing their symbolic monstrousness, Mystique and Destiny raise the young mutant girl, Rogue, thereby generating a heroic lineage without a male, albeit not biologically. When Mystique and Destiny in their lesbian/disabled/age difference relationship adopt Rogue they arguably become the most marginalised trio of women that ever appeared in superhero comics. The female triumvirate of Mystique, Destiny, and Rogue: ‘three of the most dangerous women alive’ (Fingeroth, Springer, and Colletta, 1982:9) are sexually deviant, out-of-control, mutant women. This ‘Sisterhood of Evil Mutants’ (Fingeroth, Springer, and Colletta, 1982:3) has the power to challenge, even perhaps overthrow, Professor Xavier’s patriarchal hierarchy. As Marina Warner states: ‘the spectre of gynocracy, of rule by women, stalks through the founding myths of our culture’ (1994:5). Conversely though there is something incredibly normal about these “abnormal” women who live a relatively typical suburban familial existence away from the world of superheroes and supervillains. It is as if the writers did not really know what to do with them. Operating as a headquarters, the X-Men have Xavier’s school to return to. But where do Mystique, Destiny, and Rogue go? The answer it seems was to a house somewhere in suburbia. The three women are thus normalised, and in a certain way

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41 In the *Mystique* ongoing series there are two references alluding to her past, curiously both referring to her father. When she is injured she mumbles, ‘Can’t let… Papa… find you’ (Vaughn, and Lucas, 2003b:11). When asked about her father she says, ‘We stopped talking a long time ago. He was a… a bad man’. (Vaughn, and Lucas, 2003f:5).
neutralised of their female power, when placed in a domestic setting traditionally associated with the feminine. This is in opposition to Xavier’s School for Higher Learning (or previously, gifted youngsters), a pedagogical environment traditionally associated with the masculine. In psychoanalytic terms, the X-Men are the symbolic order and must keep these powerful females apart at all costs. Why? In the triumvirate there is no patriarchal figure, representing a pre-oedipal fantasy. Recalling her childhood memories, Rogue says to Mystique (in her heavy southern accent): ‘When Ah was a kid… ‘fore Ah developed mah power… Ah remember you holdin’ me, protectin’ me from the badness an’ nightmares’ (Claremont et al, 2005:20). Here Mystique is equated with the figure of the pre-Oedipal mother who exists in relation to the family and the symbolic order (Creed, 1993:20), and is responsible for the early socialisation of the child. Freud states that the pre-Oedipal phase ‘is far more important in women than it can claim to be in men’ (1959:258). This is because the mother-child relation is a site for both the transmission and subversion of patriarchal values, where the archaic force of the pre-Oedipal, although repressed, is also permanently preserved (Grosz, 1990:149). But how can this be so? How is this mother-child relation preserved? Grosz explains:

As Freud himself noted, the girl remains in contiguity with the pre-Oedipal period in ways that are barred for boys […] In the case of the girl, there is no clear-cut division between the pre-Oedipal and the oedipal; she occupies an oedipalised position only gradually and unsurely. Her oedipal complex may persist indefinitely or fade because of disappointments, rather than end through a dramatic repression. She thus remains in touch with the pre-Oedipal maternal continent (1989:115).
Creed argues the source of monstrosity is the failure of the paternal order to ensure the separation of mother and child (1993:38).

The Sisterhood becomes a monster stalking patriarchy and is therefore doomed, as ‘she-monsters must in one way or another be despatched by the plot – or by the hero… preferably before they’ve perpetuated themselves’ (Warner, 1994:3). This Sisterhood-she-monster is despatched in a weak way and certainly before they can recruit any more female members. The triumvirate though is not (ultimately) torn apart by external forces but by themselves. After Rogue permanently absorbs Ms. Marvel’s powers, and some of her personality and memories (*Marvel Super-Heroes* v2 #11, Oct. 1992), she becomes increasingly unstable and unable to control her powers, eventually leaving Mystique and Destiny’s care to seek the help of Professor Xavier and the X-Men. For Rogue absorbing another woman’s powers makes her presence much worse such that she is lumbered with an excess of “out-of-control-ness.” Two women in the one mind/body are just too much to control. The interrogation of Rogue and Mystique’s mother/daughter relationship, and therefore also Mystique as a mother, is a continual focus of X-Men storylines. In Rogue, Mystique has raised an uncontrollable child, who is unable to control her powers herself. Disturbingly there is no middle ground or other routes to take than seeking out a male presence to help her learn self-control. Again Professor Xavier, the patriarch, is the controlling figure who teaches and cures the out-of-control female. While Mystique tries to convince Rogue to return to her, Rogue quickly becomes interpellated into the X-Men culture, citing her need to be normal. Rogue is like Carrie in the film, *Carrie*, who is a ‘child-like girl who just wants to be “normal” like every other teenager, while on the other hand she has the power… to transform into an avenging female fury’ (Creed, 1993:78). Rogue desires to fit in: ‘Ah want to be
normal, Mystique. If nothin’ else, Ah want a chance!’ (Claremont et al, 2005:20, emphasis in original). In essence she has given up her feminine specificity to be aligned with the masculine X-Men. In a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, Rogue has succumbed to the law-of-the-father, recognising the law of society. Rogue moves from the pre-oedipal (imaginary) to take on the name of the father – in this case X-Men, the “X” symbolising the X of Professor Xavier’s name. So she does indeed, as do all X-Men (even literally, on their clothes) take on the name of the father. Rogue recognises the paternal metaphor that charts her entry into the symbolic order and the social world beyond the family structure (Grosz, 1990:104). As Jane Gallop states precisely for our purposes here: ‘the law of the father gives her an identity, even if it is not her own, even if it blots out her feminine specificity’ (1982:78). Despite her shapeshifting ability, Mystique it seems cannot transform into the role of good mother. The underlying message suggested is that these deviant women cannot keep their own Sisterhood together.

With Rogue firmly established as a member of the X-Men, Wolverine, although initially rejecting Rogue as an X-Men member, acts as her surrogate father, and she often seeks his approval. Several times it has been shown that Wolverine and Mystique have an attraction to each other (seen in Wolverine #51, Feb. 1992 and Sabretooth #2 Sep. 1993). Thus the family unit of Wolverine and Mystique as Rogue’s parents is established. As just one example, Wolverine refers to Rogue as kid in Mystique #23 (Mar. 2005). The all female family has been replaced by the standard hetero-normative family unit – first with Xavier and later with Wolverine, leaving Rogue to side with her “fathers.” Indeed she states that one day she will have

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42 In the ‘House of M’ reality, an alternate reality storyline produced in late 2005 – early 2006 Mystique and Wolverine are lovers.
to choose between her friends and her family. This decision will never be particularly difficult as Rogue’s family is now the X-Men.

While Mystique and Destiny are positioned as bad mothers, the same sets of rules are not placed on male heroes. The superhero universe is one where patriarchal lines dominate, females being eliminated in the birthing process. Just as Plato suggests woman becomes merely an incubator, the father passing down the genetic heritage. This is in evidence in many superhero origin storylines, and exemplified particularly well in that of Metamorpho. In the *Metamorpho* (1993) mini-series, Metamorpho and Sapphire have a son, Joey, who has inherited his father’s coloured body and the ability to change the chemical substances of objects. The story focuses on Metamorpho’s attempt to cure Joey which only minimally involves Sapphire who for the most part is portrayed as passive, her genetic heritage pushed aside. Joey, for all intents and purposes, is solely Metamorpho’s son. Similarly, any existence of a female progenitor is erased completely from Shift’s “birth.” Only metaphorically does Shift have a mother – the Earth – over which Metamorpho’s “seed” was scattered. Like Eve being created from Adam’s rib, Rex has created, albeit unknowingly, another being from his own body. Thus he has the ability of spontaneous generation without the assistance of a female or the actual need of a mothering body either for gestation or raising. Similarly in the 2003 Ang Lee film adaptation of *The Hulk*, the genetic Hulk heritage is handed down from father to son. Bruce’s father initially had tested his scientific serum on himself, an experiment involving injecting himself with a serum – a symbolic instance of impregnation. After Bruce is exposed to gamma rays, his inherited genetics surface – again a surfacing of the hidden. Functionally, after Bruce’s birth his mother is no longer needed in the wider scheme of patriarchal lineage and is removed from the narrative
when she is accidentally (and conveniently) killed. Bruce’s father tells him that the Hulk is the “real” Bruce, which is essentially the material with which his father has passed on to him.

**Mystique, Kali and the Terrible Mother**

The mythological Hindu goddess, Kali, is a manifestation of the supreme Goddess Mahadevi (or sometimes simply Devi) (Figure 3.4). Ajit Mookerjee writes that in reality there is only one Devi who ‘assumes various forms to fulfil various purposes, sometimes she assumes a frightening form and sometimes a benevolent form’ (1988:61). In the *Devi-Mahatmya* Kali sprang from the forehead of the goddess Durga and is considered Durga’s forceful form. Even though described as separate entities, Kali is Durga (and essentially Devi) in another form. She is referred to as the terrible mother due to her penchant for nurturing and/or devouring her offspring. The terrible mother is ‘an image that represents fear of ambivalence and androgyny in female sexuality’ (Otero, 1996: 273). Her motherhood is ‘ceaseless creation’; she ‘gives birth to the cosmos parthenogenetically, as she contains the male principle within herself’; and ‘is Nature, stripped of “clothes”’ (Mookerjee, 1988:62). Kali and Mystique offer interesting parallels such as superheroes continue a lineage which can be to mythological beings. Kali as an emanation of the Goddess who is one, can be ‘conceived of in innumerable forms’ (Mookerjee, 1988:63). Mystique, like Kali, wears accoutrements consisting of skulls and generally appears naked, with long dishevelled hair, thus exhibiting polyphallic symbolism (Figures 2.28). At least once Mystique has assumed a six-armed form similar to Kali’s representation (Figure 3.3). Kali also has three eyes, and while Mystique only has two real eyes, I would like to theorise the skull on her forehead (seen most easily in Figures 2.1, 2.24, and 2.28)
which is a constant part of her accoutrements, operates as a non functioning symbolic third eye. Though drawn in various hues of blue, Kali is most commonly associated as being black, or at least dark in colour: ‘just as all colours disappear in black, so all names and forms disappear in her’ (Moorkerjee, 1988:62) a description which recalls Mystique’s shapeshifting ability and the possibility that she has forgotten her own name. Further Mystique’s real name of Raven Darkhölme reveals a certain slippage of terms. Darkhölme with the letter “m” removed becomes Darkhole, while Raven, when associated with colour, is that of lustrous black. Her name could be interpreted as “Black Dark-hole”, signifying in psychoanalytic terms the black, dark, hole of the vagina, or even Freud’s Dark Continent – woman herself. To take this interpretation of her name further, Raven is also a root part of ravenous which as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary means: ‘Given to seizing in order to devour; voracious, gluttonous. Hence of appetite, hunger, etc.’ (‘Ravenous’, 1989), which again plays into the idea of the devouring black hole of the vagina, and recalls Kali, as all names and forms disappear in Kali, and with Mystique’s shapeshifting, this would constitute a kind of death through disappearance and brings to mind the idea of the little death of the male orgasm. The male form (seed) is devoured and disappears in the black, dark, hole of the woman.

As a continuing character in the Marvel Comics Universe, and thus subject to patriarchal values, Mystique is a villain in every sense of the word. Several times co-opted to submit to patriarchal values, her feminist ideals still threaten to resurface at any time and as such she is subject to controlling measures which other superheroes are not. While labelled with classically “evil” characteristics, definitions

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43 Element Girl’s name, Urania Blackwell, offers a similar interpretation. Urania was the Greek Muse of astronomy and astrology (Lindemans, 1999). Blackwell again conjures images of a deep, dark, hole in the ground.
and labels disappear in her as fast as they’re applied. Mystique as a character, with a history patched together over thirty years, has grown into an entity who is unable to be controlled. She is a contradiction who operates on the border of what is allowed. Unable to be fixed or known in body, sexuality, even morality, Mystique’s presence destabilises and challenges the patriarchal, male dominated world of the superhero, and indeed that of the world outside of the comic book.

Figure 3.3
Six-armed Mystique referencing Kali
(Vaughn, and Lucas, 2003f: Front cover)

Figure 3.4
Kali, Hindu Goddess
(‘Grahamsville Brahmanoor Kali Temple Flourishes in the Catskill Mountains of New York’, 2006)
Chapter 4

The Shape of Things to Come:

Metamorphic Characters and Posthumanism

‘white people separate things out, even the relationship between their minds and their bodies’ (Randall, 2003:4).

‘Posthumanism seems to you a sudden mutation of the times; in fact, the conjunctions of imagination and science, myth and technology, have begun by firelight in the caves of Lascaux’ (Hassan, 1977:205).

‘The posthuman solar system is a comic-book world of infinite possibilities and cyborg multiplicities, defined in and through the technologies that now construct our experiences and therefore our selves’ (Bukatman, 2000:111).

In their editorial to the ‘Posthumanous’ issue of the journal, Reconstruction, and in true postmodern style, Jason Smith, Ximena Gallardo, and Klock, write:

there is certainly no agreement as to what, exactly, constitutes posthumanism or a posthumanist position beyond the premise that what previously seemed to constitute the subject position of a “human being” has been threatened, infiltrated, deconstructed, or denatured (2004).
Even though there may be no consensus on posthumanism, there are several key theoretical concepts, that are, not the least for my discussion here, the most prevalent. In this chapter I will provide an overview of the major strands of posthuman theory which include the figure of the cyborg; evolution of the human through mutation; and the idea of embodiment which theorises that the human, mind, body, and the environment are a continuous entity. I will also investigate the growing real world emergence of the posthuman. The superhero universe is full of characters that have a wide range of posthuman features. Using the work of Ihab Hassan, and the idea of embodiment as defined by Robert Pepperell, and Katherine Hayles, I will theorise the characters Mystique, The Engineer, Jean Grey, Jack Hawksmoor, and the characters from *The Invisibles*, as posthuman subjects. With their abilities of shapeshifting and embodiment they are forms without form; characters which exhibit endless possibility and multiplicity.

**Posthuman/Posthumanism**

In his 1977 essay ‘Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?’, Hassan echoes Michel Foucault’s claim that man as an invention of recent date is perhaps nearing its end (1973). In signalling the end of humanism, Hassan suggests:

> We need first to understand that the human form – including desire and all its external representations – may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism (1977:212).
Although it seems to have been forgotten by current posthuman theorists – Hayles uses it only for quotation purposes – Hassan’s essay is for me a nexus from which the major strands of posthuman thought originate. Written in “scenes” using eight “textual voices”, Hassan’s succinct essay, covers much of the ground – evolution, consciousness, and human/machine hybrids – upon which the current posthumanist debate resides. These major strands diverge from this essay, only to resurface and recombine years later as “new” theories on the subject. Hassan proposes ideas that Robert Pepperell, author of *The Posthuman Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain*, uses twenty years later. Hassan’s essay deals more with the aspects of human consciousness than with the integration of human and machine which has come to dominate the posthuman debate. For Hassan the process leading to a posthumanist culture depends on ‘the growing intrusion of the human mind into nature and history, on the dematerialization of life and the conceptualization of existence’ (1977:205).

Much like François Lyotard’s view that postmodernism is not an age, but ‘a mood or better, a state of mind’ (1986/87:209), Hassan’s posthumanism is that of a continual movement, an expanding of consciousness that happens, and has happened, throughout history, a performance in progress where ‘the languages of imagination and the languages of science have… crossed in certain epochs and certain great minds of the past’ (1977:207). Science and imagination are thus agents of change – their interplay as modes of representation and transformation, being vital performing principles in culture and consciousness – ideally ‘a key to posthumanism?’ (Hassan, 1977:208). Pepperell uses this key to unlock his posthumanist argument.

Pepperell defines posthumanism as that which comes after humanism; the time dominated by the thought that humans are the measure of all things; the ‘long

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44 Perhaps it is no coincidence that Lyotard also had an essay/article published in *Performance in Postmodern Culture.*
held belief in the infallibility of human power and the arrogant belief in our
superiority and uniqueness’ (2003:171). This antagonistic/egocentric humanistic
view results in humanity’s desire to dominate, control, and exploit nature. The
emergence of movements that resist exploitative humanist behaviour – feminism,
environmentalism, and animal rights – are the most evident of humanity moving
towards a posthuman future. Incorporated in the humanistic view is the idea that
scientific enquiry would prove the world, and indeed the universe, to be a gigantic
machine, and once all the parts of this machine had been discovered and studied,
then through logical reasoning, the future could be accurately predicted. Pepperell
sees posthumanism germinating in three early twentieth century ideas – cubism,
relativity theory, and quantum physics – which changed how the nature of reality
was view and represented (2003:162). Specifically, seemingly stable reality became
a ‘cluster of probabilities that mutate over time and which are dependent on the
viewer for their perception’ (2003:166). The cubists’ role in this was the introduction
of an ambiguous contingency into pictorial representation that was analogous to the
uncertainty and paradox found in advanced physics (2003:166). For Pepperell, the
posthuman era begins proper when ‘we no longer find it necessary, or possible, to
distinguish between humans and nature’ (Pepperell, 2003:161), shifting from ‘a
universe of certainty and predictability to a universe of uncertainty and
unpredictability’ (2003:167). While posthuman debate tends towards the
elimination, manipulation, or expendability of the body, Pepperell theorises about an
expansive body through the dissolution of boundaries. Thus the idea of embedded
consciousness, or embodiment, drive’s his posthuman philosophy. Here
consciousness is the mind (as opposed to the brain as an organ) and body acting
together – effectively we think with our whole body (2003:178). Pepperell argues
that the human is identifiable, but not definable such that no finite division can be drawn between the environment, the body, and the brain. Our consciousness (mind) and environment (reality) cannot be separated and are therefore continuous (2003:178).

In a similar argument to Pepperell, although from the very different field of medicine, a correlation exists with the idea of the posthuman being continuous with the environment. Many geneticists prefer a more complex model of causation of disease, arguing that genetic raw material and environment are in constant interaction (Peters in Graham, 2002:121). Similarly Hassan quotes Sir Bernard Lovell, Professor of Radio Astronomy at the University of Manchester, from a *New York Times Magazine* in November 1975:

> Indeed, I am inclined to accept contemporary scientific evidence as indicative of a far greater degree of man’s total involvement with the universe… A remarkable and intimate relationship between man, the fundamental constants of nature, and the initial moments of space and time seems to be an inescapable condition of existence (in Hassan, 1977:212-3).

Pepperell’s theory of consciousness holds parallels with that of the Australian Aboriginal Dreaming. In his book *Songman* Bob Randall describes tjurkurpa, the Yankunytjatjara name for the Dreaming:

> We do not separate the material world of objects we see around us, with our ordinary eyes, and the sacred world of creative energy that we can learn to see with our inner eye. For us, these are always working together and we learn to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ in this inner way from a young age… it joins the worlds of ordinary reality and creative
forces… because it is not just of this time and place… it is our knowledge of creation itself: past, present and future (2003:3).

The second and third points of Pepperell’s ‘Ten Point Guide to the Posthuman Concept of Consciousness’ (an abridged version of his ‘Posthuman Manifesto’ in *The Posthuman Condition*) are: ‘The human body is not separate from its environment’ and ‘Consciousness, body and environment are all continuous’ (2000), which are so similar to Randall’s simple description of the Dreaming: ‘For us, everything is intimately connected’ (2003:4) that it would be uncanny if it wasn’t so absurd that Australian Aboriginal philosophy has existed for 40-60,000 years. The question begs to be asked – has it really taken us this long to return to such a “new” idea.

Perhaps the most controversial, or at least the most unquantifiable, aspect of Pepperell’s posthuman theory is that humans and the environment are different expressions of energy, the only difference between them is the form that energy takes (2003:180-1). His idea of energy has its basis in the scientific theory of quantum mechanics, that is, at the quantum level all matter is simply made up of vibrations – so-called Superstring Theory. While this may be true, he readily acknowledges this part of his theory drifts towards that of a spiritual nature, specifically those religions which have evolved outside of Western Europe – namely Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism (Pepperell, 2000). As Pepperell points out, the further we investigate the quantum level of life the more uncertain things become, as Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle informs us. This argument would support the statement of Hollis Frampton who writes that: ‘You and I are semistable patterns of energy, maintaining in the very teeth of entropy a characteristic shape in space and time’ (1983:62). If as Superstring Theory suggests, that the building blocks of life/existence are just packets of
vibrating energy, then at our base level of existence, we are also reduced to unstable vibrations on an unstable plain of existence.

**Posthuman – After the Human**

The term posthuman is also used in an evolutionary sense, with differing definitions. One branch of posthuman thought posits that we have evolved enough to decide the direction in which we are to evolve. A definitive, and somewhat idealist, explanation of this facet of posthumanism is put forward by Nick Bostrom:

A posthuman is a human descendent who has been augmented to such a degree as to be no longer human… your mental and physical abilities would far surpass those of any unaugmented human. You would be smarter than any human genius and be able to remember things much more easily. Our body will not be susceptible to disease and it will not deteriorate with age… you may have a greatly expanded capacity to feel emotions and to experience pleasure and love and artistic beauty. You would not need to feel tired, bored or irritated about petty things (in Graham, 2002:159)

This level of enhancement says that if more is better, then lots more must be much better, and to me there is something inherently selfish about this type of view which suggests that we need to be enhanced to feel greater love. This type of human augmentation plays into the idea and figure of the cyborg, which is discussed below. Opponents to the engineering of human evolution point to the dehumanising effect it may have on the human, undermining dignity and eroding the fuzzy value of what it is to be human. Another opposing idea is the threat posthumans might pose to “ordinary” humans (Bostrom, 2005: 204). Though as Michael Akerib (2007) writes, the means and availability of procedures to attain a posthuman state of this kind
would inevitably be restricted, initially, to a chosen few. Which is essentially no different, as Hayles points out, to the liberal humanist conception that:

may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice (1999:286).

Like claims that postmodernism is simply the natural extension of modernism (high or late modernism), the posthuman could also be claimed to simply extend the ideas of the humanist agenda – progress, self-improvement, individualism (Graham, 2002:153), for all three can be applied to the posthuman ideal. Thus the domination of technology is achieved by incorporating it into our(selves), allowing a complete mental mastery over the prosthesis as the machines literally do what we think. Again opponents point out that this progress could actually be harmful to the human subject/psyche and is therefore not progress at all.

**The Cyborg**

The roots of the posthuman as a merging of machine/technology and the human body lie in Donna Haraway’s interpretation of the figure of the cyborg, a subject in both senses of the term which has come to dominate the posthumanism debate. Haraway famously declared we are all cyborgs in defining the idea of a feminism that incorporates all ideals, and Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* reiterates this:

the construction of the posthuman does not require the subject to be a literal cyborg… the defining characteristics involve the construction of subjectivity, not the presence of nonbiological components (1999:4).
Again, Hassan had pre-empted this line of reasoning:

artificial intelligences, from the humblest calculator to the most immanent computer, help to transform the image of man, the concept of the human. They are agents of a new posthumanism, even if they do no more than the human (1977:214).

Hayles’s view is that the posthuman debate has degenerated into a Cartesian separation of mind and body where the body is reduced to pure information and thus the posthuman can be described in four assumptions. These being, abbreviated here – that informational pattern is privileged over material instantiation; consciousness is an epiphenomenon; the body is the original prosthesis; and that the human being can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines (1999:2-3). Her dream of the posthuman is a version that:

embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality… that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival (1999:5).

Obviously Hayles was not familiar (at that point) with Pepperell’s view which is virtually similar to her dream, differing only by the phrase which I have left out of the above quote, that being, that the posthuman ‘recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being’ (1999:5). This is in opposition to Pepperell’s view where the environment, the body, and the brain have no finite division. That is not to say that one view is privileged over the other, but I see Pepperell’s as a more useful account. Another point where Hayles shadows Pepperell is through C.B.
Macpherson’s analysis of possessive individualism, that is, if human essence is a freedom from the will of others:

the posthuman is “post” not because it is necessarily unfree from the will of others but because there is no a priori way to identify a self-will that can clearly be distinguished from an other-will (1999:4).

In her book, Hayles traces the history of the posthuman through the ideas of bodiless information and the figure of the cyborg in an effort to reinstate the idea of embodiment in posthuman theory, and ‘ourselves as embodied creatures living within and through embodied worlds’ (1999:24). Through the cyborg Hayles points to the idea that the cyborg and cybernetics were initially another avenue to continue the values of the liberal humanist tradition:

the cybernetic machine was to be designed so that it did not threaten the autonomous, self-regulating subject of liberal humanism. On the contrary, it was to extend that self into the realm of the machine (1999:86).

This view of course has come to be somewhat disregarded with the dissolution of boundaries between human and machine. Not without its share of theoretical problems, with which I will not engage here, the cyborg as a figure that incorporates/combines the machinic and the human has become the overwhelming, if not defining, representation of the posthuman. While the cyborg is not my main concern in this context, I will give some space to the subject, for the rise of the actual living cyborg, paradoxically one which we see in popular culture and science fiction, the one which is considered the more real, as compared to someone with a pacemaker, or artificial hip is rapidly coming to fruition.
Rapid advances in prosthetic limb development have come about in reaction


to the nature of warfare in the Second Gulf War. Rapid response to battlefield injury, better initial medical attention, and lifesaving techniques involving stabilising the soldier, has seen an increasing number of combatants surviving bomb attacks, though ultimately with missing limbs. The resulting demand for artificial limbs and the American Armed Forces duty of care to provide post-combat care to veterans has produced startling innovations in the field of prosthetics. The overall drive in manufacture is for artificial limbs to be more human-like rather than the human becoming more machinic. This is exemplified in efforts to make artificial hands grasp with subtlety rather than just sheer power. Innovations have seen “bionic” limbs being moved by thought processes which activate certain muscles, as evidenced by American Gulf War veteran John German when describing in a 60 Minutes article how he activates his prosthetic hand:

So, really, in my brain, I say “open” and I say “close” and it corresponds. So it kind of is a function of the brain. It’s amazing because it’s been a long time that I’ve actually watched through my own eyes something that looks like my own left hand reach out and grab and grasp around and fingers fold around that object. It… it’s kind of freaky (‘Bionic Man’, 2007).
Interesting to note is how recipients of these bionic limbs talk about their appendages, perhaps providing a posthuman blueprint for cyborgs in the future. In the same report Professor Hugh Herr, who lost his legs in a climbing accident, describes the advantages of prosthetic limbs:

Liz Hayes: You would not have your legs back, given the ones you have now?
Herr: Oh, no, of course not. Of course not.
Hayes: You don't mean that, surely? You are happier with artificial limbs?
Herr: Of course. Why not? I can upgrade my legs. You can’t. So when there’s a new, faster computer, a better motor, I can put that in my ankle. You can’t. So, when I’m 80, my balance will be better than even 18 year olds. I’ll be able to walk with much less energy than anyone with biological legs. That’s exciting. Part of my body is a blank sheet for which to create.
Hayes: What does it say when those with artificial limbs do better than those who don’t?
Herr: It’s an exciting day. It’s, it’s very common, fairly common today for me, to get a call from a person in the hospital. They’ve been in a car accident and they ask, “Should I get my leg amputated?” And often the – the answer is, “Yes, your quality of life would improve”. So that’s happening a lot now, which is very interesting.
Hayes: So, people are making the choice to lose a limb, knowing their life will be better with an artificial limb?
Herr: Correct.

(‘Bionic Man’, 2007).
Further research continues in the field. The U.S. Defense Department’s Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), has funded a $30 million collaborative project between more than thirty labs, universities, and private companies whose goal is to ‘build a strong, lightweight arm activated by neural impulses, which means it is controlled by an amputee’s thoughts’ (‘Researchers Pursue Truly Functional Prosthetic Arm’, 2007). The boundaries between the figure of the cyborg and the figurative cyborg are quickly collapsing into a hyperreal present. If a human with two artificial legs, which can be upgraded, can run faster than a human possibly could, will we call that person, “The Flash”? Indeed if you had two artificial legs why bother with the idea of human movement at all? As a further example, a report commissioned by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) on South African double amputee and athlete, Oscar Pistorius, who runs with carbon fibre blades attached to his legs, found that the prosthetics gave him a significant advantage over able-bodied runners. The report concluded that Pistorius was able to run at the same speed as able-bodied sprinters with twenty five percent less energy expenditure, and the energy returned from the blades was close to three times higher than a human ankle joint (‘Amputee Pistorius barred from Beijing Games’, 2008).
Posthuman Bodies, Posthuman Gender

the post-human body… has undergone a meta(l)morphosis and is now positioned in the spaces in between the traditional dichotomies (Braidotti, 2002:228)

I use this quote from Braidotti because it is actually antithetical to my argument. The posthuman body doesn’t (if it ever did) lie in the spaces between dichotomies as this would indicate it being squeezed between and opposed to both. For Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingstone posthuman bodies ‘emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourse of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context’ (1995:2). A posthuman body is ‘a technology, a screen, a projected image… a contaminated body, a deadly body, a techno-body… a queer body’ (Halberstam & Livingstone, 1995:3). They are ‘causes and effects of postmodern relations of power and pleasure, virtuality and reality, sex and its consequences’ (Halberstam & Livingstone, 1995:3). This description which is in opposition to Braidotti, suggests the posthuman body, using the metaphor of space in this context, simply occupies space(s). Similar to Pepperell’s use of uncertainty, Halberstam and Livingstone elicit the uncertain posthuman concepts of gender, race, and sexuality, through the idea of *someness*:

How many races, genders, sexualities are there? Some. How many are you? Some. “Some” is not an indefinite number awaiting a more accurate measurement, but a rigorous theoretical mandate whose specification… is neither numerable nor, in the common sense, innumerable (1995:9).
Here is a posthuman ideal set out – the idea of an uncertainty of which Pepperell writes – where some number of genders, race, and sexualities are embraced. Succinctly, by keeping the number uncertain then none can be excluded nor when another type is invented/rehashed/reincarnated, will there be a conflict because there is always, and can only be, some. Leading the posthuman to being always a multiplicity there is neither one or other, object or subject, but at the same time, also both. Therefore, the posthuman body:

vibrates across and among an assemblage of semi-autonomous collectivities it knows it can never either be coextensive with nor altogether separate from. The posthuman body is not driven… by a teleological desire for domination, death or stasis; or to become coherent and unitary; or even to explode into more disjointed multiplicities. Driven by the double impossibility and prerequisite to become other and to become itself, the posthuman body intrigues rather than desires; it is intrigued and intriguing just as it is queer: not as an identity but because it queers (Halberstam & Livingstone, 1995:14).

Posthuman genders ‘include any and all former “unnameables”… and any other “transgressive” gender practices’ (Smith, Klock, & Gallardo, 2004). The reasoning is simply that these gender types have assaulted and undermined the two-sex model and thereby what it means to be human (Smith, Klock, & Gallardo, 2004). While I don’t feel this term posthuman gender is particularly relevant – they are hardly “post” anything and have always been labelled – there is something to be said for their increasing representation in comics, encroaching into the traditional white/male/heterosexual space of the superhero comic. Thus we have the emergence of unnameable posthuman genders becoming named, starting with Northstar,
continuing to *The Invisibles*’s Lord Fanny (a Brazilian transvestite shaman, though more correctly she is transgender), and culminating with *The Authority*’s Apollo and Midnighter, who engage in an openly gay and committed relationship; and who get married and adopt a baby. In Apollo and Midnighter’s relationship we have a direct correlation with Mystique and Destiny who were at the time (and to some extent still are) unnamed in their gender positions. The posthuman superhero narrative is not that of Dr Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* implied undercurrent of homosexuality (which in itself implies that there is no place for homosexuality in comics) but that of *The Authority* which sees homosexuality function at full volume where the two most powerful characters on the team openly make out with each other (Klock, 2002:143). As a representation of a committed gay couple, Apollo and Midnighter show readers what is possible and present a, dare I say, normative picture of homosexuality. On the other hand, as two of the most powerful humans on Earth, they can basically do what they want without any worry of social reprisal, a situation which is perhaps difficult to replicate in the “real” world. I recall here the *X-Men* character, Beast, being unwilling to correct the impression that he is gay in *New X-Men* #134: ‘I’ve been taunted all my life for my individualistic looks and style of dress… I’m as gay as the next mutant’ (Morrison, Quitely with Grant, and Avalon Studios, 2005:14). Incorrectly Beast positions gay sexuality with simply the surface quality mode of dress – a matter of performance. Assuming the ideal that it doesn’t matter whether he is gay or not, which of course can be seen as a positive representation of homosexuality, this is perhaps something only someone of a heterosexual identity could say. Like Apollo and Midnighter, Beast has the ability to repel any attacks which might occur in the event that his ruse is revealed. His is a position of power, mainly physical, even though as a mutant he is relegated to
society’s margins. This also brings us back to the “creepiness” of Mystique impregnating Destiny to produce a child without a male, and ultimately, Destiny’s death. While superheroes and villains are resurrected with monotonous regularity, Destiny, even though her spectral presence permeates *X-Men* storylines, her actual physical presence has yet to be reintroduced to the Marvel Universe.

The character of Buffalo Bill in Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) is another example of posthuman gender. Halberstam notes that Buffalo Bill resembles ‘a heavy metal rocker as much as a drag queen’ (2000:60), and assumes a posthuman gender because he is:

simply at odds with any identity whatsoever; no body, no gender will do… what he constructs is a posthuman gender; a gender beyond the body, beyond human, a carnage of identity (2000:58).

Halberstam notes Bill is ‘prey to the most virulent conditioning heterosexist culture has to offer. He believes that anatomy is destiny’ (2000:60). I would argue that the anatomic destiny to which Bill aspires is an illusion. Anatomy is more than the female skin which he violently covets. It is the illusion of femininity to which Bill is attracted as shown by the scene where he tucks his genitals between his legs, to give the viewer (and himself) the impression that his genital region, on the surface, looks like that of a woman. Combined with his awkward dancing it is clear that he is playing at being woman. Without male genitals, and of course also without those of a female, he theoretically becomes sexless. By clothing himself in the skin of a female he is clearly playing woman, yet becomes sexless. It is the appearance, the illusion of woman, which is attractive to Bill. The skin becomes a fetish – or even a kind of skin as condom. He can’t wear female skin in public (one presumes) so this pursuit is entirely of a solitary, and extremely private, nature. In a sense he is essentially not
really playing woman either. The skin removed from women can no longer be designated “woman.” Woman is the performance Bill wants to enact. The sexless female illusion he aspires to is similar to the way drag queens present a heightened version of femininity of which women provide no real counterpart. Drag queen make-up covers prominent male features or exaggerates them to something which is not recognised as male. Similarly Buffalo Bill simply uses the skins of women to cover up his maleness rather than to become a woman. Bill wants to wear the skin of women. He wants to be covered up. As noted by Lecter in the film, Buffalo Bill is not a transsexual but he thinks he is. Bill ‘hates his identity and thinks that makes him a transsexual’ (The Silence of the Lambs, 1991). Lecter is right. Bill has deluded himself. He is nothing more than an extreme cross-dresser, a drag queen who doesn’t want to dress like a woman, he wants to dress in woman. But the fact is that the skins that Bill collects to stitch together and wear will never look like him with his penis tucked between his legs, will never meet the illusion, the ideal of his aspirations. The skin becomes part of the performance, as Halberstam notes, to Bill skin is gender, all surface. This production of posthuman gender involves a process of violent transformation, one built through oppositions – Bill is completely opposed to everything. He is a gender in process, becoming something other:

he divorces once and for all sex and gender or nature and gender and remakes the human condition as a posthuman body suit. Buffalo Bill kills for his clothes and emblematises the ways in which gender is always posthuman, always a sewing job which stitches identity into a body bag (Halberstam, 2000:67).

45 Transsexual as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary is as follows: A. adj 1. Of or pertaining to transsexualism; having physical characteristics of one sex and psychological characteristics of the other 2. Of or pertaining to both sexes. B. n A transsexual person. Also, one whose sex has been changed by surgery (‘Transsexual’, n.a. 1989).
Halberstam’s idea of the posthuman body suit is one that can be constructed and put on, taken off, and exchanged when necessary. Bill’s posthuman body suit takes dressing in drag to a violent nth degree. It is not enough for Bill to dress as a woman but he is not suitable for gender reassignment surgery, of which he has been rejected, to become a “real” woman. I recall here the quote from Haraway, ‘one is too few, but two are too many’ (1985:96). Bill’s gender resides somewhere in-between. Though it is clear that Bill doesn’t think he, or at least his body, should suffer in his search for a clearer/individual identity/gender and it is at the cost of women that he seeks to achieve this posthuman gender agenda. Halberstam writes: ‘Buffalo Bill thinks he is not in the wrong body, but the wrong skin, an incorrect casing. He is not interested in what lies beneath the skin’ (2000:60-1). I take issue with Halberstam on this point because once Bill has his victims’ skin on, he lies beneath the skin, and he is certainly interested in himself. And if we are talking about posthumanism here then the skin cannot be separated from the body because the skin is the body. If it was simply Bill’s skin that he had the problem with, why not replace his own skin with a woman’s using skin grafts? He would then be incorporating rather than eviscerating the essence of woman which he desires. Thus it is not the wrong skin that is the problem, but the wrong appearance, and again it is not Bill who violently loses his skin to fix the problem. Of course, I realise a solution effectively cancels the premise of the film’s horror narrative but my point is made. While this incarnation of posthuman gender is achieved through violent transgression and opposition, it is not to say that it is the only way. Of course if such ideas like posthumanism are to be embraced we must accept that not all realisations/theorisations of the concept will be of a positive nature. There must be room for those which are achieved through the negative and dark. What gender is Buffalo Bill then? Some. To be clearer in this
explanation I guess it is perhaps better to say that it is uncertain what gender he is, or more correctly, to which he aspires. The idea of some and someness is frustrating. Some, is an uncertain path to an uncertain limit that can never be reached. And if we are to proscribe to Pepperell’s view, uncertainty is a frustrating yet essential staple part of the posthuman condition.

Another example, of a male playing woman which at first appears to embrace the idea of multiple posthuman gender, though ultimately radically fails, is exhibited by the Martian Manhunter in the connected stories ‘Valley of the Daals’ and ‘How Green Was My Daalie?’ in *Justice League Task Force* #7-8 (Dec. 1993 – Jan. 1994). J’onn shapeshifts into female form (Figure 4.2) in order to lead an “all” female mission (which includes Wonder Woman) to a hidden domain populated only by women known as Daals. In the two issue story, female gender stereotypes are addressed and jokingly played around with while actually reinforcing them. J’onn categorically states earlier in the story that he is a male, and certainly there is no changing this. The idea of drag is invoked by J’onn as an ‘unfortunate choice of words’ (David, Velluto, and Albrecht, & McClellan, 1993:12). Obviously to J’onn he is putting on the outward appearance of a woman. Just like Buffalo Bill, the Martian Manhunter is ‘a man imitating gender, exaggerating gender’ (Halberstam, 2000:60). When J’onn is to reveal himself in his female form to the female team members, he doesn’t want to be laughed at, invoking issues of self-esteem and appearance stereotypically associated with women. When a male compliments J’onn on his appearance he is clearly flattered, again invoking that vanity is associated with women, and that women are judged, and seek approval, from men on their appearance (Figure 4.2, lower right). The reason that this is funny is that J’onn, while playing a woman, immediately assumes the stereotypical role of female by
responding to comments on his appearance and worrying specifically how others will perceive him. In another stereotypical scene J’onn initially refuses to come out of his room in his female shape. J’onn is thus not playing woman, but the stereotype of woman.

Figure 4.2
Martian Manhunter, J’onn J’onzz, steps out as Joan J’onzz
(David, Velluto, and Albrecht & McClellan, 1993:12-3)

In the course of the mission, the leader of the Daals takes a fancy to J’onn (in his female guise, Joan) and arranges for them to be married, which J’onn plays along with in order to complete the team’s mission. Again he exhibits “female traits” – ‘this female masquerade is stressful. I’m irritable… tense… my head aches’ (David, Velluto, and Albrecht, 1994:2). Once married the leader of the Daals reveals herself

46 The idea of “coming out” is not lost on me here either.
to J’onn as half-male, half-female – in-between – solving the puzzle of how the Daals perpetuate their all woman society. Tellingly, the phallus still rules, signifying power, even in a women only society. If they are to consummate the marriage as the Daal leader intends, J’onn must, “go all the way” in his female performance, a step which he is not willing to take and he quickly changes back to his male form. Playing around with J’onn’s sexuality/gender in a serious manner is not an option even though, as team-mate, Gypsy, has stated earlier in the story: ‘We know you’re a shapeshifter. One shape should be like another to you.’ (David, Velluto, and Albrecht & McClellan, 1993:12). Indeed it should be, but it isn’t. Being serviced by the Daal leader would mark J’onn as a passive female, and with lesbian undertones. Already he has been playing the passive follower to the active Daal leader and to succumb to any other “feminised” role, especially sex, would further emasculate him. In simple and stark terms – the hero doesn’t get fucked, he *fucks*.

Startled and angered by J’onn’s deception the Daal leader lashes out but is soon overpowered when J’onn grabs her hair and bends her arm up behind her back. Their mission accomplished, the Task Force make their escape chased closely by the Daals. The ensuing fight sees J’onn save the Daal leader, after which she forgives his deception. In these last scenes the lesbian connotations are deflected, J’onn only managing to kiss the Daal leader on the cheek. Indeed there is no questioning his heterosexuality at all, as evinced by the following passage:

**J’onn:** She told me I could come back if I ever changed my mind…

But I think our physical relationship would be… *strained*.

**Gypsy:** That’s your call, wouldn’t you say, J’onn?

**J’onn:** Perhaps, but *not* a decision I choose to make.

(David, Velluto, and Albrecht, 1994:22, emphasis in original)
J’onn doesn’t want to be a woman, which isn’t surprising after all the negative connotations that have been associated with being female throughout the two issues. To cap it off, being the bride of a hermaphrodite is not the stuff of heroes, especially a male hero. J’onn becoming a woman “for real” or indeed questioning his heterosexuality in any context can only be done as an aberration to his male heroic role, and only when necessary to carry out a heroic mission. Recalling J’onn’s own fear that he would be laughed at, the narrative implies that even in a women-only population, female traits are stereotypical across age, race, and even species. It must be inherent, even if you’re a man who is only pretending to be a woman for a while. The narrative of dressing in drag, or playing opposing genders and sexualities, is one which is continually replayed in our culture. From *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *Tootsie* (1982), *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993), *Strange Bedfellows* (2004) to *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007) and any other number of movies and television series, straight men have performed other genders, and mainly for laughs. The same can’t be said for lesbian or gay men playing it straight, which often ends in tragic circumstances. *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) and to a lesser extent the western, *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) are just two examples, which unlike the aforementioned comedies, have their basis in reality.

The shapeshifter necessarily exhibits, represents, and makes clear, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance. The shapeshifter as representative of posthuman gender plays into Halberstam and Livingstone’s idea of someness, with some number of genders necessitating and requiring that performance be a part of the change. Mystique is a character of posthuman gender. Her shapeshifting ability raises questions about her original gender which has never been positively established. In the comic *X-Men: True Friends #3* (Nov. 1999) set in the 1930s (Marvel Comics
time) she appears as a man named Mr Raven, raising the idea that perhaps at the onset of her mutation she was male. Whether Mystique only outwardly appears as the gender she exhibits or actually changes her body completely, i.e.: also her internal organs, is not known. Her most common form with which she is associated is female, and she exhibits more female capabilities than male, not the least being childbirth. When a shapeshifter changes bodies do they change gender? Do they change sex? Do their sexual organs only change on the surface of the body? Mystique gives a clue to the answer being able to move organs around her body.

Shapeshifters are not sexless, though the potentiality for them to be so is evident. The potentiality of their form gives them the ability to be any gender/sex. They are engaged in a discourse with limits that can never be reached. The answer I would posit to all the questions above is, yes. How many sexes, genders, and therefore roles, can a shapeshifter occupy? Some.

Posthuman Superheroes

The most notable comic writers to explore the concept of the Posthuman are Mark Millar (The Authority and Ultimate X-Men), Grant Morrison (The Invisibles, and New X-Men) and Warren Ellis (Stormwatch, The Authority). The world of Ultimate X-Men, (indeed the Marvel Ultimates Universe), and New X-Men, exists apart and outside of normal X-Men continuity – the forty plus years of Marvel Universe comic history. Thus The Ultimates and New X-Men allows a reinvention of the classic X-Men and other Marvel characters, freeing new or newer readers from a stifling and intimidating comic history. While this freedom from history allowed Millar an unprecedented opportunity to take the characters into otherwise uncharted territory, Klock in his article ‘X-Men, Emerson, Gnosticism’ characterises Millar’s run on The
*Ultimates* as exhibiting a ‘pessimistic post-humanism’ (2004). As a term in superhero narratives, posthuman is used in a straight forward evolutionary sense. The villain, Sabretooth, sums this up:

We’re monsters… I don’t dress it up with fancy names like mutant or *post-human*. Man was born crueller than apes and we we’re born crueller than men. It’s just the natural order of things (Millar, Kubert, Raney & Derenick, and Thibert et al, 2006:305, emphasis in original).

The X-Men villain, Magneto, pushes the point further in his rant against humans:

Man is a parasite upon mutant resources. He eats our food, breathes our air and occupies land which evolution intended *Homo Superior* to inherit. Naturally, our attacks upon your power bases will continue until you deliver this world to its rightful owners. But your replacements grow impatient (Millar, Adam Kubert & Andy Kubert, and Thibert with Miki, 2006:10, emphasis in original).

In *Ultimate X-Men* naming comes into play as a factor in becoming, or being represented as, posthuman, providing a new way of differentiating the posthuman from the human. As Xavier explains to Storm of their monikers: ‘You’ve just been rebaptized as a *post-human* being… a name which describes your own skill and personality as opposed to those of a long dead ancestor’ (Millar, Adam Kubert & Andy Kubert, and Thibert with Miki, 2006:24, emphasis in original).

The posthuman is enmeshed in notions of the body and the shapeshifter is defined by notions of what the body can do. Yet in the same instance the shapeshifter’s body subverts its own definition by continually doing what a common body cannot. Braidotti writes that the body ‘is an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces… a surface where multiple codes (race,
sex, class, age) are inscribed’ (2002:25). The role of the shapeshifter is dangerous to occupy as they disturb the familiar and the known. Braidotti’s quote describes Mystique’s body as it represents a perfect interface, a surface of codes, intersecting sexes, races, classes, a unique character able to assume a multiplicity – some number – of forms, roles, genders, and identities. Barkan writes that ‘a subject whose essence is instability and mysterious change does not lend itself to classical orderliness’ (1986: xiii). With an identity built on instability, a missing origin, Mystique is able to become other yet remains Mystique. Defying traditional hero and villain stereotypes, neither heterosexual nor good mother, she spurns hetero-normative relationships, adopts children, and is a leader. She has been punished for not declaring her allegiance to patriarchy, or a defining sexuality which also makes her posthuman. Mystique will never become a hero in the traditional sense until her queerness has been renounced. Ontologically speaking however, the shapeshifter promotes the idea of an unstable definition of the self, the idea of multiple selves, and thus the endless possibility of other ways of being. The shapeshifter’s performance of multiple roles, and as a metaphor, spreads further than just form. Mystique’s shapeshifting ability facilitates her to occupy a range of subject positions in her comic existence. She is a mother, a lover, a wife, a stepmother, a step-grandmother, a detective, a model, a widow, exhibits facets of evil, and of goodness. In contrast, the subject positions the classic heroes such as Superman or Batman occupy are narrow to say the least.

Mystique is:

   capable of defeating the notion of fixed bodily form, of visible, recognizable, clear, and distinct shapes as that which marks the contour of the body. She is morphologically dubious (Braidotti, 2002:80).
Mystique’s unlimited potentiality threatens everything that is controlled, stable, and individual, the idea of the human itself. Having positioned Mystique as representative of the posthuman, the figure of the shapeshifter has itself evolved to be combined with that of the cyborg to become, what I believe, is the ideal posthuman subject – the shapeshifting cyborg – embodied by *The Authority*’s, The Engineer (Figure 4.3).

![Image](figure43.png)

**Figure 4.3**

The Engineer

(Ellis, Hitch, and Neary, 2000a:28)

The most visible figure of posthumanism in the superhero narrative is the cyborg. The number of cyborgs peppering superhero narratives is substantial, including but not limited to Cyborg (*Teen Titans*), Midnighter (*The Authority*), Robotman (*Doom Patrol*), Wolverine (with his adamantium skeleton), Fuji (*Stormwatch*), Iron Man (with his artificial heart attachment), Forge, and the *X-Men* villains, The Marauders. At base level, with his numerous bat-gadgets, Batman can be said to be the first superhero cyborg. Frank Miller took this to extremes in *The Dark Knight Returns* where he depicted Batman using an armoured suit powered by Gotham City’s electricity grid to defeat Superman. The Engineer, a.k.a. Angela
Spica, is perhaps the most telling, and even primary example of the posthuman in the superhero narrative. A former physicist and technologist, The Engineer, is a shapeshifting cyborg. Instead of prosthetics being grafted or attached to her body she has ‘nine pints of liquid machinery’ for blood (Ellis, Hitch, and Neary, 2000a:84). This liquid machinery is full of intelligent microscopic nanotech devices and by no means confined to her arteries. The liquid exists both as a part of her internal and external anatomy. Through her thoughts Angie uses this liquid to create anything she can think of including full body armour and jet engines. She is able to do this, because, as she says: ‘You can fit every book on earth into a drop of my blood’ (Ellis, Hitch, and Neary, 2000b:50). She is even able to spread and transform this liquid nanotech machinery into eighty-two fully workable bodies. This however is about as much she can manage before her ‘personality starts to disassociate’ (Millar, Weston & Quitely, and Leach & Scott, 2002:31). Capable of multiple selves who operate independently and are themselves capable of multiple shapes, in this sense her shape actually shifts to (an)other that is still her(slef). She is not only posthuman in her representation of a cyborg, she is also connected to the environment, her body (anatomy) extending further than her identifiable body. This is embodied in her ability to create multiple selves, integrate with other machines, and to perceive environmental changes around her and around the world:

The longer I wear the liquid machinery, the longer I develop an invisible web of atom-sized machine sensors around me. A sort of security perfume… I get very sensitive to environmental changes (Ellis, Hitch, and Neary, 2000b:14).

She’s so sensitive to environmental changes in fact that they effect her physically, causing her to feel ill. This is not surprising considering the sensors are a part of her
physiology, while also existing apart from her. The Engineer’s abilities recall Pepperell’s second and third points of his Posthuman Concept of Consciousness being: ‘The human body is not separate from its environment’ and ‘Consciousness, body and environment are all continuous’. Thus The Engineer is the synthesis of several strands of posthuman theory. The Engineer is also becoming the more she finds out about her abilities. And the more she finds out, the more she is able to become, in a continual evolution. As a cyborg shapeshifter, The Engineer allows linkages and identifications as woman/other/animal/hybrid, and presents a posthuman ideal in the idea that she has evolved enough to decide how to evolve. When reminiscing about her former life, how chaotic and banal, though attractive it was, she comes to the conclusion that: ‘I’m not Angie anymore. I’m The Engineer’ (Ellis, Hitch, and Neary, 2000a:104). In renaming herself in the same manner as the X-Men characters in *New X-Men*, she confirms her posthuman identity.

**Jack Hawksmoor, Shift, Jean Grey, The Invisibles**

Jack Hawksmoor, Shift, Jean Grey, and characters of *The Invisibles*, also exhibit posthuman qualities. Jack Hawksmoor from *The Authority* (and previously *Stormwatch*), has been surgically enhanced by aliens, becoming ‘*homo urbanus,* one of a kind: city human. Human designed specifically to live in cities’ (Ellis, Hamner, and Story, 2002:148). Hawksmoor can communicate with cities as sentient beings and get them to help him in his superheroic endeavours, while also providing him with superhuman strength. He can also disperse his body into the urban environs, them effectively becoming continuous with his body, consciousness, and the environment. In this sense he is also a shape-shifter.
Morrison’s work on *New X-Men* has been described as adhering to or playing with the idea of the posthuman (Wolk 2007). The telekinetic X-Men member, Jean Grey, is another posthuman subject. In *New X-Men* #128 (2005) Professor Xavier and Jean experiment with her growing telekinetic power. Jean explains that all her senses seem to be melting together:

**Jean:** It’s like I’m feeling more of *everything*… but it all melts together. It’s not *just* sight or sound… it’s all of my senses at *once*, sort of rippling out through my surroundings…

**Professor Xavier:** Your mind’s ability to precisely operate matter extends far *beyond* your physical body and deeply into your environment. But… I think there could be *more* to it…


Indeed there is more to it. When Xavier touches a fork Jean is levitating with her mind in mid-air, Jean can feel Xavier’s pulse through the fork. Again in a posthuman idea, Jean’s consciousness extends beyond her body into the fork and surrounding environment, effectively exemplifying that she is embedded as part of that environment.

Shift also provides elements of the posthuman. When he evolves he finds the ability to absorb elements from outside himself, bypassing Rex’s restrictions of only being able to use the elements contained in the human body. Naming himself *Shift* mirrors the naming of the X-Men in that, as Indigo says: ‘it complements your *new* persona as a *shape-shifter*’ (Winick et al, 2004b:108). Shift also changes form frequently; he is not confined by one shape, and can be said to use his shape to express mood, feelings, and opinions. He has a greater range of bodily expressions, a *body language*. 
Morrison’s sprawling epic, *The Invisibles* (1994-2000), is another example of the posthuman. In many ways *The Invisibles* can be used as a synthesis of all the ideas of which I have been arguing. Morrison ties together eastern philosophies, pseudo-science, magic and fantasy narrative, and conspiracy theories into a mish-mash of a storyline that revolves around a ‘centerless, revolutionary guerrilla society’ (‘The Story So Far…’, 2001:6) called The Invisibles, who are: ‘an ancient and secret network of freedom fighters dedicated to the liberation and evolution of Humankind… engaged in a war with the ultradimensional entities known as the Archons’ (Uncredited Introduction, 1998:4). Of course this is a massive oversimplification of the story. It is also a ‘cracked treatise on the nature of reality, cast in the form of a fast-paced action-adventure story’ (Wolk, 2007:260) and a lot of it is explicitly concerned with the way time and space can be represented on a printed page (Wolk, 2007:261). According to the last chapter of the series the next stage of human evolution is ‘thoroughly unstable personalities’ (Wolk, 2007:268). Wolk continues:

> Having an unstable definition of the self, in Morrison’s cosmology, makes perception of the invisible more possible, since it means the vantage point doesn’t have to be fixed (2007:267).

It could be said that Morrison tries to put in too much as the story evolves into high-concept, and yet does not resolve all the loose ends. The final issues race toward the finale with little time for explanation. Suffice to say that The Invisibles thwart the return of the Archons. The members of The Invisibles are those on the fringes, occupying the in-between spaces of society – anarchists, witches, outcasts, occult terrorists (Uncredited Introduction, 1998:4). The point of *The Invisibles* is that the multiple self realises multiple viewpoints and thus allows a greater understanding of
the world and ourselves, though it is at the expense of control, or in essence, the comforting feeling of control. Control is entangled in the accumulation of knowledge but the great irony is that to garner more control, more knowledge is needed. To do this we need to venture into places that are less than stable to discover information, and will perhaps and necessarily challenge our viewpoints, delivering a loss of control. *The Invisibles* illustrates (both literally and metaphorically) the possibility of embodiment through fractured storytelling and the depiction of multiple viewpoints throughout. *The Invisibles* draws on the concept of extra dimensions, namely that of the fourth dimension and trying to imagine what the third dimension (our world) would look like from this “outside” position, all the while trying to do this in a two dimensional plane. It is clear that Morrison at least peripherally knows of the ideas of the posthuman. Pepperell’s sixth and seventh points respectively are ‘Language divides us’ and ‘language is not all of reality, but part of it’ (2000). This idea is taken up by Morrison in *The Invisibles* where only a few people, mainly the Archons, have access to all sixty-four, not twenty-six, letters of the alphabet. Thus when these extra letters, like the triple-u, are learnt, more layers of reality become accessible to the speaker. The difference, I would argue, between common renditions of superheroes and Morrison’s is that (loosely) Morrison makes them posthuman in the fact that they are connected to everything around them, they’re not singularities existing among a world of events. Morrison’s characters, like their connection to space, exist in and of the world.

Paula Rabinowitz asks the question ‘can the posthuman speak?’ (2000:42). In the space of one paragraph she cites the posthuman body as ‘living outside national, sexual, economic borders’, then exceeding and overriding borders, before finally speaking through a language that straddles the borders between ‘health/sickness,
male/female, real/imaginary (2000:43). She then decides that the posthuman, like the alien, the marginal, and the subaltern ‘probably cannot speak because it is always spoken through the stories that someone else has already told’ (2000:43). I would say that this is the point exactly. The posthuman, in true postmodern sense, only speaks through stories that someone else has already told. This is the whole point of what Klock calls the re-visionary comic narrative. Rabinowitz’s point is made through oppositions and borders, and the idea of being “outside.” Using the work of Pepperell I would rather position the posthuman body as one reaching for a limit that can never be reached. There are no borders for the posthuman to straddle, no oppositions of which to be outside. As an embodied presence, they have no borders because they cannot live outside consciousness. Body and environment are continuous. They can only live within, embodied. Rabinowitz states: ‘the posthuman body is still saturated with the stories of humanity’ (2000:43). Yes, and in being saturated with stories, actually take them to another level. The human is a genre, but the posthuman rewrites, is rewritten. Their stories, their origins, have already been told. The posthuman rewrites itself, is rewritten, in post terms. Genre plays into ideas already told – re-visionary, troping, postmodernism. Posthuman superhero characters speak through a troping of genre and character. Yes, there is an element of Lyotard’s playing with the pieces, but evolving new pieces of a puzzle without a frame/border. In true posthuman/postmodern style these stories, characters, or tropes of characters will continue to be rewritten. Batman is embodied in Watchmen’s, Rorschach and similarly in The Authority’s, Midnighter. Born of Metamorpho’s body, Shift is literally Metamorpho embodied. When Shift reincorporates himself into Metamorpho, he again literally becomes embodied in Metamorpho, as Metamorpho explains: ‘I feel him in here. I have all his memories. His anger. His guilt. His love.'
I swear to you… it’s like I lived it’ (Winnick, McDaniel, and Owens, 2007:157, emphasis in original). Metamorpho has been rewritten by Shift’s reincorporation.

As comics companies have come to realise, the idea of continuity is one which cannot be rectified simply by killing characters and making a couple of different Earths. No sooner has continuity been fixed, new continuities arise which conflict with the old. With countless writers and artists working across titles over decades, discontinuities and the multiplicity of mistakes that disrupt continuity are the only certainties of the superhero narrative. In a sense the stories simply rewrite themselves. Multiple writers and artists, with their varied interpretations, refocusing, re-producing, re-writing characters and origins, have produced characters, almost unknowingly, that are posthuman. In their natural evolution, their reflexivity, their reinvention of narrative and character, and indeed genre, superhero narratives have, and could only have, produced the posthuman characters for our time. And truly these characters represent Halberstam’s idea of someness. How many posthuman superheroes are there? Some. How many super powers can there be? Some. What does this mean? The continual reinvention of the superhero narrative and thus superhero characters, has produced the posthuman superhero. They are self-reflexive characters imbued with the weight of comic history who interrogate the limits (if any) of their powers and abilities. These characters are above the human, embedded in their environment, and have consciousnesses that extend beyond their physical bodies.

Coming Off The Page

In 1971 a now famous experiment led by Philip Zimbardo, known as the Stanford Prison Experiment, was conducted to ‘study the psychology of imprisonment – to see
what happens when you put good people in a dehumanizing place’ (Franco and Zimbardo, 2006-07:30). Scheduled for a period of two weeks, the experiment had to be stopped after six days when the participants conducting the role of guards began using increasingly degrading forms of punishment. The findings of this experiment were replicated in real life thirty-five years later in the actions of the guards at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. This “Banality of Evil”, shows that ‘under certain conditions and social pressures, ordinary people can commit acts that would otherwise be unthinkable’ and also accounts for ‘people taking no action when action is called for’ (Franco and Zimbardo, 2006-07:30). However, inspired by the experiment, Zimbardo and co-researcher, Zeno Franco, have asked the question: ‘Is it also possible that heroic acts are something that anyone can perform, given the right mind-set and conditions? Could there also be a “banality of heroism”? (Franco and Zimbardo, 2006-07:31). The answer is a resounding yes. Through their research of heroism they have found it possible to foster a ‘heroic imagination’ which ‘can help guide a person’s behaviour in times of trouble or moral uncertainty’ (Franco and Zimbardo, 2006-07:31). However, Franco and Zimbardo write that the idea of heroes and heroism has been diluted and dumbed down which impedes the fostering of the heroic imagination. To foster the heroic imagination society needs to resist the urge to rationalize inaction and the growing fear of personal conflict which diminishes the ‘hardiness necessary to stand firm for principles we cherish’ (Franco and Zimbardo, 2006-07:34). Finally Franco and Zimbardo cite that a reconnection with the mythic ancient ideals of traditional heroic tales, especially for young people, enables:

a connection with the hero in ourselves. It is this vital internal conduit between the modern work-a-day ethic and the mythic world that can
prepare an ordinary person to be an everyday hero (Franco and Zimbardo, 2006-07:35).

Where on a broad scale do we find such examples of heroes now? Franco and Zimbardo cite heroism portrayed in such films as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy which are based on the epic tradition, or even certain video games, as examples which could help children develop an internal compass in morally ambiguous situations or help them think about their ability to act heroically (Franco and Zimbardo, 2006-07:35). Morrison’s take on this when writing the characters of *New X-Men*, was to look at them as if they were role models:

> And when supermen do come along, what are they gonna want to find? A role model. Like everyone else on the planet. We all want to find people who’ve trod our path before, who can suggest some ways to help us feel significant. So the idea behind a lot of what I was doing in X-Men and really all of my comics is to give these future supermen a template, to say “Okay you’re a superhuman, and maybe it feels a little like this” (Babcock, 2007).

While comics as a form of heroic etiquette manual may at first seem absurd, consider that in 2004 *The New England Journal of Medicine* reported the first documented human case of a genetic mutation that boosts muscle growth (Schuelke et al, 2004). The study focused on an abnormally strong four-year old German boy whose DNA was found to block production of the protein, myostatin, which limits muscle growth.\(^{47}\) In 2007, nineteen-month old, Liam Hoekstra, was found to have a similar condition, though a blood test determined that, unlike the German infant, he did not have the genetic mutation that blocks all production of myostatin. Rather, he has a

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\(^{47}\) For privacy reasons the name of the German infant was withheld in the article.
myostatin blockade which leaves him with forty percent more muscle mass than normal, a speedy metabolism, and almost no body fat. He is one of roughly one hundred known cases in the world. The article reports that his mother has taken to calling him ‘The Hulk, Hercules, the Terminator’ (‘Rare condition gives toddler super strength’, 2007).

Could the internet be a facilitator of this expanding posthuman consciousness? With the internet’s ability to connect similar people and special interest groups from around the world, the chances of mutations occurring in the human population increases. People with similar body types, experiences, and conditions, such as that exhibited by Liam Hoekstra now have the possibility of meeting each other beyond the possibilities of chance, and there is nothing to say that two of these abnormally strong individuals may produce offspring that are “super-powered.” The posthumans of the future may need to be schooled in the etiquette of heroism, especially if they have abilities above that of the human and society expects them to be heroic. Consider also the notion that many of today’s technological advances have been predicted or inspired by science fiction. Human flight, space travel, virtual reality, have some precedence in literature before their presence in reality. Take the following passage by Richard Kostelanetz in his 1968 essay ‘Dada and the Future of Fiction’ where he discusses the different way fiction may be presented to the public:

Just as the French novelist Marc Saporta created a book, offered in a box, whose unbound pages can be read in any order, so a fiction appropriate for storage on an advanced computer (which given time-sharing, can be electronically linked into an individual reader’s home) should be similarly non-linear. That is, the random access memory of an advanced machine would enable the reader to appreciate discrete
segments in any order over his home console; and ideally, every sequence… would provide him with more or less the same interest, coherence and pleasure (1968:26-7).

Thus Kostelanetz predicts the emergence of hypertext fiction on the home consoles of our “advanced” computers we will all have. One wonders whether Mark Amerika in conceiving his Grammatron project ever came across Kostelanetz’s essay. Why couldn’t comics be inspirational for the coming posthuman era? Morrison’s characters then begin escaping from their flat two dimensional existence, as he iterates:

I said, way back, almost jokingly, that I thought super-people were really trying very hard to make their way off the skin of the second dimension to get in here. They want to get in here with us… the next stage is to clamber off the screen into the street. I think what you’re seeing with things like… the cyborg experiments and genetic manipulation that is now possible, is that pretty soon there’s gonna be super-people. You’ll be able to select for super-people: “I want my kid to have electric powers.” That kind of thing (in Babcock, 2007).

The idea that comics could become textbooks or etiquette manuals for future posthumans is far-fetched, perhaps slightly absurd, but not entirely unrealistic. Mutation advances the human race, not just with mutations, but with the genetic material produced from these mutations which could possibly cure disease, thus advancing the human race further again. This sort of manipulation could thus makes those people of mutation think differently about their body, their existence, and their consciousness, in an outward spiralling net that builds upon each new discovery and revelation. Indeed it may not be genetic manipulation by scientists that furthers our way of life, our race, but the natural mutation of the human body. The world
populated by the posthumans of tomorrow will be one which is unrecognisable to ours. But once again, comics have beaten me to the punch. I feel it is only fitting to finish with the last words spoken by Batman, from *Justice* #12 (Aug. 2007):

Imagine if you will, Alfred, a world to come, a world transformed, a humanity *beyond* even our wildest imaginations. If our lives and the struggles we face were able to purchase that future, how could we not be grateful for the opportunity to fight for that possibility? That tomorrow? Perhaps, Alfred, one day, humanity… or what humanity will become… will look back at this time, and see the beginning of *change*. Of transforming into something *greater*

(Krueger & Ross et al, 2007:43-4, emphasis in original).
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.

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2008
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Foreword:

Notes on the Text

In writing what would eventually become *Serpent Dawn*, I wanted to explore and intersect two themes – the superhero narrative, and the idea of a uniquely themed Australian novel using myth and a mythologising of the Australian landscape.

Superheroes are the staple of the comic medium and due to its primarily visual nature examples of superhero narratives in novels are generally restricted to that of novelisation of films, or as “the further adventures of” scenarios such as the series fiction of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*. I wanted to create a superhero narrative in novel form, which reflected the freedom that the superhero narrative has in incorporating multiple modes of writing. My thesis makes the distinction between comics as a medium and the superhero narrative which resides in the genre of the marvellous-uncanny. In making this distinction I feel my new model of genre categorisation symbiotically helps reinvigorate both the superhero narrative and the idea of genre itself. As I explain in Chapter Two of *Changing Bodies: Representations of Metamorphic Comic Characters*, the superhero narrative is almost uncontained in the modes of writing which it incorporates - science-fiction, fantasy, and myth, being only a few. Thus my research of the superhero narrative and metamorphic characters informed my writing of *Serpent Dawn*. Like the superhero narrative, *Serpent Dawn* combines elements of science-fiction, fantasy, and myth,
becoming a hybrid narrative which is situated in the genre of the Marvellous-Uncanny.

In wanting to write an “Australian novel” as the second theme of my creative component, I knew that Aboriginal Dreaming stories were full of metamorphic characters, not the least being the Rainbow Serpent, and provided a rich vein of inspiration. Thus I drew upon Aboriginal mythology and legend, and also the myths of a postcolonial Australian nation. The intersection of these two myths is the figure of the Australian landscape and its relation to the Australian populace. Although I am not a scholar of Aboriginal Studies I was certainly aware of the possible problems of a white male writer using Aboriginal Cultural Heritage for his fiction. The theoretical component of this thesis, *Changing Bodies: Representations of Metamorphic Comic Characters*, does not investigate the area of Aboriginal Studies and the Dreaming. This was not the focus or intention of the theory which has a literary base around the theoretical/figural representation of metamorphic comic characters. Thus I would have been starting “from scratch” in Aboriginal Studies not actually having undertaken any work of this nature in my undergraduate academic tenure.

The original premise of the fiction (titled *Acka: Rock Stars and Superheroes Be Damned*) was something far removed from the final draft of *Serpent Dawn*. The conception of the fiction component was not remotely based on or featured Aboriginal culture. However as the story and idea developed, Aboriginal culture presented itself as something uniquely Australian which could not be ignored if I was to write an “Australian” novel. In regards to the issue of appropriation of Aboriginal material my intention was to make sure that I did not do this. In hindsight, after conducting the research for this preface, this intention was perhaps imbued with a certain naïveté. While always being aware of the issue of appropriation I had not
fully realised the issues or depth of the topic. Terri Janke in *Our Culture, Our Future*, defines Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights as consisting of:

> the intangible and tangible aspects of the whole body of cultural practices, resources and knowledge systems developed, nurtured and refined by Indigenous people and passed on by them as part of expressing their cultural identity (1999: 11).

The use of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage, especially Dreaming stories, is a source of much contention. I took as somewhat of a blessing David Unaipon’s quote:

> Perhaps some day Australian writers will use Aboriginal myths and weave literature from them, the same as other writers have done with the Roman, Greek, Norse, and Arthurian legends (Unaipon, 2001:4).

As a pioneer who collected and documented Aboriginal Dreaming narratives, Unaipon was caught at cultural cross-roads. Raised as a devout Christian and availed of a western education (speaking Greek and Latin), Unaipon held his Aboriginal heritage dear, speaking his own Ngarrindjeri language fluently. However as Mary-Anne Gale writes of Unaipon’s collecting of stories:

> it seems authenticity was not an issue for Unaipon… it was more important to produce texts that won him acceptance among his white readers… his aim was to present his work as something equivalent to that produced by not only the white poets and literary men he admired, but also texts that were logically argued and scientifically sound (2000: 231).

Unaipon not only collected stories from his own Ngarrindjeri people but from the peoples surrounding Ngarrindjeri lands (Nukuna, Narrangga) and indeed throughout
South Australia. At one stage he published the stories he collected in pamphlet form himself and sold them door-to-door. Gale argues that certain oral narratives which Unaipon collected from outside his own community and which he subsequently reproduced in written form, demonstrates his ‘intention of “weaving literature”… with little concern for authenticity’ (2000:281). She proposes that Unaipon ‘chose to embellish and reconstruct hybrid texts from the original oral narratives’, but he also ‘chose to represent the occasional narrative… in a relatively unembellished form, probably because his source material was more detailed and precise’ (2000:283). Of course as noted by Gale, and Muecke and Shoemaker, Unaipon himself was the victim of appropriation, his texts being rewritten by, and attributed to, the amateur anthropologist William Ramsay Smith. Gale concludes there is little doubt that Unaipon is the author of the texts which comprise the stories attributed to Ramsay Smith (both published and unpublished), but ‘what is in doubt is the identity of each of the original narrators from which Unaipon drew his inspiration to “weave” such syncretic texts’ (2000:284).

The Indigenous writer, Colin Johnson (also known as Mudrooroo) holds an inclusive view of the use of Indigenous culture. He writes (as Mudrooroo):

The Indigenous culture of Australia is increasingly seen as the culture of Australia… even to the extent of appropriating some of its forms… The Dreaming is increasingly seen as the heritage of all Australians and the songlines of our Indigenous ancestors, the great epics singing the land, part of our common heritage (1997:2).

In regards to the use of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage, Johnson asks the question:
… if a writer wishes to write about a country crossed with songlines and wishes to use either the form or content to give a relevance to his or her work, should he or she be banned from doing this?... Where else should Australians go for cultural inspiration than to Indigenous culture? It is about time that we gave away such words as “appropriation” and “misappropriation” and set out to build an Australian culture and literature which is based on and in Australia, that is, on the land and on the songlines which make known the land (1997:23).

Johnson has come under fire for his comments, mainly for the fact his Indigenousness is self-proclaimed, that is, he's not of Aboriginal descent at all and thus appropriated an Indigenous identity, which would position his argument as spurious at least, and self-serving at worst. A fairly scathing indictment of his career is given by Rosemary van den Berg, which I quote at length below:

Johnson has changed his identity so many times it is hard to keep track of who he really is. One thing is for certain though, he is not an Aboriginal person. His non-Aboriginal identity has been proven by his own family and the Nyoongar people whom Mr Johnson has stated knew him as a child in a small country town in Western Australia. Mr Johnson, alias Mudrooroo Narogin, alias Mudrooroo Nyoongah, alias Mudrooroo, has been exposed as an impostor of the worst kind, for he knew he was not an Aboriginal person, yet he used an Aboriginal identity for his own ends - aka an “Aboriginal” writer. He is now famous as an “Aboriginal” writer and his expose [sic] as being non-Aboriginal does not seem to deter him in the least from accepting money and accolades from the white Australian public and other ignorant Aborigines (van den Berg, 1998).
Gary Foley has written in Johnson’s defence, stating in his 1997 essay ‘Muddy Waters: Archie, Mudrooroo and Aboriginality’:

Mudrooroo had spent virtually all of his early life on the margins of society… What the critics of Mudrooroo seem not to appreciate is that to acquire an Aboriginal identity (regardless of how) in 1965 was not exactly something that people were queuing up to do. To be regarded by the dominant society of Australia in 1965 as being a ‘boong’, ‘coon’ or ‘Abo’ was a passport to discrimination, prejudice and poverty, and many light-skinned Aboriginal people opted to assume a non-Aboriginal identity (Indian, afghan, Maori, etc) to escape the extreme difficulty of life as an Aboriginal person. To have been bestowed with an Aboriginal identity and then embrace and live that identity among Aboriginal people when times were tough is, for me, sufficient for Mudrooroo to be regarded as a member of the Aboriginal community (Foley, 1997).

Foley throws into question, or at least raises the question, of what constitutes Aboriginality. I would suggest it still relates to the idea of authenticity and what authenticity itself constitutes. Mudrooroo is condemned about writing as an Aboriginal when his authenticity as a “genuine” Aboriginal with Aboriginal heritage is questioned. Yet for Foley it is okay to write as Aboriginal if you have lived the Aboriginal experience, that of one of discrimination. The idea of who and what constitutes an Indigenous or non-Indigenous writer can be easily thrown into turmoil, which leads us to the issue of Leon Carmen.

Leon Carmen, a non-Indigenous white male, wrote an “autobiography”, My Own Sweet Time, as Wanda Koolmatrie, an Indigenous woman descended from the Pitjantjatara people of South Australia. Carmen has stated he took the name and identity of Wanda Koolmatrie to perpetrate a hoax concocted by himself and his
agent John Bayley in order to break into the Australian literary scene: ‘I created a
countertulture of the mid “60s”’, and as a ‘heartwarming comic
odyssey… It could be the start of a new genre’ (Spielmann, 1997). While the purpose
of Carmen’s hoax was to illustrate (from his perspective) that it was easier to be
published as a black woman than a white man, Maggie Nolan found the exercise
demonstrated a different (or perhaps a continuing) picture of white Australian
identity politics:

What is at stake here… is a fantasy of white supremacy and white
male entitlement to positions of cultural dominance. So while
Carmen claims that he chose Koolmatrie as his narrator because her
status as an Indigenous woman and member of the stolen generations
seemed to him the most oppressed subject position he could think of
to occupy, his hoax was grounded in an envy of the perceived
rewards that came with that position, and the purpose of the hoax was
to prove that Carmen is in fact, worse off than Wanda Koolmatrie…
it might be hard to be Wanda Koolmatrie, he seems to be saying, but
it’s even harder, in contemporary Australia, to be Leon Carmen
(Nolan, 2004:146).

The right to tell/write/publish Dreaming stories is perhaps the most
contentiously debated issue of the appropriation of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage and
there is no doubt it is the feature which has most often been appropriated. As
Aboriginal activist, spokesperson, and author, Jackie Huggins (currently Deputy Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the University of Queensland) writes:

Out of all the material written about, for and by Aboriginal people, this is perhaps the most sensitive genre (Huggins, 1994:13).

Huggins feels that writing children’s literature based on Aboriginal Creation stories should be exclusively done by Aboriginal people because:

Much of what has been written about Aboriginals by non-Aboriginals has been patronising, misconstrued, preconceived and abused. We’ve had so much destructive material written about us that we must hold together the very fabric of the stories which created us (Huggins, 1994: 12-13).

Indeed, regarding Serpent Dawn it had never been my intention to re-write a Dreaming story as my own. My decision was to use figures and incidents of Aboriginal mythology that were freely available in published material. That is, I would not take an Aboriginal Dreaming story and “make it my own” through re-interpretation. However Huggins’ thoughts also extend to the use of Aboriginal beings and characters from creation stories, Dreaming narratives, or indeed any Aboriginal stories:

If… Aboriginal spiritual characters are written about they must emanate from the right source/region/owners of the people to whom those stories belong… some writers treat those characters with the same applicability and generality as they do ghosts, witches, and gnomes. One playwright told me he “just put them in for effect”, not
realising the protocols involved. I prefer that people don’t write about them at all to save the colourisation and tokenism (Huggins, 1994:13).

Huggins suggests why white writers shouldn’t be allowed to write Aboriginal spiritual characters:

The problem with some writers is that they have “made up” what they don’t know about. This dangerous methodology only serves to alienate socially aware readers and those people whom it is meant to benefit (Huggins, 1994:13).

I find this an interesting point. How does it ‘alienate socially aware readers’? Wouldn’t socially aware readers know the difference between fiction and reality? Who are ‘those people’ who the ‘made up’ stories are meant to benefit? Indeed, isn’t the whole point of writing fiction to ‘make up’ what you don’t know about? And if a non-Indigenous writer doesn’t have access to certain information, what other avenue do they have other than to make it up? These are broad statements and I understand the points Huggins is making – if you don’t have the full facts then don’t attempt only half the story. Still, if this viewpoint is taken, then men couldn’t write female characters, nor women write male characters, adults couldn’t write as children, except from their own experiences which would mean that all children’s stories would be solo outings, nor could anyone write as an animal or an object, or an alien for that matter! The whole genres of fantasy, science fiction, even historical fiction could not exist because the only avenue for writers to go down is to “make up” what they don’t know about.

Melissa Lucashenko takes who has the right to represent Aboriginality one step further. At the 1998 Children’s Book Council conference, Lucashenko gave a
paper during the ‘Whose Dreaming? Whose Story?’ session and in the following question time ‘revealed she believes Indigenous writers also have exclusive rights to fictionalise Aboriginal characters in novels’ (Gale, 2000:4n) and that:

only Aboriginal people have the right to write novels with both Aboriginal characters and white characters because it is only they who have the life experience of living in both worlds (Gale, 2000:4n).

Thomas Keneally has stated that if he were writing *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* today, a story told from the viewpoint of the Aboriginal protagonist, he would write it differently:

I would be more diffident about writing from the nomadic, animist world view of Aboriginal Australia. I wrote in the first person not explicitly because I wanted to steal an identity and pose under it… (Keneally, 2003).

This seems like a shame, (and I don’t see how writing a character can be referred to as ‘stealing an identity’). Would the story be the same? Would it have the same resonances if Keneally felt constrained on what he felt was allowed, or told how he was allowed, to represent Indigenous characters? Keneally though, can feel somewhat secure in the knowledge that *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* was based on an historical incident. He goes on to say:

I confess that, I'm not, as far as I know, confessing so much to a massive crime as to an act of presumption and impoliteness… for a white fella to appropriate an Aboriginal point of view… was not justified… (Keneally, 2003).
But having said this Keneally makes the distinction between book and story, a statement I would position as differentiating between commercial and non-commercial enterprises:

I tend to believe that whoever can get to the research and turn it into a book, having paid all requisite and just copyright fees and compensations, owns it. Women can write about men and vice-versa, both well and badly and should be permitted to… But the question of ownership of the story in the profoundest, morally right sense, is the most vexing in the greatest cultural divide of all, the divide between sedentary and nomadic cultures. Here one should tread carefully (Keneally, 2003).

Sandra Phillips, an editor who has worked exclusively with Aboriginal authors at Magabala Books and University of Queensland Press, is against non-Indigenous writers writing about Aboriginal issues. She states that non-Indigenous authors should never write about Indigenous subject matter or use Indigenous characters because:

For a non-Indigenous author to achieve a true feel to their representation on Indigenous subject matter and... character... they would need to be very enculturated with Indigenous culture. And if they are not, they are writing as outsiders to that culture and their representation would be vastly different to the representation defined, developed and refined by an Indigenous writer (Phillips in McDonald, 1997: 13).

Phillips is right. A non-Indigenous writer’s representation would be vastly different to an Indigenous writer’s representation. But does that make it wrong? Or just simply
different? Phillips assumes that all non-Indigenous authors want to achieve a “true representation” of Indigenous character (and subject matter depending on the subject matter at hand). The problem with a statement such as this is that achieving a true representation of Indigenous character is like trying to achieve a true representation of a tree. Which tree are we speaking about? Is there, can there ever be, a true representation of Indigenous character? And if there is, doesn’t that representation immediately become a stereotype, which defeats the purpose of achieving diverse representations of Indigenous people and culture? This statement also assumes that an Indigenous writer will naturally be able to achieve a “true” representation of an Indigenous character, and/or culture.

Nadia Wheatley points out the difficulties faced by white writers who aim to present material in a culturally sensitive and appropriate way:

If white writers exclude Aboriginal characters and themes, do they run the risk of giving the impression of a white Australian monoculture, and thus inadvertently fostering racism? ... there are also specific, practical questions that arise when a white writer feels it necessary to write about Aboriginal people and issues. For example… Should we say aborigine or Aboriginal or Koori(e) or Murri or what? Is it Dreaming or Dreamtime? Is it always offensive to use terms such as abos or boongs or coons or gins, or is it excusable if we put these words into the mouths of unsympathetic white characters, or characters from the past? ... And if we want to express a character in an authentic Aboriginal way, how do we do this if we have never met a Koori or Murri or a Nungga or a Nyunga? (Wheatley, 1997: 22)

To answer her own question, Wheatley refers to a methodology using research, as well as common respect and politeness:
After all, if I wish to write a story about executives, I make sure I go and meet some, and I try to understand how they think and feel and talk; once the story is written, I go back and check it with them, to make sure I haven’t made any stupid blunders. Or if I wish to write a story featuring gay characters, I am very careful to try not to use words or stereotypes which might hurt real gay people (Wheatley, 1997: 22).

Again, this assumes there is some “true” essence to the culture of executives (and gay culture), and by meeting some of these executives, a true representation of an executive or executive culture can be achieved. I ask the question: if a non-Indigenous writer used the argument that they had met ‘some’ Aboriginals, and that was the basis for their depiction of Aboriginals in a narrative, would it be classed as adequate research for that depiction? Elizabeth Farrelly perhaps sums up the attitude of one faction of white culture’s attitude to the debate with respect to art:

you can’t patent an entire culture; can’t insist that only those born into a cultural system may have imaginative access to it; can’t quarantine the imagination within the confines of birth and experience - or what is art for? Surely, art’s capacity to flout cultural boundaries is one of its greatest strengths - not just artistically, but socially. Politically, even. Dammit, the Carmens and Duracks should be applauded, not condemned, for daring to undermine the ramparts of race and stereotype... Since ambiguity is art’s home ground, and extending experience via imagination is its raison d'etre, this imperative to restrict the creative personality is perverse indeed (Farrelly, 2003).

Farrelly is correct. You can’t insist that only those born into a culture have imaginative rights and access to it. Insisting doesn’t make it so, it just makes those
who wouldn’t have known or bothered before at least consider the act of asking permission. Whether they do is not guaranteed.

While the traditional stories from which I’ve drawn inspiration are referred to as myth, Jackie Huggins makes the assertion that traditional owners of such stories regard them as true. Huggins states:

We never refer to these stories as “myths”. How can the Bible be a myth? (Huggins, 1994: 13).

Regarding the Bible as fact opens another can of worms, so to speak, but if Aboriginal Creation stories aren’t regarded as stories or myths at all, but fact, then this assertion renders all arguments null and void. The Bible, while allegorical in nature, is referred to as true by many Christians. Perhaps I am jumping the gun here. The Bible may not be a myth, but there is certainly a Christian mythology. Still, if Aboriginal Creation stories are judged as fact then it should be easy to discern fact from fiction. That would be: anything in a work of fiction, is fiction, without claims to factuality, even if based on fact. Thus works of fiction are not re-telling Aboriginal stories (possibly using Aboriginal characters or beings), but telling stories containing Aboriginal elements. Serpent Dawn is certainly a work of fiction and I am not trying to pass off any kind of Aboriginality in using Aboriginal characters. Indeed as the Australia Council’s pamphlet Writing: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Writing states:

Under copyright law, it is not an infringement to refer to another writer’s work. Creation stories that are published have copyright protecting the expression. However, it is possible for a writer to adapt a story, tell it in a different context or use different words, creating
Copyright in another form. It is also possible for a writer to include or write about creation stories without following the correct Indigenous protocol of seeking permission from the people in authority (Writing: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Writing, 2007:14-5).

In true postmodern fashion I could argue that the Wulgaru in Serpent Dawn is not the Wulgaru from the Waddaman (also Wardaman) Aboriginal story ‘How Djarapa Made Wulgaru’, citing that each interpretation of the character is different, and even though they may be similar, they are not one and the same.¹ Wulgaru in Serpent Dawn is definitely not the Waddaman/Wardaman’s Wulgaru. Appropriation of characters and narratives is a staple part of postmodern fiction. Characters (peripheral and leading) in iconic narratives are re-written. Such iconic narratives themselves are deepened and added to by being told from a different perspective, creating a greater mythology. Such texts include Tom Stoppard’s play Rosencrantz and Guilderstern are Dead (Hamlet), Kathy Acker’s Empire of the Senseless (using excerpts from William Gibson’s Neuromancer), J.M Coetzee’s Foe (Robinson Crusoe), Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea (Jane Eyre), and Sena Jeter Naslund’s Ahab’s Wife (Moby Dick). Of course the superhero narrative is one where characters are continually re-written (and re-drawn) by different authors and artists. Lasting, stand-out portrayals of characters come with the distinction of a prefix – John Byrne’s ‘Superman’; Frank Miller’s ‘Batman’. Nor are comic producers/writers/artists averse to using famous characters. A most notable example is Alan Moore’s The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen. In this popular comic

¹ The level of appropriation of the story ‘How Djarapa Made Wulgaru’ is deep. It appears in the book Australian Dreaming: 40,000 Years of Aboriginal History (edited by Jennifer Isaacs) and is simply attributed to ‘Waddaman, Katherine River’, indicating the people and area from which the story originated. However, this is also referenced with an endnote which upon checking reveals the story is republished from Bill Harney’s Tales from the Aborigines (1976) a reprint from the original 1959 publication. Bill Harney was a white author born in Charters Towers, Queensland, of English immigrant parents and died in 1962. Thus the original Indigenous storyteller is unknown.
Moore reinvents the characters Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde, Captain Nemo, Mina Harker, and Allan Quartermain (to name only a few) from late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature as a “supergroup”. In the case of comic characters like Superman and Batman, authors are contracted to create stories and any unauthorised use of such characters is dealt with harshly. In fact both Marvel and DC Comics even trademarked the term “Superhero” in 1979. No other company can refer to their heroes on the cover of their comic books as “Superheroes” or some such derivative.¹

In contrast here is the two ideas of ownership presented through Aboriginal and western culture. With characters such as Batman and Superman, there is a clear cut case of ownership. And yet, for characters such as Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde who are no longer under copyright (or trademarked), the work of Stevenson having passed into the public domain, and therefore can be exploited by anyone who sees fit. Thus there is the idea of collective ownership once copyright has passed. The Aboriginal idea of ownership is similar, although copyright never passes into the public domain.

Aboriginal cultural heritage is collectively owned in a manner of custodianship and is to be protected accordingly.

Are white writers, like myself, simply using art, theory, literature, fiction, philosophy, as a tool in order to keep a grip on their position in dominant culture? As an excuse? Perhaps. Putting forward these arguments, it may seem like I am making excuses for not seeking consent for my use of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage. I am not.

The Australia Council’s Writing: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Writing states: ‘Non-Indigenous writers should consult and seek consent where use of Indigenous Cultural Material and histories are made fictional’ (Writing: Protocols

¹ The same goes for magazines, cardboard stand-up figures, playing cards, iron-on transfers, erasers, pencil sharpeners, pencils, notebooks, stamp albums, and costumes.
Consent by both non-Indigenous and Indigenous writers is a priority. People wanting to write about Indigenous people should discuss their artistic ideas with Indigenous friends and acquaintances as well as consulting protocols. If the non-Indigenous writer doesn’t know any Indigenous people to consult with then that is a great reason to abandon the project (Pascoe in *Writing: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Writing*, 2007:10).

In my opinion abandoning the project was not an option. Therefore the problem presented itself, if I was to seek consent, from whom do I seek it? The Rainbow Serpent is a mythical being which is an integral part of Aboriginal Culture extending from the Northern Territory throughout Queensland, New South Wales, and as far south as Victoria. From which specific group would I ask? The answer is provided thus:

There may also be one or more groups that have custodianship of a story. Consultation with, and consent from each identified group should be sought. Be prepared to reconsider your project if consensus cannot be reached (*Writing: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Writing*, 2007:14).

Again this was not an option with regards to time and work already completed. In putting forward the differing positions on the subject leads me to the next point. I make it clear I acknowledge that I have used various aspects of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage – language, names, places, characters, and beings – in my creative component, *Serpent Dawn*, but that I have not sought the consent of traditional
owners. In not seeking consent I have made an “executive decision” on the grounds of the thesis as a research project, versus the possibility of it becoming a commercial entity. At this point in time Serpent Dawn is not a commercial entity and has an audience of myself as author, supervisors, and examiners. On the other hand, if it had been my intention to use Aboriginal Cultural Heritage in the fiction component right from the beginning then I would have had no hesitation in seeking consent. I do feel that I have walked a fine line and used the material responsibly and sensitively, as was my intention. However in future, if I was to embark on a course for publication of Serpent Dawn in any capacity which would present it to a wider audience, I would pursue consent.

The original Indigenous owners of any Aboriginal Cultural Heritage should be acknowledged. I thank the Indigenous owners and custodians for sharing the original stories and narratives from which I’ve drawn inspiration. I acknowledge that if I had not done this then the names/places/character names/mythological beings may have been interpreted as being invented by me, which of course they are not. When using Aboriginal terms I made sure, where possible with available sources, that the areas and figures that I used in Serpent Dawn did relate to the geographical areas in which they appear in their original contexts. For example Jiwarli Beach in the story is in the area that was originally inhabited by the Jiwarli people. The use of Aboriginal beings, such as Wulgaru, in this story therein is in no way meant to diminish their original form or contexts in any way. In lieu of consent I have, where possible with the resources available, compiled a comprehensive list of the sources/original texts and authors/owners from which I have been informed, and these are provided in the Glossary section.
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Perhaps some day Australian writers will use Aboriginal myths and weave literature from them, the same as other writers have done with the Roman, Greek, Norse, and Arthurian legends


Because of the differing capacities of rich and poor, and of human versus natural systems to adapt to climate change, some in the environmental movement are characterising adaptation as having acquired “a genocidal meaning”. By this they mean that a cosseted, wealthy few may survive climate change by retreating to some refuge, but the vast majority will inevitably perish…

Serpent Dawn
Part 1

Sydney – Summer 2060
Chapter 1

Screaming, rushing, howling wind pummelling the cracked windscreen, the straining chassis, of a black XC Ford Falcon plummeting down a sunset coloured highway. In the driver’s seat, Acka wears a forced, wind-whipped smile. Windows open, the windscreen creaks, glass on glass, and shatters. The rush of hot wind crushes Acka’s face almost flat, blowing out the rear windscreen, wrenching it away end over end to disintegrate on the hot bitumen behind. Eyes closed to slits, dust flying in her face, tiny rocks and glass shards sandblast Acka’s cheeks raw, hair streaming out behind her horror movie style.

Adorned with chaotic fingernail flames painted down the sides, the Falcon’s speed hits terminal velocity, the chrome bumper bars glowing white hot. A three pronged heavy metal soundtrack screams out of the car’s frame, simultaneously intermingled with overlapping graffiti yelling expletives swirling into Acka’s ears like infected water down a sink. Acka grits her suddenly sharpened teeth, one fang punching through her bottom lip, cutting her tongue as she runs the muscle over the calcium edge. Her eyes are shocked wide open, irises flipping, blinking neon green and purple.

Running on blood and bone the Falcon’s engine goes faster, paint on the bonnet bubbles, burning away to pure bare metal. The headlights turn on spontaneously and explode as the roof rips off, metal bird shriek, more paint searing away. Not even touching the road, now riding ethereal hell rails, the tires are on fire.
The Falcon likes it, all glowing white hot sheen. Acka runs a slipstream pipeline.

Arms stiffened straight, she digs her fingernails into the steering wheel, hard enough to go straight through the hardened plastic. The front panels rupture from their mountings in scrap iron screams. The plastic steering wheel melts over Acka’s hands. Searching for energy her arms extend through the dashboard panelling into the engine housing, wrapping around the smoking, oil covered motor, pulling it in to her suddenly stretched open mouth, metal scraping her teeth as she slides the engine down her gullet into her belly. Acka is the centre of a speeding galactic star, the life force, screaming primal.

The road drops away into the abyss of space.

She’s falling into the sun.

A solar tentacle lashes out, slapping her chest, but she doesn’t burn. The expanding sun is dying and wants her energy. Like an angry lover’s arms, more solar flares beat either side of this wounded Hellmobile. Smell of sulphur annoys Acka’s burning nostrils. The bonnet blows away in a twisted metal mess. Seats blow out through the boot into the void. The deformed car’s frame is now Acka’s exoskeleton. Inexplicably drawn on a super-heated torrent in the cold expanse of space, Acka speeds headlong, face first, into the roar of red, scalding orange, the vengeful pure white heart of the sun…

To the strains of a madman’s cackle and the sound of splashing fluid, Acka quickly drifted from sleep to wakefulness…

Could it be… rain?
Blazing sunlight coming through her open bedroom window was cooking her face. Sweat ran down the side of her head and neck, her hair all wet. Urine smell. Not rain.

Acka opened her eyes.

Stone, her older half-brother, was pissing on her pillow. And having a merry old time doing so.

*What the fuck?*

Acka jerked her head away, scrambling to the far side of her bed, against the bedroom wall. *‘What the fuck are you doing!!??’*

Stone, cock in hand, laughed again, swaying his hips side to side, spraying the last drops of piss over Acka’s pillow and towards her prone position. Quickly deciding the best defence was a good offence, Acka grabbed a dry section of her pillow, and swung the thing at Stone’s head. *‘FUCK OFF!!’*

He rocked backwards out of range almost losing his balance. Now fully on the offensive Acka jumped to her feet, the bed squeaking and rocking under the strain, and swung the pillow at Stone again. In a reflex action he grabbed the pillow and in doing so righted his balance, then wrenched it from Acka’s grip. He scowled and dropped the pillow, looked at his wet hand.

*‘Oh, shit.’*

Acka took the opportunity to throw a straight right punch which Stone fended away. She followed with a roundhouse left which clipped the end of his stubby nose.

*‘Hey?!’* Stone touched his nose, equally puzzled that she’d thrown the punches and that one had actually connected.

Acka threw another right, again fended away.
‘HEY?! Settle down!’ Stone cocked his fist at Acka and she flinched backwards. ‘What d’you think you’re doin’?’

‘Get the fuck out of my room!’

‘Don’t be like that.’ Stone put his cock back in his pants. ‘I could’ve pissed on your face.’

‘Fuck you!’

Stone shook his head in mock amazement. ‘I don’t get you, Acka. I could be your best friend.’ He made to leave the room then paused to inspect the picture that took up almost the entire wall opposite Acka’s bed – a scratchily designed sun in crayon, charcoal, and slashes of black and red paint. ‘What is that shit anyway?’

Truthfully, Acka didn’t know herself. She’d only just put it there a few days before on a strange spontaneous whim. She was certainly no artist. Maybe this sun was the one that had infiltrated her sleep, dominating her dream.

The sudden exercise had triggered Stone’s asthma. Pulling his asthma spray from his pocket, he shot a huge gulp, and clamped his mouth shut. Acka took her chance for an insult. ‘You look like you’re sucking cock when you use that.’

Stone raised his eyebrows. Really? Still holding the asthma spray in, looking at her straight faced, he turned and ripped Acka’s favourite poster off the wall. He finally breathed out, laughing, half arrogant smile on his angular face, an abstract grid of obtuse bones. ‘Mum wants you.’ Stone disappeared into the darkness of the hallway. He was always fading into the house’s shadows.

Acka’s heart returned to a normal beat. She mumbled to herself. ‘Fuck her too.’

In future she’d have to find a more suitable weapon than a pillow to have handy next to the bed. Or put a lock on the door. Or both. Stone’s little “prank” was
too close by far. At nineteen she already felt like she was being pushed into an early grave. The thought of having to turn her room into a pseudo prison cell, simply to keep Stone out, left her completely dejected.

‘Acka!’ Her mother’s voice pierced the walls like a banshee bullet.

‘What?’

‘ACKA!’

‘Are you deaf? What!?’

‘My breakfast!’

This was not the ideal way to greet the day. Would it ever be different? Acka wished perhaps, once, that she could wake to a different set of circumstances, to a house with no looming problems, something other than sweat, stink, sickness, and constant psychological and physical tussles. This slow death routine burned the life from her body, sucking out all her moisture, leaving her a dry riverbed. Acka wanted herself to be sucked out with that water and slip silently into the water cycle. Once again, as happened regularly two to three times a week, she’d awoken with a dull headache. When she didn’t wake with one she tended to develop one by the end of the day. The same thing happened with nausea. Her body was permeated with a fatigue that penetrated every bodily system. Sometimes it was just too painful, and too hot, to think.

Dora, her mother, coughed, a concrete grating on concrete hack that echoed up the hallway. Acka sighed heavily as she walked into the oppressively warm smoke and sweat drenched lounge room. The air-conditioner had broken down years ago and the heavy curtains were always drawn, leaving the room in perpetual darkness. Since being diagnosed with skin cancer Dora had developed a sincere and
sick fear of sunlight. She complained the sunlight burned her eyes and hadn’t left
their rotting carcass of a house for over a year.

All 146 kilograms of her mother’s blubbery stench reclined in a huge stained armchair. With such weight it was virtually impossible for her to leave the house now even if she wasn’t scared of sunlight, though Acka knew Dora hardly cared.

The triple screen TV in front of Dora blared the sickening tones of several “talent” search shows gone wrong. In contrast to Stone, Dora’s face was a series of overstretched ovals. On the surface there was nothing to suggest Dora and Stone were related. Maybe somewhere underneath the slack skin there was a resemblance. Acka thought the same of her connection to Dora and Stone, the surface relations sucked away by a hidden vortex under the skin. Only genetics held the truth of the family, if “family” it could be called at all. This was more a collection, a brace of acquaintances that just happened to collide, only to remain connected by ever thinning but seemingly unbreakable tendrils. Dora was smashing chocolate biscuits dipped in melting strawberry ice cream into her mouth.

‘Mum, you can’t eat that before breakfast.’

‘Why not?’

‘Yeah.’ Stone’s irritating, food-blocked, voice leached from the kitchen.

‘Why not, Acka?’

Acka ignored him. ‘It’s no good for you.’

‘It makes me feel good.’

‘She says it makes her feel good, Acka.’

‘Shut up, Stone!’ Acka yelled at him over her shoulder, more in hope than anything.

Stone mimicked Acka’s voice, badly. ‘Shut up, Stone.’
Acka shook her head in disbelief and focused on her mother. ‘You’re not well, Mum.’ Acka searched her mother’s grey face, charcoal black skin radiating from sunken eyes, double chin degenerating into a triple. Each day Acka saw her mother’s body slowly merging with the chair as she increasingly refused to leave its comforting reassurance. Her outline went fuzzy. Was a similar future buried somewhere deep in Acka’s genes? Would this be how she’d end her days?

‘I’m fine, I’m getting better. Anyway, what would you know?’ Acka’s mother turned back to the television. Dora’s thin, grey, unkempt hair was plastered sweatily to her forehead and Acka suddenly felt a great sorrow for her mother.

‘Would you like me to cut your hair for you? It’ll make you feel better. Cooler.’

Dora dismissed the offer. ‘My hair’s fine. I’m fine. If you want to make me cooler, turn on the fan. Oh… my bucket. Quick!’

Acka searched desperately as a strange animal gurgling emanated from her mother’s throat. The bucket was under the dining table. Acka jumped, snatched the bucket, and dove back to her mother just as she leaned to the right side of the chair and vomited a thick viscous stream of bile and former food into the receptacle. The acrid smell and the tiny drops of fluid splashing on Acka’s chest almost made Acka herself heave. No sooner had the last drops of sick fallen from her lips, Acka’s mother had returned her attention to the television. ‘Oh, look! It’s Correen. She’s my favourite.’

Stone lurched into the room. ‘She’s farcked.’ Small pieces of sandwich spat across the room as he spoke. A dollop of mayonnaise seeped from the corner of his mouth toward his chin. ‘She’s got nothing, Mum. She’s a dog! I wouldn’t do ‘er with yours.’
There was no denying that Dora thought the sun shone out of Stone’s arsehole. She wiped her mouth on a small embroidered handkerchief, dropped it in the bucket without looking. ‘I like her. She reminds me of me.’

Acka shook her head again, turned and tripped over the corner of Dora’s chair, bucket slipping from her grasp, contents splashing across the floorboards. Her mother’s response seemed impossibly immediate and harsh for one so unhealthy.

‘Oh for fuck’s sake, Acka. You fucking useless cunt! You’re a natural disaster. I don’t know how I had such a useless child. Must come from your father’s side, may he rot in hell. Hurry up and clean that shit up. As if it doesn’t stink enough in here.’

Acka mumbled to herself as she stood, not noticing Stone hovering behind her. ‘Yeah, and why does it stink so much?’

Stone responded unsympathetically. ‘Because you’re not doing your fucking jobs properly, that’s why.’ Stone hadn’t finished. He deliberately dropped the final fragments of his sandwich on the floor. ‘Clean the rest of the place up while you’re at it. No wonder she’s dying.’

‘I’m not dying! And where’s my breakfast?’

Dora’s and Stone’s invective continued while Acka cleaned the vomit and made the required breakfast. There was little food left to grab for herself. Acka would’ve much preferred her mother to be an alcoholic. At least then there might have been a “reasonable” excuse for her obnoxious behaviour.

Dora was running low on her medication and like all the other house chores, replenishing the stock was Acka’s responsibility. She never relished the idea of going out into the heat but circumstances dictated such necessity. Donning her neck to
ankle skin suit underneath her normal clothes, sunglasses and cap, Acka ventured outside and down her road, Wattlegrove Drive. The sunlight was so harsh that even minimal exposure now could cause skin damage.

Acka never looked back when she left the house. Looking at the place made her nauseous. Maybe she’d turn into a pillar of salt if she did. Acka sometimes thought the house mutated extra rooms, that there were parts she had never been to, had never seen. Furniture always seemed to be moving, in slightly different positions every few weeks. There were no free spaces or bare open areas the rooms were so cluttered with junk. The whole house exuded a darkened sense of claustrophobia…

The morning sky was tinged purple, the sunlight reflecting off the cocktail of contaminant particles that drifted in the lower atmosphere. The heat was unbelievable, and made her blame the inhabitants of the past, that their environmental neglect had allowed the situation to get so bad. Temperatures soaring over forty degrees stretched for weeks on end. The drought of South East Australia was now officially entering its eighteenth year with no relief in sight. As the drought interminably wore on, a generation of people, like Acka, had only ever known heat, and the ever-present desire to escape.

The houses in Wattlegrove Drive, including Acka’s, were all exactly the same in style, design and layout. In the past they were differentiated only by the blandness of contrasting colour schemes – beige, off-white, cream. Now they were distinguished by the degree of dishevelment, dilapidation, and the varying shades of the rust covered cars lying abandoned in the front yards. They were once the epitome of a spreading suburban landscape, the collective home builders’ idea of the perfect house, with similar angles that seemed to stretch into each other, small balconies with no access. Graffiti covered some sections of the house fronts, and a greater
portion of the potholed road, creating a sordid battle of curved and harsh edges. These houses with their dark coloured roofs became kilns baking their inhabitants to a brittle consistency. The severity of the drought had long ago dried the layer of clay beneath the dwellings causing the ground to shift. You could almost hear the symphonic atonal groaning of wood and brick, ready to split, crack, and disintegrate in a shower of capitulation. Acka passed two houses which had tilted into each other, a pair of contented drunkards laconically passed out on their way home from an all night bender. Overflowing rubbish bins, discarded car parts and errant pieces of electrical wire fought for pride of place in the bare dirt front yards. The hardiest weeds clung to a meagre existence in the cracked concrete of rubbish and dirt filled gutters.

Further down the road Acka saw the flashing lights of ambulance and police vehicles clustered around the entrance of “Haven 2”, the local gated community. The number two signified it was the second Haven Community built, about forty years before and this old dame certainly showed her age. As Acka approached she watched the emergency service personnel standing around meekly, absently, looking thoroughly confused.

Acka lent heavily on the Haven fence, peering through the hot bars, past the milling emergency officers to see two bodies, a man and a woman, lying on their driveway in front of their half open garage door, limbs twisted at obscure comic book character angles, the congealed blood from their head wounds pooled into blank vermilion speech bubbles. Acka didn’t recognise them. Did the murderer originate from inside or outside the enclave? The answer made little difference as the blood slowly baked itself to the concrete in the ferocious morning heat. Increasingly, the residents of gated enclaves were finding the pressures of their communities too much
as their resources ran short – not as short as the regular people on the “outside”, but enough. The pressure of having what others did not, and the mental, and sometimes physical, defences needed to keep them took its toll. Murder and suicide ensued on a weekly basis up and down the eastern seaboard, originating from within and without the enclaves. There was always a distinct possibility that the perpetrator of this crime came from within Haven itself, but the chances of an arrest and conviction were minimal, as was the case with most crimes in the area.

‘Know anything about this?’ A uniformed male officer had approached Acka from behind, a little too close. She could smell his strong coffee tinged body odour. Acka turned, giving the officer the once over. ‘Do you?’

Sweating profusely, the officer stepped into Acka’s personal space, hands on hips, monstering her. His face drooped everywhere, no hint of elasticity. He was a good head taller than Acka, broad shouldered, overweight. *How did he get so fat?* Acka could only imagine the number of kickbacks he must force on a daily basis. He lingered, looking straight at her, breathing heavily through his nose as one bead of sweat dropped from the tip. Acka stared straight back, stuck her chin out, and thought if she wanted to, she could quickly slip around him, pull his gun from its holster, and blow a big muthafuckin’ hole in his hanging gut. ‘Caught any criminals today?’

Unable to elicit the fearful response from Acka he wanted, the officer snorted, and walked away. Acka mumbled to herself as he went. ‘Cocksucker’.

Again Acka peered through the bars. The police and ambulance officers meandered around the bodies, pacing in odd angular ant-like directions. Acka fleetingly thought of her father. He had been stabbed seven times by his lover in an adulterous tryst in a deteriorating Blue Mountains motel. The “Do Not Disturb” sign
on the door strenuously respected, his bloated alcohol ridden body was left undiscovered for days. She, the lover, was found a week and a half later in a New South Wales north coast motel, remnants of overdose vomit covering her mouth and chin, evidence of several sexual partners strewn about the room. Explanations for their sex and death behaviour were lost forever, as her last pungent breaths gurgled over her dried, split lips. She, the lover, was a “victim” of a gated enclave, had lived in one all her life. The contingencies of the outside world were overwhelming and she had only coped through addiction. At least that was the story Acka’s mother had told her in various stages of aggressive rant when Acka was a child. ‘They deserved each other. I’m glad they’re dead. She was a slut and so was your no-good male progenitor.’ At the time Acka wondered what a progenitor was. When she found out the meaning of the word, she wondered where her mother had learned the term itself. She’d never heard her mother use such a specific word before or since. Finally she decided this usage could only have been an aberration, her mother probably meaning something different but inadvertently getting it right.

Nearby a group of various pre-teen and teenage adolescents with knotted mops of hair, dressed in dirty t-shirts, played cricket in the middle of the little used road seemingly oblivious to both heat and police investigation. Both usual occurrences, they held no fascination for the youngsters. The boys and girls had made makeshift cricket stumps out of old garden stakes shoved into a garden pot filled with sand. The bowler pitched his delivery short and the batsman hooked the rubber ball high into the air, landing on the bonnet of a police car, bouncing over the gated community’s fence, through the throng of tired looking professionals, and into an unkempt garden bed. The fielder chasing stopped short, unsure whether to continue pursuing. No adult picked up the ball. The boy hesitated, looking back at his
fellow players, then in the direction of the ball, the two parties in a strange kind of stand-off – lethargy versus indecision. The emergency personnel continued to ignore the boy edging closer to the scene.

‘Go on!’

The fielder bravely retorted, ‘Yeah. Good on ya.’

Seeing that this situation was unlikely to resolve itself, Acka strode unchallenged through the gate and retrieved the ball from under the bush where it lay, strode back out, and tossed the ball to the boy.

‘Just go in next time. What’re they gonna do?’

The boy shrugged. ‘Probably arrest me or something.’

At the intersection at the top of the street, where the New State Highway slunk its way north-west, Sienna, a girl of about sixteen, lent unsurely against a telegraph pole, smiling invitingly as Acka walked past. She wore a white cropped top, high heels, and a short denim skirt, her small but plump belly spilling over the waistband. The intense sunlight was already melting her badly applied make-up, her hair recently died a shocking blonde. Acka had seen Stone talking to Sienna several times and recently he’d been talking about his new girlfriend. Acka knew what this meant Stone had pulled her under his widening criminal wing. Poor wretch. Was she soliciting now? This early in the day? Acka didn’t think so.

‘If you’re waiting for Stone, he’s home.’

‘Oh, he said I’m not allowed to go to his house.’

‘Right.’
Stone had a long history of petty criminal enterprise, which had resulted in a juvenile record longer than both his arms, but surprisingly no actual prison time. His slate wiped clean on turning eighteen, Stone wasted no time in racking up more offences to his self-coined nickname. Of the sentences he received, most were suspended. Stone himself knew that he was really only rehearsing for the “big time” or what he assumed was the big time, and thus his run-ins with the law were a measure of getting to know the legal system and how to work around it. Of course, in his rampant stupidity, Stone believed himself to be smarter than just about everybody else he knew, and those he figured to have more intellectual property than himself, he chose not to associate with. As he often said, he wouldn’t want such wankerism rubbing off on him. His favourite saying was the tried and true, highly unoriginal, *tell someone who cares*. In his petty criminal mind he thought he was doing rather well, disregarding the fact that he was still living with his mother. Acka couldn’t remember a single time when Stone had done something that didn’t, in some way, benefit him. Stone had three ways of solving problems. Violence, serious violence, and shocking violence. He was the epitome of “big fish in a small pond” syndrome.

Acka left Sienna to her waiting game and continued her uneventful trek to the local pharmacy. She arrived panting even though the walk wasn’t difficult, approached the stern looking woman standing behind the counter, and pulled her mother’s crumpled prescription from her pocket. Loose change tangled with the paper sprayed across the glass topped counter, a few coins skidding to the floor. The pharmacy assistant sighed annoyingly and gathered the errant coins, meticulously, suspiciously, counting them while Acka placed the rest on the counter, nervously shifting from foot to foot. Actual cash money was considered the domain of criminals and the poor. Anyone using it was treated accordingly.
‘You’re sixty five cents short.’ The woman’s tone and posture told Acka that today was not her Compassion Day.

‘No, that’s right. It’s always that much.’

‘It’s gone up.’

‘It’s not for me. It’s for my mother. She’s dying. She’s on the benefit scheme.’

‘Sure, but it’s gone up. There’s a cheaper version.’

‘She won’t take the cheaper stuff.’

‘Why not?’

‘How should I know?’

‘Well, I can’t give it to you. We’re not a charity.’

Acka’s stomach growled loudly. Well, at least the woman now knew Acka wasn’t a criminal. She stared and the woman stared back. ‘You can try the medical centre. They might have stock at the old price.’

Acka scraped up the money and prescription and left. Even worse than trudging to the pharmacy was the trek to the medical centre, at least another twenty to thirty minutes walk. The centre itself was worse than the walk, filled with people who had one foot through death’s doorway, with the other about to follow in a damned hurry. She was contemplating the effort, divided over whether to wait until tomorrow when she was to receive her own benefits and could make up the paltry shortfall, when her phone rang. The caller ID read “Pussy”. She answered grinning, delighted, at least for the distraction.

‘Hi, Pussy.’

‘Acka!’

‘What’re you doing?’
‘I’m coming in to Sydney for the weekend.’

‘What’s happening?’

‘Harbour Festival. Gonna hit some clubs. How cool is that? You up for it?’

Acka sighed. Pussy asks the impossible. ‘Same old problem, Puss-Puss. No cash.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll get you in if you can make it to the CBD. Dad’s given me The Card.’

‘Really?’

Pussy giggled on the other end of the line. ‘Sort of.’

Pussy was good like that. You did have to put up with, well, just about everything, with her, but she was nothing if not generous with her father’s money.

‘Can you make it to Sydney?’

‘When will you be there?’

‘I’m over Uluru now, so… I’ll be in after… the sun’s down. Eight.’ That meant sometime between seven and nine.

Acka reached into her pocket and pulled out the funds assigned to her mother’s medication. The sunlight glinted off the coins as she rolled them around her palm. There was enough for the train journey, maybe a drink or two. Her social welfare payment was due tomorrow. Dora had enough medication till then.

Could she make it?

Acka thought she could.

At least half an hour, to an hour, extra had to be added to any Sydney rail journey since the system was so utterly fucked. Acka had endured the trauma of the rotting
railways so many times there was little she didn’t expect. Heat often buckled the longstanding tracks and then no trains came. Locomotives broke down and then no trains came. Sometimes, for no given reason, trains just didn’t come. Could Acka make it? Not if the decrepit New South Wales Railway System had anything to do with it.

As Acka knew it would be, the train journey was a nightmare. The Old Windsor line, the quickest route to Sydney, was closed for “short term maintenance”, whatever that meant, so she had to take the roundabout journey using the Arcadia line, adding at least an hour to the journey. The train was an hour late, two carriages short of the designated number, and packed to the rafters with passengers. Acka squished her way through all the carriages trying to find one that, at least, had working air-conditioning, only to find no respite from the stink of sweaty, compressed human misery.

She stood in the vestibule of the last carriage, one hand lightly grabbing a pole for balance, the same action as about ten others. More people boarded as the train got closer to Sydney. Personal space became non-existent, bodies so close they were impossible to ignore. Acka focused on a slender passage between passengers that allowed her to peer out a window that wasn’t covered with graffiti. Scenery flashed past outside – if it could be called that – the same scenery which she’d seen a hundred times before, and was no more encouraging than what was on offer inside the carriage. Decaying billboards with numerous layers of ripped posters, flaking, and sagging, created a union of obscene images, of rotting flat bodies, reflecting a devolving suburbia.

During the media termed “Rampage of Carnage” of the 2040s, the massive North-West N.S.W. suburbs stretching away either side of the snaking train line
experienced a dark carnival of bizarre violent, sexual, and sadistic serial crimes. The enormous homes became sepulchres harbouring terrible suburban skeletons. Whole suburbs went up in flames. In hindsight the riots, social confrontation, and defiance were explained as the effects of a class of suburban populace finding themselves on the losing end of economic circumstances. By the mid 2050s the drought was in full, destructive, swing. Those with the means to get out of Sydney did so, migrating to the continually booming North-Western sector of Western Australia around Fitzroy Crossing and Broome. The remaining populace in Sydney consisted of those who could afford to stay, and those who couldn’t afford to leave. Acka and her family were the latter.

Caught in this bleak daydream, Acka felt something brush against her thigh. Whatever it was, it was too close, and as much as she was able in the cramped space, she shifted her position away from the invasion accordingly. A few minutes later she again felt her leg being touched. The distinctive pressure of fingertips unmistakeably lingered too long. Again she shifted her position, disturbing a fellow passenger, resulting in a brusque glare.

Pulling out of Arcadia station the train lurched spasmodically forward, stopped suddenly, and lurched forward again. All passengers in the vestibule, including Acka, swayed back, forward, and back again. Most lost their grip on the pole. In their attempts to stay balanced and upright everyone’s feet became clamped under each others. The train continued its erratic motion removing any chance a person had of steadying themselves. With a floundering of limbs, a human avalanche crashed to the floor. Each passenger’s struggle to right themself was hampered by everyone else attempt to do the same. Acka found herself caught under several bodies, and felt a hand pushing forcefully at her groin, the fingers undeniably
pressing into her crotch. Her arms were shoved out to her sides, caught under the heap of people. The back of the man on top of her, had pinned her head sideways, obscuring her vision. *Would they just get off?*

The hand worked insidiously further towards its goal. Acka flailed and bucked at the pile of bodies as much as she could. *Hang on and take it easy* came from several sources receiving the brunt of Acka’s assault. The train lurched again and Acka cursed its antiquated arse. The extra movement had only helped the molester’s exploits, allowing the hand access to the waistband of her pants, pushing its way beneath. As her struggling increased so did the sounds emanating from her throat, a panicked, ‘Get off, get off, *get off!*’ she hardly realised she was saying.

Thankfully bodies above her began moving and the weight on her lessened. Whether through Acka’s ministrations or the threat of detection, the hand withdrew before reaching any place capable of being significantly violated. The thought though, was hardly comforting.

Finally Acka was able to jump to her feet. An apprehensive circle had cleared around her, everyone staring at her like she was a crazy person, waiting for a more brutal violent act to materialise. Acka stared back at the passengers, searching the faces of both men and women for the trace of guilty pleasure that signified ownership of her molestation. The search was in vain, met as she was with deadpan expressions perfected over years dealing with the insults, slurs, and offensive incidents that occurred every minute of every day in Sydney’s depressing, roasting, suburbia. Her body shaking, she wanted to scream primeval barbs at their indifference. She felt sick. They *made* her sick.

With no-one wanting to make a scene or engage with her in case she was indeed a freaked-out psychopath, the passengers made way for her as she crept to the
furthest end of the vestibule, next to the door that led to the guard’s carriage. The cleared area around her remained. She continued eyeballing the other passengers, making a few shift uncomfortably. Feeling safe enough that she wouldn’t be bothered, she broke off her gaze, leant against the door, and phased out, staring out the cracked and graffiti covered window.

A shanty colony had sprung up in the vast Macquarie Cemetery which three or four months previous had housed only the dead. Pieces of sheet metal, wood, sacking, and other salvaged material had been strung between headstones and mausoleums to create makeshift dwellings for a growing refugee population. The “real” shanties however, were located in Sydney’s Stadium District. The huge numbers of South-East Asians displaced by rising sea levels, meant Australia was a destination for those who took their lives into their own hands and dared to make the journey. Australian Border Security on the East Coast was overwhelmed. Some refugees even managed to sail brazenly into Sydney Harbour. Those who made it did whatever they could to survive and the open park spaces surrounding the Stadium District were too inviting to ignore. The demand for high profile sporting events in Sydney had almost completely diminished over the years. Once the first few refugees had set up camp, almost overnight the unused spaces of Moore Park became a huge shanty settlement which soon spread to the neighbouring little used and ill-maintained golf course, the area suddenly home to thousands of refugees. When police moved in to clear the site, the inhabitants defended their territory desperately in several bloody encounters over a period of weeks. When the bulldozers were ordered in to raze the scrapheap
dwellings, the residents simply rebuilt their structures overnight. Night after night. Eventually the bulldozers stopped coming.

As more refugees arrived at Sydney’s shores, the patchwork network of shanty settlements pushed further and further into the various semi-deserted suburbs, and now it seemed, their cemeteries. The tall, weathered, monuments of angels and Madonnas protruded above the makeshift roofs, a stony council presiding over the living of a new underworld.

Coming over the Harbour Bridge, the train was enveloped in the swirling coughed up lung of thick smog hung over the city, and created an impression of travelling into a permanent half-dusk. Though most pollution burnt off during the day, the remainder still left a terrible dirty smear across the city skyline. Acka sighed heavily, relieved to be near the end of her train journey, and prepared to leave as the train pulled into the harbour-side station of Circular Quay. The station wasn’t the closest to her eventual destination but she was just so desperate to get off. For Acka, the less time in the train the better. The other passengers peered nervously at her when the carriage doors opened, a palpable tension pervading the vestibule. With a reserved regard they pressed together to provide a path for her, like the Red Sea parting, so she could exit the carriage first. Still incredulous that she had been tagged dangerous, Acka departed as quickly as she could, looking at no-one, wondering at such pleasantries afforded to psychos.

The Quay Markets ran the length of the harbour levee walls from the western section of The Rocks to the former forecourt of the Opera House. The ten metre high levees loomed as a backdrop, a barrier to reality, holding back a tide of fluid anger and
bitterness chomping at the land. Acka knew the walls would eventually fall to oceanic rage, an appetite sated once and for all. Until then the populace would live in knowing ignorance of impending Armageddon.

The permanent makeshift markets served as a commercial and residential precinct for the refugee population. This was where the first refugees had congregated when they had nowhere else to go, their homelands ravaged by the climatic upheaval of rising sea levels. Soon the area became a thriving marketplace, always buzzing at any time of the day or night. Here was a strange bazaar of dirty smells and interweaving languages. The sounds of people coughing and hacking were ever-present. Face masks – homemade, makeshift and otherwise – were common. The quality of wares was average at best consisting mainly of pre-used and retro-fitted goods. For the majority of those who frequented the Quay Markets, it was the best they could afford. Too hot for people to come out during the day, from late evening till early morning was when most of the buying and selling took place, when the city came alive. People crawled like soldier ants through the cramped grey streets during the dark hours. You had to be on your guard, one hand on your valuables. Still, Acka could handle herself down here. She knew where to go and more importantly, where not to go.

Even though the Harbour Festival was on, the numbers on the streets would hardly increase. Most who came in for the few events of the type, like Pussy, wouldn’t set foot on street level. They’d make use of the enclosed skyrise walkways between buildings to frequent the clubs and shopping malls from the peace of their hotel rooms. For many of Sydney’s inner city high-rise residents the experience was the same. Every need was catered to at least thirty stories above street level.
Acka cruised past the stalls, and though she couldn’t afford anything, the vibrancy of the Quay raised her spirits and she found she was enjoying herself. She flicked through old car magazines showing the hotted up, petrol swiggers of the 1970s, affluence burning on every page. The curved features and simplistic engine designs fascinated her.

<You buy?>

She recognised the language as Deshi, an Asian dialect originating from Bangladesh infused with slang English, though she had no ability to speak it. Less a question than a command, Acka looked up at the woman, at her deeply lined features, red-rimmed eyes, slack olive skin. Acka shook her head. ‘Ah!’ The woman threw her arms in the air and spun away, disgusted at Acka wasting her time. She angrily brushed aside the canvas doorway that led to the residential section at the back of the stall. The heavy cloth caught on a chair next to the entryway allowing Acka to see into the private quarters. In the room were a number of people, who Acka assumed were family members. A woman, maybe in her late twenties or early thirties, sat on a simple cot rocking back and forth holding what looked like a small bundle of clothes to her chest. Acka knew the swaddling contained a child and by the look on the faces of the people gathered in the room, the child was dead. Every few rocks the mother would compulsively hold the bundle away from her chest to look at the small face. Each time she did so she winced, her body twitching like a great, sharp pain had shot up her spine, her head went back and again clutched the child to her breast. She began to wail so softly that Acka could only just hear her, a sound that came from the depths of the woman’s belly. Her mouth opened wide to try and expel the grief and pain but the slow violent suffering, pulling all other emotions underneath, refused to dislodge from her being. The other family members sat with
heads in hands, some rocking slightly like the mother, the room a prison of cruelty that would only release the occupants when the term of sorrow had been completely served.

An older man, maybe the father, or grandfather, the severity of lines and weathered skin of his face made the distinction difficult, noticed Acka’s interest and pulled the canvas curtain across the opening. The action nudged Acka out of her macabre fascination. She’d been staring at this intensely personal scene, one which she had no right to witness. Too late she realised the moment to apologise had passed. The man’s sorrowful eyes lingered in her vision as she made her way beyond the markets towards the Opera House and harbour viewing platforms.

The once picturesque jewel of the harbour, the Sydney Opera House, was a faded beauty which had been abandoned as a cultural venue. Bordered by the protective levees holding back the often angry harbour waters, the landmark had completely lost its charm as a postcard location. The distinctive sails were filthy and yellowed. Like sporting events, there had been little demand for concerts and high cultural events in Sydney for many years. The spectre of increasingly high maintenance costs had left the venue neglected and vulnerable. Used for a period as an administrative building, the finale came for the venue after a series of fierce storm surges cracked the icon’s foundations, allowing sea water to leak in to the lower recesses. Eventually the foundations of Dawes Point’s and its surroundings became unsafe and with reconstruction costs deemed prohibitive, the damage was stabilised and left for future governments to worry about. With barriers erected across the forecourt, the majority of the Opera House grounds were off limits to the public.

With the street level now below water level, viewing platforms provided the best vantage points for harbour views. The quick glimpse she managed of the
harbour from the train didn’t compare with the thing up close. Screwing up her nose as she mounted the final few steps of the viewing platform Acka was startled by the noise and the stink emanating from the water. Like the Opera House, Sydney Harbour had also seen better days. The brown, oil-slicked waterway bustled with Chinese junks and sampans. Around the edges of the harbour the water could hardly be seen for the collection of vessels. On the more open water and under the Harbour Bridge luxury yachts, cruisers, and houseboats, bobbed idly, somehow shielded against the wretched, people filled shore.

Almost immediately after she reached the edge of the viewing platform, she saw the skippers of two equally unseaworthy sampans arguing in wild gestures at each other for right of way as the boats headed for collision. One wore a black cap, the other of a faded dirty red one. Both believing themselves to be in the right, neither altered course, and too late the bows of the vessels, like their pride, crunched together, wood splintering and creaking. The black capped skipper’s engine chugged sick several times, then stalled. Nearby boats cleared a distinctive “no go zone” around the small conflict, knowing that something as simple as this could escalate into physical hostilities, something to be avoided at all cost for those not involved. The collision wouldn’t have been detrimental to a well maintained boat but something must have been dislodged or rent apart. The stern of the black capped skipper’s boat began filling with water. Unaware of the leak and intent on continuing to argue vehemently with his rival, the skipper leapt to the bow. Taking the angry barrage in his stride, the other skipper began to laugh as the conflicting weights in the black cap’s boat soon saw the flimsy craft buckle in the middle and quickly sink. The black capped skipper, look of wild surprise, flailed in the water, clearly not a strong swimmer. Acka was unsure whether she was about to, or able to, watch a man
drown. The sheer sides of the levees provided no purchase to get out of the water even if he had been adept enough to swim over to them. The red capped skipper was motoring away when several other boatmen around yelled at him, pointing at the man in the water. Seeing the other man struggling, he swung his vessel around, pulled alongside and still laughing, hauled the man on board, slapping him on the back, perhaps glad he had one less fisherman to compete with. As the boat chugged away past the Opera House the waterlogged skipper sat with his head in his hands. He was probably living close to the bone as it was and the loss of his watercraft could only adversely impact him and his family. Acka felt as sorry for him as she frequently did for herself, knowing that in this city, this state, even the smallest wrong decision, indeed mischance, could lead to the harshest consequences.

Like the boats on the harbour, people sat all along the top of the levee walls with homemade handlines and poles openly flaunting the harbour fishing ban. Acka couldn’t imagine eating anything that came out of these filthy, polluted depths. If the city of Sydney was a bodily wasteland then the harbour was its sick and ravaged heart, slowly dying under an enormous toxic weight. Would everything just stop when nothing could live in these waters anymore?

The Harbour Bridge itself had passed the test of time well, the great grey ornament being well looked after. Letting such a world-renowned icon fall in to disrepair would be akin to an Australian sacrilege. The fact that the bridge’s robust 1920s engineering meant that it could withstand just about any human or environmental attack and therefore needed generally nothing more than a continual coat of paint to keep it up to specification was a plus for any government. The murky brown water underneath the structure left Acka imagining the bridge as an elderly
woman, one foot stuck either side of a large and still filling puddle, defiantly holding her lengthy skirt up out of the mud.

Acka remained on the platform awhile trying to paint a picture of how the harbour had once been, like she’d seen on television. Images wouldn’t form in her mind. She couldn’t merge the two disparate scenes. Which one was reality? The water licked and splashed against the levee walls. How long before they couldn’t build them any higher? They represented a sort of wishful thinking like it wasn’t actually happening. The view was depressing and Acka left the platform, trying to take stock of some unfathomable loss that she couldn’t locate.

Once off the platform, she skirted the main thoroughfare of the markets to meander through Sydney’s streets towards the hotel at Darling Harbour where she was to meet Pussy. Bright red banners proclaiming the ‘Sydney Harbour Festival’ hung from streetlights at the Circular Quay end of Pitt Street where abandoned commercial buildings had become high-rise squats for thousands of people. There was little law enforcement could, or would, do, outnumbered as they were. The deteriorated building facades hid these hives. No space went to waste in Sydney unless it was heavily guarded by private security forces. Attempts to extricate the squatters generally ended in protracted standoffs that were eventually called off, the occupants successfully barricading themselves. One assault however was successful, in a manner of speaking. A group of building owners employed a contingent of mercenaries to seize their building in a precise military style operation. During the ensuing melee the building caught fire, killing hundreds of the occupants. The cause
of the blaze couldn’t be positively established. The building was subsequently demolished.

Sydney was humming, sending a buzzing, perhaps a warning, straight through Acka’s body. The rattle and ca-clack of cars, bikes, light rail systems pummelled her senses. Rippling, heavy blanket, heat came off sun-bleached buildings, the brickwork too hot to touch. Even in the shadows of skyscrapers during the day, the heat slunk its way between the buildings. White moisture collector wings jutted out from the roofs and upper levels of office towers like webbed hands held up to the sky, beseeching the flying machines passing overhead. Doubling as sunshades, the collectors caught dew in the mornings and rainwater on the rare occasions that rain fell, flowing to retrofitted water tanks in the buildings’ unused underground car parks.

The Sydney air was like walking through molasses, stagnating around buildings, a palpable weight that made shoulders sag and bodies stoop. The people on the street were like the buildings – harshly faded. By the time Acka reached Darling Harbour she felt like she’d been assaulted. Though she actually had been assaulted on the train, this was something else, like she had been continually pushed over, time and again. The city exuded a feeling of sickness and decay permeating Acka through her senses. The smell of pollution and rotting garbage in the gutters and alleys was a background presence that almost made her physically sick. Each time she came to Sydney she remembered why she vowed not come back again unless it was absolutely necessary. To Acka Sydney was a rickety system on the brink of shutdown.
The Miranda Apartment and Hotel Complex at Darling Harbour was nestled amongst the thirty or so similar hotels that loomed over the inlet. The building’s security guard stepped menacingly in front of Acka as she approached the entrance.

‘Name?’

‘Aurora Ackland. I’m a guest of Priscilla Oakley.’

He mumbled into his intercom headset, one hand to his ear. ‘An Aurora Ackland to be admitted.’ He waited a few moments, nodded his head, before turning to Acka. ‘No-one by that name listed. Move along please.’

Acka groaned inwardly. She didn’t need this. Pussy’s goddamn lax attitude.

‘Could you try Acka.’

The guard chewed gum, refused to look at Acka. ‘You had your chance. Move along.’

‘Had my cha…? What?’

Sweat trickled down the side of Acka’s face. She checked the credit on her phone. Enough for probably one call to Pussy. She’d prefer to keep it for an emergency. Oh well…

As usual, Pussy had underestimated the travel times and was still in the air.

Acka quickly explained the situation in full hearing distance, and view, of the security guard.

‘Just tell him who you are.’

‘What do you think I did? The guard’s an ape.’

‘Alright, leave it to me.’

A few minutes later the guard put his hand to his ear, nodded, and dawdled over to Acka. ‘Can I see some identification?’
Acka produced her ID. He took longer than was needed to inspect the credentials, checking both sides several times in tedious detail. At no time did he take one resting hand off his weapon. When he decided everything was in order, he inserted a new piece of gum into his mouth, gave Acka back her ID, and waved an indignant hand towards the door like he was king shit of ratfuck town. Didn’t even look at her once. Acka murmured ‘grunt’ in Chinese.

‘Hmm?’

If you didn’t know how to tell someone to get fucked in several different languages, at least, you could only expect average treatment from many quarters. In many of those quarters it was respected.

Acka smiled wide. ‘Thanks. You’ve been a great help.’

Pussy’s Sydney retreat was the basic one bedroom, one bathroom, one bed variety which her father’s money had provided. The view was nice and the fridge stocked with leftovers from Pussy’s previous weekend jaunts. Acka grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and flipped on the TV.

Pussy’s father had unexpectedly inherited a small fortune from a relative – the stuff of dreams – and like most people who had the funds, quickly moved his family to North West Australia. With the remainder of the windfall he set up his own real estate business with offices in Fitzroy Crossing and Sydney. The rest was history. He made a tidy sum selling homes to people moving from Sydney to “The Fitz” and then selling the vacated Sydney houses to “New Australians” – the wealthier refugees who could afford them. Ethical at its base? Perhaps not. Lucrative? Most certainly.
Pussy had always kept in touch with Acka although the physical distance had also equated into somewhat of an emotional distance. Acka wondered sometimes if Pussy wasn’t just taking pity on her poor friend, forgetting that only one small twist of fate had seen their paths separate.

Soon bored with the non-stop barrage of television reality shows, she’d had enough of reality, she ventured on to the balcony. A blasting hot stream of westerly wind and a stifling blanket of low level pollution greeted her. She shielded her eyes against the glare of the setting sun. A confused phalanx of helicopters, gyrodines, tilt-rotors, heli-planes and SkyCats emerged like ghosts into corporeality out of the hazy sky, drifting in on the scorching wind towards the Sydney skyline. Silhouetted against a purple-red sunset, a shimmering blood sun, the air vehicles looked like the hordes of war coming to wage battle against Sydney’s rusting defiance.

Pussy burst through the door like a whirlwind, throwing several small cases to the floor. ‘Fuck me, it’s hot! Jesus! What are you doing with the door open?’

Acka grinned, immediately forgetting the travails of the day. For all their differences which had increased since Pussy moved to the North-West, Acka always felt like she’d only seen Pussy yesterday. They hugged. ‘How was the flight?’

‘Good. Long. On auto most of the time.’ She tapped an earpiece. ‘Got some study in.’

‘What are you studying again?’

‘Same as everyone. Business and International Environmental Relations.’

‘Is it working?’
Pussy screwed up her face. ‘I dunno. Maybe. Thought I’d come in for the festival. Just wanted to get away for a couple of days before exams. The Showdogs are playing at Alienfetish.’ Acka hadn’t heard of the band or the club. ‘Do you actually know what the festival’s in honour of, Acka?’

‘Nothing. Never has been, as far as I know. I think there used to be something cultural way back. Now they just stick a bunch of banners around the place and have a midnight parade.’

Pussy feigned excitement. ‘Wow.’

‘Man, you hungry? I need food.’

Pussy ordered food and beers for them both and they munched out sitting on the bed.

Acka threw her clothes in the washer/dryer and jumped in the shower. She hadn’t bother to go home and get changed, just jumped on the train in her heavy boots, black army pants and dark green t-shirt over her skin suit and they, as well as her, stunk of sweat. As long as they were clean she should be okay. Acka had got into clubs wearing shabbier clothes than those. By the time she got out of the shower they were ready. Pussy however, was not. She had an elaborate process of getting ready that involved trying on several outfits several times and flinging unwanted pieces of attire across the room. It also included drinking shots of imported fortified wine. And she hardly shut up the entire time. Acka was treated to treatises on Pussy’s university course, her last several sexual partners, and generally how difficult it was being Pussy in today’s world. In a rare lull Acka managed to get a question in.

‘Why don’t you ever come to see me?’

‘What d’you mean?’
‘I mean, you come to Sydney but you never come out my way. Couldn’t you pick me up on the way in? At least I wouldn’t have to deal with the fuckin’ train system.’

‘Can’t. Zoning laws on flying and landing in residential areas. Anyway, it’s not you, Acka, but, like, you’ve gotta be kidding. Why would I go anywhere near those suburbs again? For one thing, they stink!’

Acka had to admit, on the hottest days, Pussy was absolutely correct. She lay on the bed while Pussy’s extended ritual continued, dozing dreamily as a sliver of sunlight through the curtains cut a slash across her face, a warm open wound in the otherwise sterile air-conditioned room. For these few moments she could pretend she lived a life free of a decaying house, waking in sweat stained sheets, and threats of violence. For this she was indelibly in Pussy’s debt.

Pussy had finally decided on an outfit, surprisingly plain in fashion though in inverse proportions to its revealing nature. ‘It’s what everyone’s wearing in The Fitz.’

Or not wearing by the look of it. Acka wasn’t so impressed. ‘Really? Are we ready yet?’

‘Not yet.’

Acka rolled her eyes as Pussy rummaged in her bag and pulled out a small plastic canister. She popped the lid and dropped two black pills into the palm of her hand, holding them out for Acka to see. ‘Juice. Had it before?’

Acka frowned. ‘Never heard of it before.’

Between two fingers Pussy delicately handed one to Acka. ‘Once you’ve had the black, you never go back. It’s synthetic. Not addictive. Just a lot of fucking fun.’

Not addictive, eh? Acka had heard that one before. ‘Why juice?’
‘You’ll see.’
‘Had it much?’
Pussy threw the pill in her mouth, swallowed it dry. ‘Heaps.’
Acka did the same.
Pussy smiled. ‘Now we’re ready.’

Pussy was keen on heading to Goldmine before Alienfetish. ‘Interesting don’t you reckon? Gold. Mine. Mine, not yours. Works on a totally selfish level.’ They took the enclosed air-conditioned Skywalk system that connected and criss-crossed the city’s high-rise buildings like a schizophrenic spider’s irregular web. These glass and metal aeries offered spectacular and safe viewing, effectively insulating the city’s rich and upper class hotel clientele from Sydney’s lower and street levels. Sydney’s twinkling lights turned the streets and buildings into a neon chandelier too garish for any hotel foyer.

There was another way of life “upstairs”. Shopping malls on the upper levels of buildings took up several floors providing all essential needs, services, and wants. Those who lived or worked on the upper levels of the city would be lucky to set foot on the street once every few months. For those with the money and privilege there simply was no need to do otherwise.

Following Pussy through the skyscrapers of Darling Harbour, then into the myriad of towering structures of the city proper, Acka became somewhat disoriented. She was sure they’d gone through a number of malls twice, although they all looked so similar she couldn’t be completely sure. When Pussy’s stride became more confident, Acka’s suspicions that Pussy had been lost too were confirmed. Soon the
pulsing yellow neon around Goldmine’s entrance fairly shimmered at the end of a corridor elaborately decorated like a goldmine from a movie set. The bouncer checked out Pussy, dressed to kill as she was, then skimmed Acka up and down, and scoffed to himself. He turned to Pussy. ‘You can.’ He jerked an indifferent thumb at Acka. ‘But your boyfriend can’t.’

‘Fuck you, grunt.’

‘Hang on, Ack.’ Pussy put a calming hand on Acka’s arm. ‘Why not?’

He laughed like it was too obvious to explain. ‘She’s a Burbie.’

Acka sneered while turning away. ‘Sei chun si futt lou.’

The bouncer pointed at Acka, while directing his question at Pussy. ‘What did she fuckin’ say?’

Pussy paused, arrogantly cocking her hips sideways. She didn’t actually know what Acka had said, so she made something up. ‘She said you’re a fuckin’ primate.’

The bouncer’s reaction announced he was none too thrilled at the insult. ‘Fuck off, kaya budak perempuan sundal. Now.’ He turned his back on them.

Little did he know Pussy knew Malaysian too, ‘Mak kau jolok diri sendiri sebab tu dapat anak sial macam kau!’

Pussy’s insult brought the bouncer back face to face with her. He stepped forward, eyes wide and menacing. ‘Hoatu poaka momona!’

Acka admired that Pussy was in no way intimidated by this dumb bull that was twice her size. Pussy had no idea what the bouncer said, so she changed language too.

‘Cac tao lo dit, cho cai!’

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† Chinese-Cantonese - Stupid asshole.
§ Malay – Rich girl slut.
** Malay - Your mother fucked herself and got a retarded child like you!
†† Maori - Fuck off, you fat pig!
Although increasingly amused at the exchange on her behalf, Acka realised
an escalating slanging match perhaps wasn’t their best option. It was her turn to be
the calming influence. ‘C’mon, Puss-Puss.’ She dragged Pussy away who continued
to spray the bouncer with invective.

The bouncer gave Pussy the finger as he watched them go before turning to
the next lot of waiting patrons, who were dressed no differently to Acka, whom he let
straight in, convinced of himself he’d won the battle.

Acka wasn’t a stranger to city clubs and therefore knew her clothes weren’t
the problem. The dress regulations depended on the attitude of whoever was on the
doors on any given night. She knew there was little chance of getting into these clubs
if Pussy wasn’t by her side. Pussy obviously had money, and she obviously didn’t.
She’d been before with Pussy and knew what to expect. Secretly Acka didn’t mind
that Goldmine rejected them. By the look of the place and most of the people waiting
to get in, Acka knew it was upmarket, meaning that Pussy was likely to garner a
grievous amount of attention from the male clientele, leaving Acka twiddling her
thumbs.

Completely riled at the way they’d been treated, Pussy suggested going
straight to Alienfetish. When it looked like they weren’t going to get in there either,
Pussy pulled out a trump card. ‘Do these faces look real to you?’ Of course there was
no way for the bouncer to know, and he stepped aside. Acka figured that bouncers
and doormen must just be pure egomaniacal psychos. Pussy was flustered. ‘Fuck!
What’s with these clubs tonight?’ She’d never encountered such static before.

Alienfetish was more Acka’s kind of place, if she had any kind of place. The
club’s fittings had the look of organic metal, sculptures of demonic cars emerging

\[Vietnamese - Eat my asshole, bitch!\]
from the walls, the strobe lighting making the patron’s faces alternatively angelic and evil.

They had a few drinks and caught up some more, as much as the loud level of music allowed. Acka noted the looks that Pussy was receiving from other patrons, men and women. She also noted that Pussy knew she was getting them but trying not to look like she knew she was. With your skin having to be covered in public because of the prospect of sun damage, a nightclub was a place where the display of flesh was almost mandatory, and in some cases, close to obscenity.

‘The Showdogs’ came on stage, immediately belting out a raucous tune. The female singer was tiny, the rest of the band towering over her. She wore a revealing outfit showing her lack of belly button. Her skin flashed with extensive tribal and dancing black light tattoos curling around embedded jewels, the idea apparently resurrected from a one hundred year old science fiction novel. At certain points it was hard to distinguish between tattoo and outfit the thing she wore was so tight on her frame. She’d had the full works – pointed elf ears, bone implants fashioned into tiny horns, and when she opened her mouth to sing, the end of her tongue was split, snake-like, and two incisors were shaped into tiny fangs. The woman captivated Acka absolutely, how unattached to her body she must be, yet determined and sure to become such an intimately designed moving sculpture, a walking installation, a shape-sliding, living canvas. What would it be like to be transformed so completely? Her wonder was disrupted when the Juice kicked in like wild brumbies stampeding across a river. Acka wobbled, bumping into Pussy’s shoulder. Pussy helped right her and smiled knowingly. ‘You too, hey?’

Acka nodded. Orange and apple smells had rushed seemingly from inside her nose out to the air. Juice. Right. She got it.
The female lead singer’s voice was doubled with a resonating sonic wizardry and sounded like an ethereal choir with soft thunder as a backing track. ‘C’mon do the snake, c’mon do the wyrm, c’mon make a fire, c’mon make it burn.’

Pussy started to dance slow on the spot. ‘I love this retro stuff!’

Each black clad band member flailed about in their own space, hair flying spastically. The bassist spun around, the headstock of his guitar just catching the singer on the ridge of her brow. Her head snapped back but she didn’t miss one word. The cut started bleeding immediately, flowing over her eye and onto her cheek, like she was crying sweat and blood tears. She shook her head and blood droplets flew over the audience. Acka could see every droplet catching the light intensely, spinning in slow motion in mid air like red poisonous bullets.

When the band finished Pussy turned to Acka. ‘Hey, Anielle says she can probably get us in to a Harbour Party, like on a cruiser actually on the harbour. It’s like a floating club.’

‘Who’s Anielle?’

‘I just met her in the toilets.’ Pussy pointed her out at the bar. Anielle looked like Pussy’s clone, right down to the striped fingernails. ‘She’s from The Fitz. Goes to my university too.’

The subtext was clear. Anielle could probably only get one other person in to the club. Two would be pushing it. With the Juice’s main high fading, Acka had no desire to get out on the harbour only to be turned away.

‘You go. I’m gonna go home, Puss.’ The look of relief in Pussy’s cracked saucer eyes, a look she was desperately trying to hide, told Acka she’d said the right thing, at least for Pussy’s sake.
‘You sure? Why don’t you stay over in the hotel room?’

‘Y’know, Puss…’ Acka wanted to continue, if you were just gonna ditch me…

‘What?’

‘I don’t really feel like going any more rounds with another tough nut security freak. I’ll be okay.’

Pussy hugged her. ‘I love you, Acka.’

‘Love you too, Puss-Puss.’

Pussy kissed her goodbye and Acka left the club, wandering through the walkways until she found her bearings and directed herself to Central Station. Once there she took a security lift down to the station proper.

The train home left on time, which early morning services generally did. The service was only full, not packed with people like earlier and there was little disruption along the way except for a crystal binger who freaked about forty minutes into the journey. The guy had started to cut himself up. Acka tucked herself up into her seat and hoped his attention remained on himself. Someone must’ve pressed the emergency alarm because the train came to a halt between stations. An off duty military ranger threw him off.

About half way home, the Juice finally wore off completely. Her lids heavy, Acka wanted to sleep but nodding off could only invite trouble.

Trudging down her road in the early morning she felt like there were ghosts marching shoulder to shoulder by her side, the eerie stillness broken by croaking cane toads. They scattered from her path as she crossed her front yard. Where the hardyfuckers survived during the day, she had no clue. Whatever. They seemed to be doing better than humans.
Chapter 2

Acka’s phone ringing brought her out of a restless slumber. Pussy.

‘Acka, is that you?’

‘Who else would it be, Pussy?’ An industrial dance beat thumped heavily in the background. ‘Where are you?’

‘I’m on the cruiser.’

Acka checked the time. ‘But it’s like, eight o’clock.’

‘Is it? Oh, yeah.’

‘You still going?’

‘Yeah. It just doesn’t stop here. Great, isn’t it? Say hello to Steve.’

‘Who…?’

A male voice came on the line. ‘Hi. Who’s this?’

‘It’s Acka. Who’s this?’

‘Steve. Pussy’s great, isn’t she?’

‘Yeah, I guess so…’

‘That was Steve. I just met him. He’s so gorgeous. I think I’ll probably fuck him later.’

‘Right. Can’t he hear you?’

‘Yeah, of course. Well, I don’t know, maybe. It’s pretty loud in here.’

‘What happened to whatshername? Anielle?’

‘Who?’
The girl who got you on the boat."

‘Oh, right. Dunno. Anyway, I’m on another boat now.’

‘Another…?’

‘Can you come out later?’

‘Hey? Pussy…’

‘Anyway, well, if you can, give me a ring. Don’t be throwaway. Gotta go. Bye.’

The line went dead. Acka tossed her phone back on her bedside table, lay back and stared at the ceiling. ‘Yeah, I got home fine. Thanks, Puss.’ Well, she had paid for everything, making it hard to feel too hard done by.

Acka ventured from her room to survey the familial situation. The door to Stone’s room was closed. This didn’t mean he was home. In the lounge room Dora remained asleep in her lounge chair. She rarely moved these days, preferring to sleep in her chair rather than make the effort to move to her bedroom.

Her Sydney interlude well and truly over, Acka went about the unenviable task which she’d shirked the day before. The temperature was hot, though agreeable and Acka wearily set off in search of Dora’s medication with a sense of deja vu. She’d had nowhere near enough sleep.

Police “Do Not Cross” tape sagged across Haven 2’s driveway entrance, the murder site now devoid of people, a shadow scene. The bodies had been removed. The bloodstains remained. The same kids played cricket on the road, still without any skin protection. ‘We’re immune!’ they told her, laughing.
Her first stop was the pharmacy which, again, was no use. They’d sold out of the drug since she was there yesterday. Acka tipped her head back and groaned. The trip to the medical centre couldn’t be denied.

The centre was always filled with the downtrodden and today was no different. Faces hung limply, eyes set back in their sockets, bags so black they had taken up residence under the eyes, the skin and sinews doing the least work possible to keep the starkly vacant orbs in place. In a sense Acka was lucky. Many had to make the pilgrimage every endless day. Most of the patients waiting couldn’t, or had no inclination to, hide large black skin cancers that were growing larger before the poor bastards’ eyes. At least the place was air-conditioned. Acka contended that many of the patients invented conditions just so they could “legitimately” sit in the cool of the building. Perhaps the cool air stopped them from dropping dead right there, or only masked the fact they were already dead. It wouldn’t have been the first time.

Acka registered her presence with the front desk and waited while they performed the several mandatory security checks. Half an hour later, medicine in hand, Acka left the Medical Centre strolling back into the heat feeling some small sense of achievement. She passed by a sunburnt park, the short, dehydrated grass somehow managing to cling to life. Still tired from last night’s partying and having no inclination to return home, Acka sauntered over to the lone gum tree at the park’s centre. Just as sometimes she spent hours on end lying in her room staring at the ceiling, now she sat with her back to the tree’s smooth bark and watched the sky, letting her mind roam free. The jaunt to Sydney had made her feel ill and depressed, highlighting what she didn’t have. While she coveted little of what she experienced, she realised she didn’t know exactly what she did want. The dancing and the club,
while enjoyable, left her with a feeling of emptiness. Was this emptiness created by
the experience or did the experience only highlight the emptiness? Either way, trying
to expunge that empty space by sweating it out or filling it with booze and pills was
geared towards transforming yourself for a shortened period. She could see how a
craving for the combination of these things, such a bodily experience, could become
a passionate addiction, a desire to change the empty space rather than find its
meaning. If she didn’t have to get the medicine to Dora, she would’ve stayed there,
in the moment, forever, staring at the ever morphing clouds in the blue windswept
firmament.

She closed her eyes…

…the image of the sun, ringed by a dark outline burned her retinas, a hole
through to the base of her skull. She felt herself floating through air and space,
falling, falling…

The ring around the sun contracted, pinching the sun’s volume in half, solar
flares exploding from the surface, fiery shouts of pain...

The ring twisted into the shape of a huge flat head, a sleek body uncurling
from itself. Acka fell towards the celestial cataclysm, the sun being crushed of all
power, and she saw this thing was a giant snake ready to swallow the sun.

She fell towards the sun, into the massive maw of the beast, a leviathan
swimming through the bitter blackness of the heavenly void, eater of worlds and
stars. As the sun’s flames lit the inside of the wyrm, Acka knew that she too, would be
swallowed…
...Acka jerked back to consciousness, body shaking. The sun had crossed the sky. She’d probably been asleep about an hour or so. Reluctantly she pulled herself to her feet, and made her way home.

Stone appeared in the front doorway as Acka made her way across the yard. ‘Acka! There’s something wrong with your mother.’

‘What?’

All he said was, ‘She stinks’, before heading back to his room, slamming the door shut.

Acka surveyed the lounge room. Hmm. Curious. The TV still wasn’t on. The TV was always on at this time of the day, even if Dora had lapsed back to sleep. The silence was disquieting. In her chair, Dora’s mouth was a slack frown, her eyes closed. Stone was right. There was a smell. It may have just been the damp, smelly chair, although as far as she could tell it seemed no filthier than usual.

Acka called out to Stone. ‘How long has she been asleep?’

Stone emerged. ‘What?’

‘How long has she been asleep?’

‘How the fuck should I know?’

Acka nudged her. ‘Dora?’

Dora didn’t respond. Acka nudged her again. ‘Mum?’

She checked Dora’s pulse, squeezing hard through the thick fat around her wrist. Nothing. The situation looked grave. A fly crawled over Dora’s dry, cracked lips. Acka raised open one of Dora’s eyelids. The eyeball underneath stared vacantly ahead. Acka let the lid drop and stepped away, at once shocked and relieved.
Sometime after Acka had gone out yesterday morning, probably soon after, Dora had died.

Acka then noticed the pool of liquid forming under Dora’s terribly swelled feet, and she inspected closer. The excess water retained in Dora’s bloated body was pooling in her bare feet and seeping out of her skin, slowly trickling onto the floor to produce a slowly expanding wet stain, also accounting for the smell.

‘What’s wrong with her?’

Acka sighed. ‘She’s dead, you fuckin’ idiot.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I said she’s dea…’

Stone stepped so monsteroingly close to Acka she could feel his hot breath.

‘Call me an idiot again, ya stupid slut! C’mon!’ All muscles straining, Stone raised his fist. ‘Think you’re so fuckin’ smart!’

Acka quickly moved out of punching range and pointed to Dora. ‘Jesus, Stone. She’s dead. There’s water coming out her fucking skin!’

Stone calmed down a few percentage points, glanced at Dora’s body, accepting this thin slice of reality. ‘Yeah, well, it’s not like it wasn’t gonna happen. Probably died of shock after lookin’ at you one too many times. Did you get her medicine?’

‘Yes.’

‘Not bloody quick enough apparently.’ He sniffed heavily. ‘It’s on your head, this.’

‘On my hea…!?’ Acka shook her head. ‘Christ…’

Stone’s eyes widened. ‘Oh, fuck!’

‘What?’
He looked at the floor, searching his mind. ‘Fuck. Fuck!’

‘What?’

‘No more Dora. No more benefits. Shit!’

That was Stone. Always the fucking monetary pragmatist, especially when the lack of funds related directly to him. He did have a point though. Dora’s medical pension paid for most of the rental expenses and her medication. The only money Acka had for herself was the scrap change left over from her governmental Living Wage after the other household bills were paid. Stone didn’t pay for anything, ever.

‘You’d better ring someone to come get the body.’

Stone pulled a disdainful expression. ‘I’m not doin’ it. She’s your mother.’

‘She’s your mother too!’

‘She’s your mother last. This is a mother-daughter thing. Don’t talk to me about it.’

‘Well I’ve got no credit on my phone. Can I use yours?’

‘Are you fuckin’ kidding? Jesus, Acka. You’re a fuckin’ trip.’ And with this dismissive comment, Stone left Acka alone with Dora’s corpse.

Acka didn’t feel anything. Was it simply numbness? Stone was right on another account too – she was going to die sometime.

Acka pushed down the pangs of guilt as she stared at Dora’s body. But what of respect for the dead when the dead had no respect for you when they were living? Even in death Dora caused problems. She shouldn’t be thinking that way. Was this her mother or was it not? Her body was now a strange uninhabited mass, a housing which no longer produced. Her presence, albeit not consciously, had cast a strange protective barrier between Acka and Stone. The further Dora slumped into her sickness, the thinner the barrier became. Acka knew, though hoping in denial that it
wouldn’t come to fruition, that her mother’s death would inevitably lead her down a violent path not of her own making.

Stone’s crew cut hair made his head look like a box. A sheen of sweat graced his forehead. There were some people, no matter the heat, who seemed to be unable to perspire. Stone was not one of these people.

‘Acka. I’ve solved our problem.’

*Our problem?* Acka didn’t think they had any problems Stone could solve, aside from Stone himself. Had he decided to commit suicide? ‘Yeah? How’s that?’

Stone spread his arms like a magician finishing an elaborate conjuration. ‘We won’t tell anyone she’s dead. Money just keeps comin’ in.’

Acka was incredulous at his shallow idiocy. ‘How’re you gonna access the money? She approves everything by voice phone.’ Stone furrowed his brow, confused that his phantasm had suddenly disappeared. ‘I thought you were a businessman, Stone.’

On Acka’s comment Stone’s eyes suddenly lit up with what he thought was probably the best idea he’d ever had. He clicked his fingers.

‘Even better. Fuck her. You’re gonna *work* for me.’

‘Need a bookkeeper, do you?’

‘Don’t be a slut. You’ll work for me. I need another income stream now.’

Stone saw Acka with new vision. ‘And you’re it.’

His words quickly dawned on her. ‘No way. No *fucking* way!’
Stone towered over her, muscles immediately clenched, forehead veins popping, sweat dripping. ‘How else are you gonna make money? You fucking are or I’ll fucking kill you. Got it!? Be ready.’

‘What am I supposed to do?’ Acka stunned herself that she’d even asked the question.

‘Do I have to think of everything? Use you’re fuckin’ imagination. You’re fuckin’ stupid, Acka. Remember that. Stupid and nothin’. The sooner you do, the happier you’ll be.’

This was bad. Her mind raced. Acka needed time to think of a plan. She pointed at Dora, blissfully dead, now a landing terminal for circling flies. ‘What about her?’

‘That’s your job. I’m goin’ out and she’d better not be here when I get back.’

‘How long will you be gone?’

‘Get fucked.’ Stone stormed out the front door trailing black clouds of angst.

Judging by Stone’s complete lack of concern for Dora, Acka’s theory that Stone was capable of anything was playing out, with her at centre stage. With the thin leash that connected Stone to Dora now severed, his moral system was crumbling by the minute. It wouldn’t be long before he started indulging his most selfish and despotic traits. For all Stone’s intimidation, there was no way Acka was going to succumb to prostitution. “Yes sir-ing” and “no sir-ing” to Stone would be completely fucked for a start and somehow seemed worse than providing her body to his filth-ridden client base. Thoughts of violence flicked through Acka’s mind – an image of her standing over Stone’s body saturated with blood and multiple stab wounds, a huge kitchen
knife dangling from her fingers, her blank face splashed by an abstract expressionist’s bloody brush. A wishful scene of Acka’s for sure, but in reality such a conflict could have only two outcomes – Acka and Stone’s places reversed, or Acka being taken away by the fat cop who’d menaced her the day before to spend the majority of her life in prison. Surely Stone wasn’t worth that.

The question remained, what was she going to do? Her few friends in the suburbs were all in the same situation as her, living on government subsistence monies, waiting for a job to come up. She really couldn’t rely on any support from that quarter. For all her dire circumstances, the fact was, she didn’t want to stay. There was no reason to. And deep down, through all the to-ing and fro-ing this was an opportunity to get out that she had to take. Wherever it led her.

She checked the time. If she was lucky, Pussy might still be in Sydney.

Having no credit on her phone, Acka swiped Dora’s phone from her dressing gown top pocket, hoping it wasn’t code-locked. It wasn’t and she sighed with relief. She’d known all along where Dora’s phone was but didn’t want to use it in case Stone immediately took it for himself. He’d keep it for sure. The phone took her body senses and empathed her verbally while she punched in Pussy’s number.

– *Your pulse is running at 100 beats per minute and you’re pheromone levels are in the high range band. This means you’re really stressed at the moment.*

‘I fuckin’ know that.’

Most phones were great if you could afford all the extra features. Somehow it seemed Dora could afford this one. Why she needed the function Acka could hardly wonder.

– *Take deep breaths to help slow your pulse rate and calm yourself down.*

*You’ll feel much better.*
‘No time for that. Thanks anyway.’

– Do you want me to remember this number?

‘I don’t care.’

Acka paced the room, sweating on each ring, uncomfortable asking Pussy what she was about to ask. She turned and caught sight of Dora’s slumped form. The smell smacked her, getting worse by the minute. In an hour it would be vomit inducing.

A mountain of background noise roared on the other end of the phone.

‘Hello?’

‘Pussy, where…’

‘Acka?’

‘Yeah, it’s me. Where…’

‘Hang on. Can’t hear you. I’ll dampen.’

A few seconds later the background noise dropped to a minimal level.

‘Acka? This isn’t your number. What’s up?’

‘Dora died.’

‘Really? Was she that sick? I knew someone who died once. I think it was my uncle…’ Pussy always needed to somehow relate occurrences back to her. ‘Hey that’s too bad, Ack.’

You’re not fuckin’ wrong. ‘Pussy, I sort of need to get out of Sydney.’

‘What for?’

‘Dora died, Pussy.’

‘Didn’t you just say that? That’s your mother, right?’

‘Yeah.’
'I don’t get it. Wouldn’t you need to stay in Sydney if your mother died? I mean for all that after death stuff.’

‘Look. I just need to get out. Where are you?’

‘I think I’m about over Broken Hill or somewhere. No that can’t be right… Hang on… I should be further north than that… yeah, I am. Not sure of the exact location…’

‘What? But when you rang earlier you were still going?’

‘Yeah, I know. I hit the wall not long after. Just completely slumped.’

Acka groaned inwardly at Pussy’s capitulation and kicked the floor. ‘Shit. I was hoping you were still here. Or at least somewhere close.’

‘Why?’

‘I need a lift.’

‘Where to?’

‘Away from here.’

There was a short silence as, Acka guessed, Pussy put two and two together.

‘Acka, sorry, babe. I’d like to help. I would. But it’s really, sort of, difficult, like, I can’t turn around. I’m late as it is and anyway. And there’s not really any room in the gyro. It’s only a one-seater. Plus Dad checked the Card and he’s blown himself a new one. You could say I’m deep in it. Why can’t you stay?’

Acka put one hand to her forehead, closed her eyes trying to gather her thoughts, her resolve. She sighed heavily. ‘Fuck. It’s Stone.’

‘Your brother?’

‘Half brother. Yeah, he’s… fuck. Dora’s dead and he wants to fuckin’ pimp me out.’

‘What!? Why? He wouldn’t. Would he?’
‘He would.’
‘You sure?’
‘Pretty sure.’
‘That sounds fucked. What’re you gonna do?’

Acka’s heart sank straight into the dust. ‘I gotta get outta here. Will you be back any time soon? I mean like in a day or so, maybe?’ Acka realised she was asking this was question in vain.

‘I’ve got exams for the next couple of days, at least, I think I do. And Dad says I can only keep the Sydney apartment if everything else is, y’know, in order.’

‘Shit. Don’t you just pay someone to do them anyway?’

‘Yeah. Mostly. But I have to make it look like I’m actually doing it. You can come and stay with me if you can get to The Fitz.’

The impossible. Once again Pussy suggests the impossible. ‘How am I supposed to do that?’

‘There must be some way. I dunno. Train? I’m really ripped at the mo’. I’ve put the autopilot on. You just caught me. I was dozing off.’

‘Oh, man. This is fucked.’

‘He won’t follow through, will he?’

‘He’s one mean, stupid individual, Puss.’

‘You’ll be okay. Just get out of there. Come and stay with me.’

‘Yeah, thanks..’

‘What can I do, Acka? Like you said. He’s an idiot, right? He’s probably just, y’know, tryin’ to be a man or something.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Sorry. Anyway hope you make it to The Fitz.’
‘Thanks.’ She clicked the phone off, knelt on the floor next to Dora. ‘Fuck.’ Smashed her fists against the stained carpet. ‘Fuck! *Fuck!* *FUCK!*’

Acka seethed at her mother’s corpse. *This is all your fault.* The corpse mocked her, a flash image of Dora leaping to her feet, black eyes smoking, screaming in Acka’s face. *Like hell it’s my fault!*

‘*It is your fault. It’s all your fault!*’

Would it be better if the house’s creaking, cracked walls fell in on her, ending her misery right then? She heaved a massive sigh, the house never felt hotter or more oppressive.

The impossible. How impossible? Was getting to The Fitz that impossible?

Acka’s meagre funds were nowhere near enough to get her to Fitzroy Crossing by any transport available. She raided Dora’s room and belongings for anything of value, finding nothing except tacky jewellery and loose change. Unknown to Acka, Stone had hocked all Dora’s valuables long ago. The only thing of value Dora seemed to still own was her phone and Acka already had that.

The only person in the house who had any money was Stone. There was no denying what she had to do if she was going to leave. Desperate circumstances require desperate measures. If she was going to do it, it’d have to be soon. Sooner than soon. *Right now.* Any later and it might be too late. She might never get out. Stone might finally make good on those threats. He could get his mates too… that wasn’t worth thinking about it.

If the impossible was needed, then the impossible she had to deliver.
Stone’s room resembled a pornographic napalm explosion. Cut up pictures of breasts, crotches, and the fragmented faux-inviting faces of a thousand forgotten porno-starlets, many whose careers had ruptured like bursting acne, were plastered all over the walls. These stylistic shards of nude and semi-nude celluloid celebrities were a testament to years of teenage angst ridden fantasy. In certain parts of the walls, using body parts cut from different sources he’d created several “perfect” porn queens. The results was more franken-porno creations, each part considerably out of sync with the others, like store mannequins haphazardly thrown together. Acka was momentarily stunned at the homemade wallpaper. She hadn’t contemplated the “artwork” before but the time taken to create this wall of glossed flesh, this obsession, was commitment shown in spades. A squiggle of black lines on his pillow was the signature of a semi-famous porn actress. Weren’t they all semi-famous?

The question was where to start? The room reflected Stone’s headspace – cluttered, filled with trinkets of small meanings, an upended junk box. No place immediately presented itself as holding a treasure trove of valuables. When after a few minutes she’d only uncovered a few stray notes she began to dread that Stone most likely kept the bulk of his money on his person. Then she heard Stone talking on his phone, coming through the front door. Her blood froze. Christ, he’d hardly even left.

‘I’ve got me own problems. Yeah. Get over here anyway. Now.’ He strode into his room to find Acka with her hand in the proverbial cookie jar. ‘What the fuck…?’ Stone didn’t need to answer his own stunted question. He simply launched himself at Acka, hands hunting for her throat. ‘Tryin’ to fuckin’ rip me off?’ Saliva sprayed her face as his bulk slammed her backwards and they both toppled to the floor, all floundering limbs. Somehow she managed to break his grasp and push him
away. She scrambled for the open window getting her head and torso out before
Stone recovered, grabbing her by her pant waistband and dragging her back through
the opening, knocking paraphernalia from the window sill and nearby dresser in the
process. He flung her onto his bed, the joints creaking under the sudden weight and
followed through with a steel-capped boot to Acka’s left thigh, immediately sending
the area numb. She bit her lip in pain.

In the midst of the fray, breathing heavily at the sudden exertion, Stone found
some pocket of negotiation, or his attempt at such. ‘C’mon, Acka. You know I’ve
always liked you, even if we’re not full blood family. You know I’m always lookin’
out for ya. Why would ya want to go and do somethin’ like this to me? After all I’ve
done for ya? Now put my money back, and I won’t hurt you.’

If Acka knew anything, she knew that statement was a lie. Stone’s fists
clenched and unclenched like they were pumping pure gold rage through his arteries.
This man that knew no containment was trying to contain himself, his insides ripping
themselves apart to get at Acka, wanting nothing better than to exercise considerable
violence on her slender frame. It was hardly appropriate to tell him she’d hardly
found any money yet.

Looking at Stone in that pure restrained moment of his anger, Acka felt the
rushing sensation, the point of knowledge that Stone was hollow, harbouring a need
to grab and pull everything into himself, to dominate, to fill the void. It was a need
that punctured things and sucked out the essence. Acka knew that this was an
affliction, and for that moment she felt a depthless pity for her half-brother. Whether
Stone noticed Acka’s subtle pitying expression, or was just fed up waiting for an
answer, he mounted another attack. He leapt on top of her, his body bearing down,
hands clamped around her wrists. ‘Don’t be a stupid bitch. I’m offerin’ you a chance
here. Maybe one day you’ll have your own set-up.’ Yeah, that’s what she wanted to be. Bordello Queen of King’s Hill. ‘What else you got? Where you gonna go?’ The creases in his forehead were an amazingly pronounced pattern of arches. ‘I don’t wanna hurt you, Acka. But I will. You know I can…’

Stone’s iteration of those words made her physically sick, like he had more on his mind than just beating the daylights from her. The fear of rape, whether by him or his so-called associates, struck her like ice-covered knives. Their thin family ties had just been severed, like rotted pieces of dangling meat.

Acka proceeded with her only remaining option. She relaxed her arms slightly, causing Stone to momentarily lose his balance, his body dipping towards her, and at that point she smashed her knee into his groin with as much force as she could produce. Stone’s eyes bugged out and he expelled a double cough gust of air. Amid rasping groans he collapsed on her. Acka rolled him off her onto the floor where he lay incapacitated, hands gingerly holding his crotch. She was actually tempted to do the world and herself a favour and continue kicking him to death while he was down. Instead she had a sudden attack of inspiration. She pulled Dora’s medication from her pocket. What the sedatives and painkillers would do she didn’t know, but it had to slow him down even further, right? With a surging pleasure she plunged two of the disposable needles into Stone’s back. Stone’s eyes rolled back into his head.

Fuck it.

She stuck him with another. He fell limply to the floor, a pile of wet towels.

Shit.
What if she’d killed him? Suddenly her inspired thought wasn’t so inspiring. She comforted herself to some extent by deciding that if she hardly knew where she was going… how would the cops?

She realised by his statement that there must actually be a decent amount of money somewhere in the room. He’d inadvertently given himself away. She spent the next few minutes rummaging through Stone’s scattered possessions, hitting the jackpot in the sock drawer where at the back was two football socks stuffed with cash which surprisingly went into the hundreds of dollars. Certainly more than she’d expected. His wallet had surprisingly less cash than she’d expected but took the combined amount close to a thousand dollars.

*The selfish fucker.*

On her way out she nabbed Stone’s heavy black combat vest too. It was too big, but she’d always liked it.

As she left the house she heard a low groan emanate from Stone’s room, a phantom signalling its continued existence, in some small way leaving her relieved that she hadn’t killed him. With only the clothes on her back, she hobbled up the road, her upper leg aching terribly. Acka once again came upon the group of street cricketers playing in the middle of the road. ‘Hey guys.’

‘Hi, Acka,’ they answered in unison, voices flat. The repetitive nature of their daily game was an escape, deflecting any thoughts of present difficulties, even for kids.

‘Hey, if you see my brother coming up the street, you know him, he looks like… like a muscle man, box-headed type of guy, with a short haircut, ask him if he wants to play. He loves cricket. He’ll probably say no to start off with but keep asking him. Don’t take no for an answer. Ok? Sometimes he’s a bit shy.’
The kids had found their challenge for the day. Their faces brightened at the prospect of a new player injected into their game. They all nodded. ‘Okay.’

‘Thanks. And put some hats on!’

Even though she dreaded the thought of another train journey so soon, it was her best bet to get as far away from King’s Hill as quickly as possible. She checked her watch and hoped to God the hourly service was running on time.

It wasn’t. The empty tracks stretching away into the near distance mocked Acka’s escape. She cursed her cursed existence, pacing the degraded station platform, constantly checking the time and for any sign of Stone. By now the associates Stone had commanded to the house would’ve arrived, if they were vigilant. Most of the time, they weren’t and Acka was relying on that ingrained apathy. Either way the longer she waited, the longer Stone had to recover, the longer she had to imagine what they’d do to her.

She waited and watched, kicking pebbles, breaking twigs, biting chunks from her fingernails, brushed bothersome flies from her face.

Stone’s unmistakeable outline appeared at the corner of her street.

Her heart jumped.

*Shit.*

With a strength fuelled by humiliation and rage, Stone had recovered enough to literally drag himself from the house. Thoughts obviously unclear, Stone hovered back and forth at the street corner, unsure in which direction to proceed, Dora’s medicine obviously still having a noticeable effect. Horror movie thoughts ripped through Acka’s mind. It would only be a matter of time, even in Stone’s blurred state, before he worked out the train was her only escape route. She was trapped
again. If she left the station the train might arrive and she’d be stuck for however long until another came. Staying put meant risking another confrontation. Heat shimmers rose from the vacant track, happily mocking her.

Body lurched to one side, his asymmetrical zombie gait parading the effects of Acka’s medicinal attack. Stone made up his mind and stumbled towards King’s Hill station. Acka clenched her fists anxiously as she watched Stone edging closer.

 Fuck this. This couldn’t be happening. Not when she was so close to leaving.

Stone reached the stairs to the station overpass. His legs refusing to properly respond to the task of ascending the steps, he latched both hands onto the railing and doggedly pulled himself along, the strain evident on his sweating, red-faced features. Acka could see the pained look of determination, the white anger smeared across his face. She moved to the point of the station platform farthest from the overpass. Unfortunately Stone spotted her as he peered from his perch slumped against the railing and pointed directly at her. Emphasising every expletive, his voice revealed levels of humiliation and fury even Acka found disturbing.

‘ACKA! You cunt! Come here! You’re fucked, girl!’

The eyes and heads of waiting passengers turned to Acka. She shrugged, frowned, denying all knowledge.

The hum of the overhead train wires indicated the approach of her much maligned transport, now her saviour. Acknowledging his chance of revenge was slipping away, Stone picked up his pace only to have one leg fold under him, leaving him looking like a career drunkard, his straining arms clutching the railing the only things stopping him from hitting the ground completely. With a great effort he pulled himself upright again and staggered at an awkward rate down the stairs to the platform. ‘You are fucked, Acka!’
The train pulled in and Acka crowded in to the carriage. Stone lost sight of her. The doors took an eternity to close. Acka agonised over every second they remained open, expecting Stone to have suddenly overcome his malady, burst into the carriage with cyclonic brutality and drag her screaming back to the house, knowing no-one would lift a finger to stop him.

Finally, thankfully, with their electronic signal and release of air, the doors closed. Acka continued to hold her breath. Had Stone entered another carriage? She dared to press her head to the glass and look out. Stone remained on the platform, breathing heavily. He caught sight of her as the train moved away, hitting the window from which Acka peered stone-faced with the edge of his fist as the train pulled away.

‘You’ll be back, you slut!’

There was no use in gloating. What was to say the train didn’t break down fifty metres up the tracks? She was strangely impressed at Stone’s dogged pursuit and tenacity about the whole affair. What could be driving him? She couldn’t be that important to his criminal plans. Was he reticent, even scared, about the thought of post-Dora circumstances? At the thought of being alone?
Chapter 3

Acka had been on the train heading west for about forty minutes. The locomotive’s sensor-sweep to make sure the rails were free of foreign objects, people crossing the tracks, or hadn’t buckled from the heat meant it was only crawling its way through Sydney’s western suburbs. These suburbs clinging to the Western train line were more run down than King’s Hill. The grimly smiling facades of the Western Line’s major stations were dirty, fake jewels attracting the populace with false promises of a fortune hidden beneath the surface. She breathed a sigh of relief that the train wasn’t making any stops at these stations. The slums – there was little else that they could be called – on either side of the tracks must have been decent districts once. Now the houses and streets were in dilapidated states, covered in makeshift repairs. Rusted cars lined the streets. A silent air of failed prosperity permeated the sagging roofs and fissured bitumen. Once a dream, now a nightmare, the scene resembled a torn and sullied carpet. She was struck by the thought that there was even less hope here than for those living in King’s Hill. The structures, roads, the whole system seemed to have organically devolved to a state where leaving was warded against. Was this the future for King’s Hill? Then again, did she care? Acka knew then her quick-fire decision to leave Sydney, even in such forced and twisted circumstances, was correct. There was no use reckoning with the dying that danced blindly on Sydney’s emaciated corpse.
In a gift from the gods, the train journey in to Sydney, her second in two days, was uneventful. Pussy’s offhand suggestion was prescient. With her minimal funds, Acka couldn’t afford passage to The Fitz either by plane, gyro, or HULA. She’d come to loathe the rail system over the years but without any other means of departing the city, a cross country train journey was her only option.

Four car trains of human misery left Sydney for Adelaide every second day. Acka had been lucky to score a seat cancellation. All the sub-economy spaces – two metre by two metre white-lined squares – were taken. The extra money for a normal seat punched a dismal hole in her budget but it was better than being punched by Stone. Privatisation of the national train system meant different companies serviced different states and sometimes areas within states. She’d have to change trains in Broken Hill, for Adelaide, then again for Perth. Once there she supposed there’d be further negotiating of systems to get to Fitzroy Crossing.

Waiting for the afternoon service to move off, Acka hadn’t looked at the other passengers as they settled in to their seats and spaces. She had been distracted by a bizarre home movie in her mind that was stuck in a loop, starting with Stone coming for her from the corner of her street and finished with his prophecy on the station platform. You’ll be back.

No, she wouldn’t. Even if it killed her.

The train finally picked up speed after traversing the inner suburbs and Acka stared out the window, hypnotized by the train’s rocking movement. The air-conditioning, which was currently working in this carriage though she didn’t know for how long,
made the slow journey at least comfortable. The address over the intercom advised that it would be used intermittently during the journey to save energy.

The torn and frayed patchwork quilt sprawl of western suburbs housing ran all the way to the foot, and continued up the rumpled pillow escarpment of the Blue Mountains, pushed against the bed head of the sky. Housing of every sort jutted from the mountainside. Once sharp views of the plains, now allowed a perfect vista of brown pollution. The rail line clinging to the cliffs cut out of the mountain rock incline made Acka feel like she was going above, beyond.

The train line’s abandoned stationhouses were falling apart, splitting, though some showed evidence of occupation. They were as good accommodation as any, Acka supposed. The weeds and hardiest wildflowers ran free, rampant and overgrown from their previously well kept garden beds. Disused billboards occupied the edges of the rail line, a strange historical form of advertising. The fading phone numbers and internet addresses could only yield a disconnected tone and out of date information.

The mountains held history for Acka. The motel of her father’s death was somewhere up here. Which one was it? Would she be able to see it even if she did know? Was it even still there? A certain remorse swept over her. What sort of thing was it to know where and when your father was murdered but not his face or manner? How much of him had leached its way into her?

* * *

An hour further into the journey the scenery suddenly changed like a knife had sliced through the landscape. From pale green and yellow foliage, the train passed into the
terrain of nightmares. Acka gazed out over acres and acres of bushfire burnt
countryside. The trees merely black sticks jutting from a grey moonscape searching
for redemption. What had they done to deserve this? The fire had exposed everything
underneath what Acka supposed used to be thickly covered underbrush, of which not
one skerrick remained. The harsh and jagged contours of the rocky land had been
starkly revealed, a death veil pulled back. In the distance a solitary kangaroo, it too
now exposed, bounded away to a better place, puffs of ash and dust rising from the
grounded like miniature nuclear blasts on each jump. The marsupial stopped for a
moment, peering at the train, before quickly taking off again, snaking past the crusty
black, dead trees. This was the result of a mega-fire, flames so high and intense they
jumped from mountain ridge to mountain ridge with ease, travelling at unheard of
speeds. The black mounds of twisted, obliterated houses marked the former human
occupation of this countryside. With fire services stretched to their limits, some
residences were deemed expendable. If there was no need for the fire to be put out in
certain areas, then there was no need to waste the water.

The train passed through kilometre after kilometre of black scorched earth.
This must have been some firestorm. Acka remembered the reports a few months
previous. The fire had only abated when a freak thunderstorm hit the fire front.
Within an hour the majority of the blaze was doused by one of the biggest storms of
the past year. Firefighters fled the area with scalding steam injuries. The high speed
winds turned ripped branches into instant missiles. The downpour turned the ash and
dirt into a grey sludge which flowed down the gullies and valleys to choke the
already dying creeks. Blackened stumps stuck from the ground like the finger and
thumb bones of buried giants. Aboriginal legend had that giants walked this land in
the dreamtime, long ago time. Were these somehow the relics of those beings?
The train descended to the plains beyond the mountains, now a definite physical barrier between Acka and Sydney, the train becoming a vehicle penetrating into Acka’s unknown dark future. She’d only ever thought of the future as a distant concept, an event that happened to other people. There was never any change for her, just a perpetual present. She regularly forgot which day it was. Thus she always simply existed from moment to moment. Now that a strict line demarcated the past from the present, the future was a daunting prospect for which she was hardly well prepared. Acka knew Dora would die, eventually. Even so, that knowledge was a barricade that she couldn’t see past or imagine the consequences. She loved Dora as her mother, though as a person, that was another story. Apart from the remorse of leaving her body to Stone’s less than capable hands, her feelings for Dora were as flat as the desert plains she was travelling towards. She actually wanted to rid herself of this emotionless state, this inability to cry. The escape she’d longed for from her sad Sydney existence had happened so fast, it now seemed such an anticlimax, a reality that just suddenly happened, an episode she was a character in rather than actively taking part of. She felt empty, rather than relieved.

Like the city, the sun had slowly, almost effortlessly, leached life from all the landscape it gazed upon. The city’s robustness reflected some of the heat, but out here on the flat country, all was absorbed into the dirt, trees, and rocks. Acka had never seen the country in the flesh before. She was shocked. Australian nationalistic pride was built on a connection to the country and land. She heard it every day through the monotonous mediated rhetoric of political heads of state. Yet here was...
the result of so much neglect and what could only be called a self-aware apathy, disregard, even hate. The rolling crop fields had reverted to a desert that stretched away endlessly. Acka had heard the centre of Australia referred to as the Dead Heart. The landscape here suggested that the heart in all its deadness had expanded. The inland held no mysteries now as it once had for the pioneering explorers. They had all been sucked from the earth like the now vanished water. Vast stretches of screaming arboreal bones standing sentinel-like waited for their master who would never return. Dead, twisted, grey trees, the colour of shame, branches silhouetted against the sky, resembled the remaining hardened arteries of a body long ago rotted away. The country she was entering was a place without time, baked hard by the incessant heat. Acka imagined that here, not even dirt crumbled anymore, that the final degeneration had already taken place and no further degradation could happen. Dead trees had turned to a stone-like substance that never eroded. Day and night waxed and waned without discernible difference as the temperature never wavered below blistering. Here was a landscape that had been driven to a time before birth. Without water there could be no life. Acka had visions of the earth cracking, somehow swallowing itself in deep rock fissures. Unlike the mountains which held some remnant of foliage and flora, out here you could be forgiven for thinking the earth itself had given up, packed its belongings and moved on. The land split by the moving silver cage in which she now travelled, Acka reckoned that in the not far distant future, even this reminder of timepieces would cease.

As the train snaked lazily across the vast western plains into a vermillion and gold sunset, she closed her eyes to sleep, welcoming the fatigue she’d staved off, only to find her mind slowly, strangely untethered, yearning to float into this devastated environment. On a sudden whim, she allowed it to roam free, perhaps
really freely without anything to hold it back, for the first time. Acka felt her future lay in the core of the sun, like her dream. She could either burn completely, her molecules, atoms destroyed, or travel at the speed of light becoming a burning essence, hotter than the sun itself, and punch through the other side.

The sunset washed over the last vestiges of blue sky, transforming from orange to mauve. She felt this was the first sunset she’d ever seen, ever experienced properly, because she’d never bothered to look anywhere but east.

Where Acka’s carriage had been quiet for most of the journey so far, now a number of conversations had begun. A more relaxed attitude, and what Acka recognised as perhaps an air of hope, had begun to pervade the carriage. Perhaps it was the landscape that had shocked them from their silence. The train was booked out. Caught in her inner melancholic world Acka had been oblivious to the other passengers, such as she was examining, and fascinated by, the landscape. She’d failed to notice anyone in particular in her surroundings, the faces, bodies, and clothes were just blurs of shapes and colours.

The carriage aisle divided the two classes of travel – three adjacent sub-economy floor spaces on the left side, economy single seats on the right. A mother and her two young boys, maybe four or five years old, occupied the floor spaces diagonally across from her. Both the mother and boys wore dark rings under their eyes. She hadn’t noticed the children and at first presumed they were being exceptionally well behaved for what she thought for them would such a boring journey. A closer examination revealed their emaciated figures just didn’t have the vigour to misbehave. She caught the eye of the older boy. Did she have the same
tired posture as him? Did she look exactly the same as them? Acka wondered where they were going, and why they were leaving.

Acka didn’t feel like she was meant to be in the seated section. The disdainful looks of several other passengers told her they didn’t think she should be there either.

On the floor space across the aisle from Acka was a young man who she caught looking, in fact staring, at her. He was maybe no more than twenty with a number one haircut and a scar that ran along his right cheek bone that was partly covered with a sparse layer of facial growth. Acka assumed the scar was the product of a cancer removal. His attention made Acka uncomfortable.

‘Sorry. Didn’t mean to stare. You remind me of my sister.’

Acka nodded a small acknowledgement, shifted nervously, tucked her feet up under her on the seat. ‘Unlucky for your sister.’

He dipped his head sideways. ‘Not really. I come from a good lookin’ family. Going far?’

Acka was reticent to engage in conversation, but the sly compliment had somewhat disarmed her. ‘Adelaide.’

‘Me too. Well, I guess mostly everyone on here is, aren’t they? Been there before?’

Acka shook her head.

‘Where are you staying?’

She shrugged. She hadn’t thought about it. Thus she didn’t mind telling him that she didn’t know.

‘Head to Hostel Row. Used to be big a while ago.’ He smiled sarcastically.

‘When people travelled for fun. You should be able to get something cheap along
there somewhere.’ He introduced himself as Cord then nodded towards the window. ‘That looks bad.’

Along with most other passengers Acka looked out the window to see a plume of smoke rushing past. Soon the train slowed and stopped. About half an hour later the intercom system announced an engine part had given out and a replacement had to be ferried from Sydney by another train. Frustrated groans filled the carriage and a new round of conversations commenced. By the time the part arrived and was replaced they’d be travelling through the heat of the next day instead of through the relatively cooler aspect of the night.

The train managed to limp into the deserted town of Parkes. The guard’s voice over the intercom told passengers that they’d be able to leave the train during the night upon request but advised against doing so. If they did, their safety couldn’t be guaranteed any further than the Parkes station platform.

Cord rubbed his scar. ‘Guess this trip is gonna be a bit longer than expected, eh?’

‘I guess so.’ The fact was, Acka didn’t mind so much.

Cord had come from South West Sydney and was going to look for work in Adelaide. ‘ Couldn’t be any worse than Sydney, eh?’ Acka agreed. Could anything be worse than Sydney? Cord was asking Acka about herself, something she couldn’t remember anyone doing with any intent since… forever. Acka found herself responding to his easygoing charm, drawing her into his conversation, although she offered little information about herself. It felt pleasant to talk without the threat of argument or abuse. Apart from the scar, Cord wasn’t unattractive though he regularly referred to himself self-deprecatingly. They talked into the early darkness until Acka
yawned and suddenly could hardly keep her eyes open. Cord took notice and suggested she get some sleep.

‘Lucky you. At least you’ve got a wall to rest your head on, eh?’

Acka closed her eyes.

Yeah. Lucky me.

* * *

Acka woke in the middle of the night, strange images of wet and twisted creatures lingering in her mind. She shook her head in a token effort to clear them away. The quiet carriage had become stuffy with body heat and she decided to get some fresh air. A thin blanket of sand lay over the Parkes station platform, with small drifts piled against the lower sections of the dilapidated station house walls. During the time she was asleep the replacement part had arrived and several mechanics toiled away at the engine under a small set of floodlights. However it was another set of lights that filled Acka with awe. She walked to the far end of the platform to marvel at the clear night sky. There were more stars than she’d ever seen, swarms of pinpoint jewels piercing the sky’s black veil. Apart from the mechanics’ occasional murmurs and the clinking of tools, the silence here was almost unnatural. The absence of sirens, blaring televisions, or the disturbing sounds of domestic violence left her unnerved. This was the silence of ghosts.

‘You okay?’

Acka jumped at Cord’s voice, close behind her. He put his hand out reassuringly. ‘Sorry, didn’t mean to frighten you. Just wanted to see if you were alright.’
'It’s okay. I’m just having a look around.’

‘Must have been worthwhile living here once, eh?’

Cord wandered back to the train. The nearest street sign Acka could see, feebly lit by the worker’s lights, was “Welcome Street”, a bygone reminder that indeed, people once came here to live voluntarily. Towns like this once held fistfuls of promises, of futures, that could be completely fulfilled. Now Welcome Street and its kin welcomed only dust and slow deterioration.

By early morning the train had returned to working condition and as it pulled out of Parkes, the full extent of the town’s abandonment could be observed. This was a town that, along with its water source, had simply dried up. The sagging awnings, collapsed roofs, rusting paint-chipped signs, boarded windows and doors, were all testament to the number of people who had lived there. Acka could only imagine the huge number of towns in western New South Wales that had fallen to a similar fate. Who had been the last to leave? Who had been the last to die? Was there somewhere in the town or its surrounding precincts, sitting propped on a veranda, the bleached skeleton of the last true believer, the hollow eye sockets forever searching the sky for the cloud formation that would bring their drenching salvation?

The landscape west of Parkes was once lush farmland. Now the sand covered, rock hard ground, defied anything to grow. These vast acres had settled into a non-productive essence, indifferent to any life that depended upon it for survival. Acka was reminded of the pictures in an old art schoolbook on Australian painting. The images of wrinkled brown skin and broken bodies tortuously wandering without destination now seemed like a surrealist’s prophetic nightmare, a twisted version of
their present realised in this baked hard future. Only a cataclysm could resurrect this land.

As the journey continued west the territory was beset by an absence of colour, a still life where the painter had forgotten the majority of the colours on his palette. Greys, browns, yellows, whites blended into each other reducing the three dimensional terrain to a flat plane. The harsh blue sky projected the oppressive character it had claimed as its own. The monotonous flatness was broken by the severe spectacle of a bird falling dead, straight out of the sky. Its own journey obviously too strenuous, too much, Acka watched with astonishment as the bird plunged into the earth like an unexploded missile. Later the site of a scrawny kangaroo, looking lost and out of place, searching tiresomely for sustenance, completed the set of animal hardship perpetrated by the harsh conditions. An animal that lived nowhere else in the world now could no longer live here. Cord pointed at the sorry marsupial that seemed almost too tired to move. ‘There used to be massive herds of them. Would you believe they used to shoot them ‘cause there were too many.’

Acka stepped from the train into Broken Hill’s blazing heat and was almost bustled off her feet as the travellers waiting to board the train back to Sydney ignored those disembarking, rushing and pushing their way on. Delayed overnight, these people had the look of starving animals at a new carcass. Just as the travellers from Adelaide had to wait for Acka’s late service, so too would Acka have to wait for the connecting train to Adelaide.
Acka took in her surroundings. Broken Hill resembled an alien frontier town. Dominating the skyline two hundred metres south from the station loomed a massive mound of grey and black earth. Like the rest of the passengers, she stared at the huge mound atop of which was some sort of rusted monument and an abandoned building. To the north the streets and buildings stood like dust covered exhibits in an open air museum. A SkyCat was docked at the end of the street running north at right angles from Broken Hill station. A solar tower loomed further in the distance. Cord had managed to make his way off the train and stood beside Acka in the heat. He nodded his head in the direction of the nearest hotel. ‘Look at that.’

Acka turned to see a fat-bellied man resembling a circus ringleader clad as he was in a dusty blue waistcoat, top hat and moleskin trousers, standing in the doorway of the Crystal Hotel. All that was missing on him was a handlebar moustache and tin whistle. ‘Welcome! Welcome travellers!’ He stepped from stairs and started across the road, addressing the newly arrived. ‘Welcome to Broken Hill!’ He bowed and smiled widely. Spying Acka and Cord, obviously deciding they were to be the primary objects of his hospitality, he strode forward and vigorously shook their hands. ‘My name is Pantheras Xavier Griggs. I’m the mayor! Come inside out of this heat, and into the heat, ha hah, of my hotel for a drink. For you two, the first is on the house!’

He pivoted on his heels without waiting for a reply, and marched back into the premises, his offer obviously a command rather than a suggestion. Acka turned to shrug “why not?” at Cord, but he’d already started after the mayor, leaving Acka alone in their dusty wakes.

The most immediate thing Acka noticed upon entering the hotel was the giant of a woman who stood behind the bar. Easily surpassing the two metre mark, with
straight shoulder length pitch black hair, heavy black mascara, and a nose ring, she
dominated the hotel like the mound outside dominated the town’s skyline. Pantheras
addressed her with an expressive sweeping gesture. ‘Ophelia! Drinks for this lovely
young couple. On the house.’

When they sat at the bar Ophelia simply stared silently at the pair rather than
asking for their order. Slightly unsettled Acka ordered a beer, while Cord,
audaciously Acka thought, asked for a straight scotch. Several other travellers had
followed Acka and Cord into the hotel, but once it was established they weren’t
going to be treated to the free fare Acka and Cord had been afforded, they mooched
out again. Pantheras sniffed at the perceived slight. ‘We didn’t want them in here
anyway, did we, people?’

‘No, Pantheras.’ The patrons replied, almost as one. Only Ophelia remained
silent, expressionless as she dried schooner glasses.

‘I didn’t think so.’

The chorus of voices came from the assortment of characters sitting in the
hotel the like of which Acka had never before seen in one place. Their ages spanned
from late teens to old timers well into their sixties, and one man Acka posited as
easily in his eighties. All had scars from removed cancers of some sort, chunks
missing from their ears and noses, indentation on scalps, cheeks and chests, the
damage leaving their skins an array of dappled pinks and browns. Pantheras was
obviously their leader for whom they shared much admiration, hanging as they were
on his every word, their eyes following his faux eloquent movements studiously.
Acka thought they might break into applause at any moment.

Pantheras turned his attention back to Acka and Cord. ‘Now, tell me about
yourselves.’
Pantheras nodded along intently to both Acka and Cord’s abbreviated versions of their life stories. With pleasantries over, at least in Pantheras’ mind, he returned to his favourite topic. Gesturing to the room. ‘Do you like my star attraction?’

The hotel was lavishly decorated in the style of when it had been built, the glorious silver mining period of the late 1800s. Cord was indifferently unimpressed. ‘Wouldn’t you want to renovate or something? You know, bring it up to date.’

Pantheras stood aghast at the question. ‘Certainly not!’

Cord sipped his scotch loudly. ‘Why not?’

‘What for, boy? The place is perfectly functional as is.’

Cord either had nothing more to say or decided that arguing with the man who’d provided them free drinks wasn’t exactly civil. Acka tactfully changed the subject. ‘Uh, Pantheras, is this all the people in the town there is?’

He furrowed his brow. He was getting more annoyed at each question, whoever asked. ‘Oh, no, no, no!’

‘Where is everyone then?’

‘Underground, of course!’

Pantheras explained he’d purchased the abandoned Broken Hill silver mine and accompanying equipment in the early 2040s for a bargain price and started a one man operation. As luck would have it, he hit a most lucrative vein of untapped silver ore. Simply, he recounted, it was fate. His desire and faith in unfound riches had paid off in serendipitous circumstances. ‘Now I own every hotel in town. I built the solar tower. In fact, the whole town is mine. I fly my workers in via SkyCat. The ore gets flown out on them as well. The population fluctuates depending on who understands my vision. Those who do, tend to stay. I put them up in the hotels.’ Pantheras’ eyes
seemed to glaze over. ‘You see. I’m a New Age pioneer. My spiritual ancestors are
Sturt and Giles, the explorers who made their way through this countryside, and the
miners who came after them in search of their fortune.’

Cord scratched his cheek. ‘They must have been mad.’

‘Of course they were! Stark raving! Why else would they come? The people
who come here are either going mad, or know they’re mad already.’ He leaned in
close, winked. ‘I’m joking, of course,’ then rocked back.

‘If they know they’re mad, doesn’t that prove they’re sane?’ Ophelia had
spoken, her dry, even voice exhibiting sarcastic undertones. All eyes turned to her,
though she kept her eyes fixed on Pantheras.

He brushed the question aside and with it some of the tension that had
quickly surfaced, speaking slyly from the side of his mouth. ‘Perhaps.’

Ophelia however, wasn’t finished. ‘Are you mad or sane then?’

The tension rose again as the two eyeballed each other. ‘What do you think?’

Cord slurped his drink.

Pantheras continued, turning from Ophelia, now playing to the whole room.
‘But they saw something, didn’t they? Those explorers, they had a vision, and I too
have a vision.’

‘And a good one it is too, Pantheras.’ Acka missed from which patron the
voice came.

‘Indeed!

‘What’s your vision?’ Again the voice came as if like a ventriloquist was in
the room, Acka unable to locate the source. The patrons seemed to be playing their
supporting roles to perfection.
‘One day in the future everyone will realise they should embrace the heat. Because of that, Broken Hill will be a nexus, not only for trains, but for everything. You’ll see, my dear friends, a whole new mindset will prevail. Everyone will want to live here. They’ll come in droves. It’s inevitable. And when they do. I’ll be here. My vision will be realised. This is where a nation will be reborn.’

Cord noticed someone standing behind Acka. ‘Looks like you’ve got a friend.’

An aboriginal man had entered the premises while Pantheras’ had enthralled the congregation with his performance. Acka couldn’t tell his age. He had grey hairs showing in his tightly curled shoulder length hair, but his skin was clear and smooth. He stood looking intently at her, perplexed at her presence.

‘Jacky-Jacky!’ Pantheras exclaimed.

Ophelia’s voice displayed equal amounts of disgust and exasperation ‘That’s not his name.’

‘Close enough!’ Pantheras took up a spot at the end of the bar, leaning against the wall, where he could survey the room.

Ophelia turned to Acka. ‘His name’s Jack Wiljakali.’

Jack put his hands on either side of Acka’s head. Cord made to push him away, but Acka stopped him. She realised Jack wasn’t looking at her, he was looking in to her. He tapped her right temple with a bent finger, then tapped his own. Jack mouthed words but no sounds came out. She concentrated on listening to his voice.

‘You should listen to him, darling. He knows what he’s talking about.’

Pantheras’ strange collective laughed almost as one. Except Ophelia. ‘That’s not funny, Pantheras.’

Cord leaned towards Ophelia. ‘Why isn’t that funny?’
‘Because he can’t talk. That’s why it’s not funny.’

‘We don’t know that for sure, Ophelia.’ Pantheras directed his comments to Cord. ‘We’ve just never heard him speak. That’s all.’

Ophelia poured a beer, and plonked it on the counter. ‘Here, Jack.’

Pantheras frowned at Ophelia. She glared back. ‘I’ll pay for it.’

‘As you wish, my dear.’

Jack ignored the goodwill gesture, and left the beer untouched. He nodded knowingly at Acka, like he was agreeing with something Acka’s mind had silently told him. Then he arched his head back, his stomach convulsed and shoulders quaked under his faded khaki t-shirt. He began laughing too, a choking, gulping sound that came from his belly, slapping the insides of his throat as it emerged.

From somewhere deep in the pub, a voice was heard. ‘Never seen him so happy, Pantheras! What d’you reckon?’

‘It’s true, he’s generally a sullen character. But he’s such a card too. Never fails to amuse!’

The patrons laughed. Ophelia continued to frown.

Pantheras once again addressed Ophelia’s unhappy state. ‘Well, what’s he still doing here anyway?’ Pantheras took off his top hat and dusted it with the back of his hand. ‘They’ve got their “holy land” now. He should shove off to Arnhem.’

‘It’s hard to believe people like you still exist.’

‘People like me will always exist. We’re inherent in every country.’

Pantheras’ words stung Jack out of his fascination with Acka, his attention immediately focused on the dandy mayor. He walked to an open space in the bar, continuing to stare defiantly at Pantheras. For that moment he had the whole room’s quiet attention. He stomped his foot on the scuffed floorboards and spread his arms
out from his foot, eyes tracing the room to the ceiling. The message was clear why he hadn’t “shoved off” to the aboriginal state.

Pantheras stamped his own foot and twirled like a drunken ballerina, arms above his head. The patrons again laughed at Panthers’ display. Surprisingly to Acka, Jack wasn’t angered. He knew Panthers had no idea of him beyond what he saw. He simply nodded, proudly, then exited the hotel.

Cord caught Ophelia’s attention, pointing at the beer. ‘If he’s not gonna have that…’

Ophelia rolled her eyes, annoyed. ‘Yeah. Go ahead, if it means that much to you.’

The anonymous voice called again. ‘Nice one, mister mayor.’

Ophelia rolled her eyes at the comment. ‘Fuckin’ sycophants.’

Acka addressed Ophelia. ‘You don’t like them?’

‘Who would?’

‘How come you’re here?’

‘It’s a job. More than most can say.’

‘What about him?’ Acka indicated with her eyes quickly going sideways to Panthers. ‘You don’t seem to like him much either.’

‘Him?’ Ophelia glanced at the amateur showman who was now deep in conversation with several hotel patrons, before concentrating again on the glass she was cleaning. ‘What can I do? He’s my fuckin’ father.’

Acka finished her drink, thanked Panthers for his hospitality, and exited the hotel to find herself in Chloride Street. Broken Hill’s mining history was represented by all
the streets named after minerals. Acka noticed Jack walking slowly away down Chloride Street before he turned into a side street. The aboriginal man had fascinated her almost as much as she seemed to fascinate him. She set off in his direction in the hope they’d be able to engage in some form of communication, especially about what had taken Jack’s fancy about her.

When Acka turned the corner, Jack was gone but the scene that confronted her was astonishing. Every visible surface in the street had become an artist’s canvas. Millions upon millions of small red, brown, yellow, white and ochre dots alongside stylised x-ray animals comprehensively covered store fronts, footpaths, windows, street signs, awnings, even the road. Under Jack’s methodical hands the street had become a landscape from another time. Jack had re-laid the original landscape over Broken Hill’s structures. Jack didn’t need to speak. Everything that needed to be said was right there in the artistic expression.

Out of nowhere Jack appeared at Acka’s side. He pointed to the road at an intense, condensed area of dots, moving his hand in a back and forth motion. Acka shook her head. She couldn’t see anything in particular. Jack knelt down on the road brushing away sand and stone. Then crouching, spread his arms, placed a finger of each hand on the road and walked backward, tracing something. Now Acka saw, there was a subtle variation to the application and layout of the dots. Urging Acka to follow the understated pattern, Jack stepped away and Acka saw that the variation continued up the street. Jack motioned with his hands. The multitude of dots quickly enraptured Acka as she followed the art, swimming in her focused vision until she abruptly came to the end to the street. The motif which she thought represented a path or river, she was surprised to find actually ended in the head of a giant snake,
jaws agape, teeth jagged, tongue curled in a circle. In front of the snake’s jaws, ready to be consumed, was a stylised sun.

Looking back along the street she found Jack had again disappeared, at the same time noticing her trail of footsteps in the dust following the snake’s long body. While she thought she’d been walking straight, her footsteps told a different story. The snake’s body curved and writhed back and forth across the road. The short distance to the end of the street had taken her nearly half an hour to traverse so intensely had she been tracking the reptile’s patterned body which easily ran to double the street’s length. Looking back along the body she saw the intricate patterns of flowers and stripes inscribed on the snake’s “skin”. She stood with hands on hips surveying the art-scene, unsettled at the silence and her sudden isolation. Jack may well have surreptitiously thrust her into another reality, where upon returning to the Crystal Hotel she’d find Jack was the mayor and Pantheras the mocked mute.

From somewhere she couldn’t place, Jack’s gulping laugh echoed through the streets.

Rumbling over the desert like an ill-tempered thunderhead, the sound of the train from Adelaide arrived in Broken Hill long before the locomotive pulled in to the station. The other stranded passengers heard the cue and were eagerly lining the station platform to board as it pulled in. Acka walked to the train with Cord who had somehow managed to get himself half drunk. His eyes verging on bloodshot, he stumbled onto the train collapsing into his floor space.

Acka turned and surveyed the silent streets from the platform. It was a town that asked more questions than it answered. The tailings mound loomed over the town as a reminder of once good times past, mocking the unused streets, stores and
residences. Was there really anyone in Broken Hill apart from the patrons of the Crystal Hotel? Were the miners toiling away at the underground quarry only hallucinations from the depths of Pantheras’ warped imagination brought about by his fixated sun worship? Was there really more of the precious mineral somewhere deep beneath the ground, somehow missed by all the sophisticated detection and geographical mapping devices, waiting to propel to life Pantheras’ grand vision for the nation? Only time would tell. For all its clownish bravado, Broken Hill was a broken place, an island of borderline insanity in the midst of a landscape which knew its sane, if harsh, finality. The liquid of life here was coloured silver. Equipped with the solar tower providing electricity and pumped water from the depths of the underlying aquifers, maybe in a dramatic twist of unseen events the residents of Broken Hill would become the genetic parents of Australia’s new reality. Pantheras was right in one respect. Only the mad could live in such a place. But then again were the residents of Sydney any less mad? Who would choose to live in Sydney’s squalor? Did Pantheras’ obsequious townspeople really believe he had all the answers? That these new age sun worshippers were to be the founders of a prosperous new era? Pantheras’ astounding far fetched promises of the future were attractive to people with no thoughts of the future of their own. There would always be followers of a confident personality’s ill-directed orders. The showman-mayor in a crumpled suit promoted a vision which could only be achievable through apocalypse. In reality, Pantheras was Broken Hill’s only real attraction – King Oddball of a collection of human oddities parading themselves on a desolate stage playing long forgotten roles.

Acka was the last to board the train. Before the doors closed Acka watched Pantheras standing in front of his hotel, the dust he’d kicked up settling on his
discoloured, washed out boots. Acka waved to him. She imagined he played the
same part, repeated the same words, for every set of travellers that passed through.
Pantheras spread his arms wide as if he was embracing the whole of the town, his
smile bigger than a crescent moon.

‘Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?’

The train chugged across the South Australian border. Conveniently the seating
layout in the carriage of the connecting train was exactly the same as the train that
had brought them to Broken Hill. At some stage in the past the two carriers had been
one company. Cord had passed out in his floor space and was emitting equal parts
soft snoring and wheezing. Acka decided she was glad she’d met him simply because
of the chance to talk to someone who didn’t suspect her of anything or give her
static. The journey was fairly mundane travelling through the open tracts of South
Australia. The only thing that broke the steady ca-chack of the train was when it was
forced to stop for several hours when smoke was spotted in the distance. During the
interlude, which again irritated the majority of travellers, Cord woke, confused at the
scene, which Acka explained.

‘Fire?’

‘Dust storm.’

Acka wondered whether this storm would engulf Broken Hill and wipe
Pantheras’ dream from the face of the earth or alternatively bury it under tons of deep
red dust.

‘Feel okay now?’

‘Yeah. A few drinks and, y’know, I’m anyone’s, if they don’t mind me being
asleep. Always happens.’
She kept getting flashes of Jack’s art landscape filling her vision, everything covered in dots taking up residence in her head. For all Pantheras’ outlandish plans and claims, it was Jack’s street reshaping that lodged with her.

* * *

The train swept through Adelaide’s outer suburbs reminding Acka of Sydney. Their disrepair was less conspicuous, resulting from the ravages of time rather than abuse and overpopulation. South Australia had missed much of the migration from the eastern states who had ventured south to the relatively cooler climates of Southern Victoria and Tasmania or the water abundant North Western Australia. As the farthest point from South East Asia it was insulated from most refugees. Adelaide had a reputation as a place people passed through rather than stayed. After alighting the train at Adelaide central station Cord gave Acka directions to Hostel Row.

‘Are you going there too?’

‘Nah, I’m staying at a friend’s place. But, look, give me your phone number and I’ll give you a ring when I get some credit. We can hook up, yeah?’

‘I’m actually going to Perth. Don’t know how long I’ll be in Adelaide. Probably a couple of days until I can work something out.’

‘Well, maybe before you head off then.’

‘Sure.’

Even though she was going to Perth, Acka was relieved to know someone else in the city. Cord shifted his weight nervously, then unexpectedly stepped close and hugged her tightly followed by a forceful kiss on the cheek. ‘It was good to meet you, Acka. Made the trip a bit more interesting, eh?’
She smiled involuntarily. ‘Yeah, I guess.’

‘Okay, catch ya.’ With that final farewell Cord headed off.

Acka followed Cord’s directions and headed to Hostel Row.

The walk took about an hour, Acka relishing the chance to survey the City of Churches and exercise after the long trip. Adelaide was stuck in somewhat of a time warp. The architectural style was in line with that of previous generations – the proto-gothic and Victorian dominated, though there was a sense of openness to the city that was refreshing compared to Sydney’s heated claustrophobia.

Hostel Row was less than picturesque. The number of people roaming the street however gave the place a vibrant atmosphere. She walked up and down the Row checking prices. Upon deciding on one that didn’t look too bad she entered and reached for her wallet only to find her back pocket empty. She searched her other pockets while the bored, gaunt faced counter attendant watched on. Embarrassed she stammered an excuse, ‘Uh, give me a minute.’ Acka walked back out to the street still searching her clothes. Nothing. Shit. Where was it? Her mind kicked into high gear. What were her movements? She had it when she got off the train because she checked. Said goodbye to Cord. How…?

Cord…

*Cord!*

That low, dirty *fucker!* He’d fuckin’ robbed her!

No. It couldn’t have been him. She was loathe to think badly of him. They’d travelled almost the whole way to Adelaide together. Was it possible? Had everything he’d done and said for almost the last two days been an act? Something else must’ve happened. She checked her movements again. They’d got off the train, went to the toilet, bought drinks, walked from the train terminal, and said their
goodbyes. She hadn’t come into contact with anyone else. Now she was sure. It had to have been him. Could only have been him. Her heart sank faster than a powerless submarine. How could he do that? She couldn’t believe it! Suddenly everyone seemed to be staring at her, the good feelings she had of reaching this far unscathed, unceremoniously stripped away. Acka headed to a small park at the end of the street and sat in the dying sunlight. For the first time in a long time she allowed herself to cry. She wiped the tears, one from each eye, across her cheeks. Most of her money had been in her wallet. Her saving grace was she regularly placed money about different parts of her person, a consequence of the wariness needed when living in Sydney and its suburbs. Extricating herself from there had caused a lapse in her normally impenetrable guard and Cord had taken advantage. She wasn’t completely broke but her remaining funds would only cover a few days at a hostel. After that, she was indelibly fucked.
Part 2

Fowler’s Bay
Chapter 4

Acka rested her head on the solar car’s door frame. If she’d thought she’d known heat before, her sense of scale had been renewed. The Nullarbor Plain was the closest one could get to the heat you’d get in hell. Still, the feeling of a fragile sadness pervaded, like the country wanted to cry but couldn’t spare the tears. The Australian landscape was often described as alien yet it was in fact the people who for nearly three hundred years had trudged wearily across this unfamiliar and endlessly adversarial terrain, this prison without walls, who were the real aliens.

Acka had been on the road with Peter now for several hours. They’d only just entered “Oondiri – the waterless”, otherwise known as the Nullarbor. At dusk two days previous Acka had walked back through the centre of Adelaide in what she knew would certainly be a fruitless search for Cord. The city was like a run down gothic city frozen in time, a dormant place, a seed in stasis waiting one day to bloom again. She walked the streets in a state of floating despair, the building structures reflecting her depressed state.

Her hopes were raised at one point whilst wandering aimlessly when she thought she saw Cord rounding a corner going away from her. She’d immediately broken into a sprint after the figure not knowing how she’d even confront him, but by the time she’d got to where the person was she’d lost sight of him, and he was gone. If it had even been him. She didn’t exclude that it may have been her wishful thinking. Acka had a lot of wishes.
Acka had met Peter the next day at the Adelaide Hostel – the cheapest hostel on the Row in every sense of the word. Peter’s late middle aged skin was thick and healthy on his cheek bones. He had the eloquently rusty manner of a retired stage hypnotist. Why he was staying at such a grotty place she didn’t know and didn’t ask. He mentioned he was heading across the Nullarbor to Perth and Acka had said she was headed that way too hoping he might offer her a lift. Miraculously he did, as long as she didn’t mind sharing costs, and stopping in at Fowlers Bay, a township on the coast that was en route. The situation left Acka pondering her run of alternating luck. As for Fowlers Bay, Acka wasn’t keen on the idea though she was hardly in a position to object.

They’d set off early the next day, a blazing dawn chasing, soon to overtake, them down the Eyre Highway. Peter’s car was a hybrid electric-solar so Acka felt she’d hit the jackpot in terms of sharing costs – there were virtually none. If there was ever a place where a solar vehicle was undeniably suited, it was the Australia’s open southern expanses.

‘So Acka, why are you going to Perth?’ Peter’s voice had the same humming even tone as that of the car.

‘I’m actually going to The Fitz.’

‘The Fitz?’

‘Fitzroy Crossing. WA.’

‘Oh, I see. I can’t take you that far, I’m afraid.’

‘No, I know. I didn’t mean… That’s just where I’m going. Eventually.’

‘You have friends there?’

‘Sort of.’ Acka recounted her journey so far to Peter, who listened intently.

‘A long trip for someone on their own.’
‘I guess.’ Acka had rapidly become very weary, and again resting her head on the door frame, sweat sliding down her neck, tiredness struck her like an arrow, her eyelids suddenly heavy. Acka had hardly slept since Pussy had called her when she was outside the King’s Hill pharmacy – a few hours at home, the short hour in the park, dozing here and there for a few hours on the trains. Now the low hum and steady speed of the car lulled her to sleep.

Several hours later Peter turned off the highway onto Fowlers Bay Road, a rutted track that had the vestiges of a once paved thoroughfare. The sun was low on the horizon when the rough ride woke Acka. The road wended its way along for many kilometres, the landscape turning from the flat, arid desert to an undulating coastal aspect. After an hour the road opened to the sea and continued into the township of Fowlers Bay. A rusted, swinging sign announced the settlement was established 1830, had a population of 200, and was a “Tidy Town” entrant in 2032. Acka searched her phone’s location setting for any information on the town only to find the battery had gone flat.

Peter drove down The Esplanade which ran parallel to the bay. The smell of the sea, of ancient pathways and currents, all at once struck home the amazing difference of this place to King’s Hill and Sydney itself. Where Sydney choked under so much smoke, haze, and the distinct smell of carbon monoxide and oil, Fowlers Bay air was fresh, carrying a frigid message from the Antarctic, sweeping over the Great Southern Ocean to the South Australian coast.

Set behind a long series of dunes that protected the town from the Southern Ocean, Fowlers Bay had all the constituent elements expected of a small town except the majority of premises sat unused. They drove past the abandoned Post Office,
Police Station, and Court House. Every shop was boarded shut. Apart from the boards covering the doors and windows, the structures seemed to be well kept even though they obviously weren’t used. A rusting swing set and merry-go-round sat idly in the town’s park, situated snugly between The Esplanade and the sand dunes. The deserted streets, cast in eerie shadow by the setting sun, had Acka wondering about the numbers of people living here. There certainly couldn’t be two hundred now.

‘Where is everyone?’

‘Oh, inside, probably.’

At the slow pace they were moving Acka got the feeling Peter was giving her the grand tour of the town, though leaving out the informed monologue. The town had easily past its heyday and she thought perhaps the place may never have actually had a heyday.

‘Who would live here?’

‘Oh, some people like it.’

‘Your friend?’

‘Friends.’

Peter turned a corner to an adjacent street which consisted of rows of simple bungalows on either side. These residences had the knick-knacks and adornments in front yards and on porches which indicated they were occupied.

‘How do they survive?’

Peter explained that the community grew much of their own food though there were frequent stops from SkyCat freighters on their way from the west to Victoria and Tasmania from which they could obtain any other essential items. And of course Adelaide wasn’t too far away if needed. The electricity was household
solar supplemented from the Adelaide grid. ‘They live a monastic type of life. Indulging in the simple things.’

After driving up and down several streets, his silent impromptu tour concluded, Peter pulled in to one of the bungalows, stopping in front of a garage and asked Acka to do the honour of opening the roller door for him, which she did. Acka found this somewhat curious that Peter was driving into a double garage when he said he was only visiting a friend.

‘They’re expecting you?’

‘They always expect me. I frequently drop in.’

In the second parking spot was a car covered with a green plastic car cover. Acka immediately recognised the distinctive shape and lifted one edge to confirm her suspicions. Underneath sat a 1970s era Ford Falcon station wagon which as far as she could tell, was in immaculate condition. She was immediately hit by a weird sensation as she recognised the similarity to the car in her dream from several days ago.

Peter turned off the engine and exited the solar car. ‘Impressive, isn’t it?’

‘Sure is. Not too many of these around anymore. It’s what… about… eighty years old?’

‘About that.’

Moving the car cover had disturbed a thin layer and Acka coughed, then sneezed.

‘Does it go?’

‘Uh, no.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘Don’t know. Brother Raven won’t tell us.’
‘Who?’

Peter moved away and treated the remark offhandedly as a simple misnomer. ‘Oh. One of my friends. Ah, you’ll meet him. It’s his car.’ A guilty expression came over his face. ‘Ah, I wanted to ask too. It’s my own fault but it looks like I’ve miscalculated the journey time. Is it okay if we stay here overnight?’

Acka could hardly complain and she had wondered about that since she’d woken up in the car. She smiled. ‘Of course. That’s fine. If it’s alright with your friends.’

Peter returned the smile. ‘Great. You’ll certainly be welcome. Thank you, so much. I was so worried. I’ve been thinking about it all day. You’ll feel completely welcome here. I can guarantee that.’

Acka’s first meeting with Peter’s friends was short though in no way sweet. Peter led Acka to what was perhaps the nicest residence in Fowlers Bay. Simple yet well maintained, Peter knocked on the open door and without waiting for an answer continued inside waving for Acka to follow. They walked into the main living area which was carpeted in a rich garish red, reminding Acka of the blood speech bubble on Haven 2’s driveway. In the living room was an old man sitting in an old Victorian chair with threadbare armrests. Clearly in his eighties, his static electric white hair protruded wildly from the sides and back of his head, his bald crown blotched pink and brown from extensive sun damage. Half his right eye was clouded and he continuously moved his jaw petulantly side to side. Standing rigid behind and to the left of the sitting man, hands clasped behind his back, chest thrust forward was a tall black haired man in his forties who exhibited a mix of angular and sagging features. Situated to the left of the door, going almost unnoticed were two other men who sat
on a once plush lounge, both holding open novels. Both were clothed in long-sleeved black cassocks.

‘Brother.’ Peter strode over to the old man, who remained unmoved as Peter hugged him by the shoulders and kissed both his cheeks.

Peter introduced the old man to Acka as Brother Raven, and the standing man as Brother Wedge who nodded seriously at them both. The two on the lounge were Brothers Red and Robin. Their reading session interrupted, both left the room as soon as the introductions were finished. When Acka hesitantly stepped further into the room Brother Raven was immediately filled with a spark of awareness. He sniffed the air, his face brightening, then darkening mischievously. He lasciviously licked his dry, cracked lips. ‘A girrrl. Sparrow, you dirty fish.’

Brother Wedge almost immediately and contemptuously berated him. ‘You old fool!’

The insult fuelled the old man’s ire. ‘Respect! You should give me. Respect! Me!’

Acka looked to Peter, confused at the name by which he’d been addressed and similarly unsure how to react to both Brothers’ outbursts.

‘Oh, they call me Sparrow here. It’s just something they like to do.’ He reassuringly waved an open hand at her, mouthing Don’t worry about them.

Trying to alleviate the mood Acka changed the subject. ‘Peter tells me that’s your car in the garage.’

Raven looked around confused, then turned his head towards Brother Wedge.

‘Who?’

‘She means Sparrow.’
‘Don’t let her touch my car! Hmph. Have you checked the oil, Sparrow? It’s got to have oil. It won’t work otherwise. What about Andromeda?’

Brother Wedge answered Raven’s meandering thought-stream. ‘Don’t worry about the car. Andromeda is around. I’ll tell her to come see you tomorrow.’


Clearly exasperated Brother Wedge again reacted to Raven’s bluster ‘You cantankerous buzzard!’ Acka was sure this was the only way to contain the old man’s erupting anger and she felt some sympathy for the tall man. Reminded of her mother’s personality, she knew Brother Wedge could never win an argument with the elder man. He addressed Peter. ‘I’m sorry, Sparrow. Maybe tomorrow would be better.’

‘Of course.’

Acka was glad to leave the uncomfortable scene that had unfolded. She followed Peter from the house who told her Brother Raven had taken a downturn in health recently. That’s one reason why he came to Fowlers Bay to see his old friend. ‘You have to excuse him. He’s gone mad. A little mad.’

‘We all will at some stage, I guess.’ With thoughts of Broken Hill still fresh in her mind, Acka wondered what sort of person wasn’t driven mad by the Australian countryside and climate. She again asked if it was alright for her to stay as Peter hadn’t mentioned anything in the house.

‘Oh yes. It’s no problem. Don’t worry.’

Acka noted the Brothers’ garb. ‘You didn’t say your friends were religious.’

Peter seemed to take an overly long time to respond. ‘Oh, you mean the cassocks… It’s more… of an order, really.’ Some of them were religiously affiliated
in the past, Peter explained, but those who came soon found the way of life at Fowlers much better. They knew each other by their changed Brother names mainly to reflect the Bay’s communal nature. ‘This place is a new beginning for each. It’s an… honest way of life.’ He wouldn’t like to place a label on it. ‘That may be the task of others in the future. I suppose it’s more a clan than a brotherhood. A flock of like-minded people who have congregated together in these desperate times. I’ll maybe explain further later. It’s a little… complicated.’

As if suddenly aware Acka asked, ‘Are there any women here?’

‘No. Of course not. No women.’ He smirked self-righteously, laughed with a closed mouth. ‘Unless you count Andromeda. But she doesn’t count.’

The private joke confused Acka, though she remained silent. Peter hadn’t been fully explanatory with her previous questions so she let this one go. Peter showed Acka to her accommodation for the night – one of the small, three bedroom bungalows on Swan Street not far from Brother Raven’s residence – and said their goodnights. Acka showered and took advantage of the small provisions in the kitchen. Before going to bed she locked the doors and checked the security of all the windows. She thought this was probably in vain as no doubt someone in the town had an extra set of keys to the premises. Although there seemed no direct threat from this oddball association of pseudo-clergymen, she couldn’t shake the unsettling feeling of being an intruder. Indeed, it occurred to her that it was probably better that she couldn’t.

*   *   *


Acka emerged from her bungalow late in the morning, perturbed that Peter hadn’t woken her earlier so they could continue their journey as soon as possible. Even though she was grateful for the extended and dreamless sleep, she scolded herself that she hadn’t made firm arrangements with him the night before.

The streets were swept by a prevailing cool southerly wind, a flock of gulls swirling aimlessly in the cobalt morning sky. Acka wandered the empty streets taking in the shops and monuments for a second time at her own pace. She noted the obviously occupied bungalows, estimating maybe twenty or thirty inhabitants living in the town. On closer inspection of the town’s structures she found the majority had a thin prevailing layer of rust on their metal surfaces, and anything wooden which hadn’t been recently painted was bleached and blasted a uniform lighter shade of grey. Peering through the slits of boarded windows she inspected the derelict florist, laundromat, newsagent, and hairdressers. The empty counters, shelves, and display cabinets, open cash registers, washing machines, and dryers spoke of systematic abandonment. When did this isolated community of the Brothers take over the settlement? Or did they arrive one by one to fill a vacant place, the void created when the previous residents left?

The Police Station’s doors were open and Acka entered to find the completely unmanned premises in well kept order. The front desk reception counter was polished to a high sheen. The wooden chairs, cupboards, and desks from another era were all in exceptional condition. Folders in the filing cabinets were empty, as were the desk drawers. Apart from the furniture and a working clock which told the wrong time, the building was devoid of any indication the station was used for anything other than an exercise in cleanliness and preservation. The Brotherhood obviously considered the appearance of a working law office an important part of
their existence and at least one must have taken the idea, and subsequent undertaking, to heart. She could imagine one of them sitting here silently, an eagle-headed judge waiting for the report of a petty crime that would signal Fowlers Bay as just another small town. Or was this a place where the town’s inhabitants came to vent their issues about each other? Would they convene a court of their own justice to settle the inevitable squabbles which affected any community? Although these may have been true enough, Acka left the station with the feeling that this was a simple façade, that the Police Station served more as a bankrupt museum than anything else.

The only building that had withstood any ravages of time and the harsh coastal weather was the sandstone Presbyterian Church. A lone seagull sat perched on the church’s tilted lightning rod. As Acka approached she heard the tones of a sermon being delivered. Upon entering, it looked like all the inhabitants of the town had gathered in the church to listen. There were maybe twenty men all dressed in cassocks similar to those which Brothers Wedge and Raven had worn the previous evening. Raven sat in the front pew, interrupting every few minutes by banging his walking stick on the floor. ‘What’s he saying? I can’t hear.’

Peter sat next to Raven, his hand on the old man’s shoulder, and whispered something into his ear. Brother Raven shot a jerky glance at Peter, scowled, and banged his cane on the floor once again, then drifted into a gruff silence. Peter saw Acka silhouetted in the doorway and waved to her, then whispered to Brother Raven once more.

A tall slender woman was at the pulpit delivering the sermon of which Acka had caught snippets of outside. Her voice, which sat somewhere below that of a
woman though higher than a man’s, suggested something other than the gender she exhibited. Acka understood Peter’s reference now. This must be Andromeda.

Acka took a seat in the back pew occupied by a completely bald Brother. He leaned towards Acka and smiled wanly, a heavy sheen of sweat covering his brow.

‘You must be Acka.’ He held out his hand. ‘Brother Wren.’

‘That’s Andromeda?’

‘Yes.’ He rolled his eyes. ‘We have learned to accept each other’s deficiencies here.’ He sighed what Acka believed to be a genuine, if mixed expression of melancholy, sorrow, and remorse. ‘Even if the rest of the world has not.’ He moved back to an upright position without explaining his statement.

The cryptic musings of these men were starting to get on her nerves. Did he mean Andromeda, or perhaps Brother Raven, who continued to harass Andromeda?

Andromeda pushed on despite Brother Raven’s constant interruptions, spraying her sermon throughout the church, more a performance than anything. She would read passages from the bible she held in one hand out in front of her and then take issue with what she’d read, arguing in a round about manner against the passage’s meaning. Her animated delivery was a sight to be seen, her free hand firmly on her hip as though she were pushing her pelvis sideways. The heat had made her mascara and eyeliner run producing black sweaty tears under her eyes. She had licked her dry lips so often the dark cherry lipstick had disappeared from the fullness of her lips, only a smudged outline remained. From Acka’s position at the rear of the church she looked like a demonic clown presiding over a congregation of uninterested crows.

Apart from Raven, who despite Andromeda’s clear voice, somehow couldn’t hear her, Acka noticed that none of Brothers seemed to be actually listening, or at
least were only taking minimal notice. Several had quite clearly nodded off, one producing a grating snore. Andromeda was halfway through a maniacal cackle, a joke of which only she found humorous, when the cry of ‘WHALE!’ issued through and across the church. All heads turned as one to see Brother Robin, wide saucer eyes glistening with a bizarre delight, standing almost spread-eagle in the church doorway. Hardly able to contain himself, he pointed energetically toward the beach.

‘WHALE!’ he cried again in barely suppressed exhilaration and was off at pace in direction of the beach, his cassock a billowing black cloud. The congregation eerily rose as one, no longer interested in the bizarre figure at the pulpit. Andromeda’s face deflated to a disappointed scowl, resigned to the fact her sermon was thus ended. Acka recognised a certain ripple effect pass through the Brothers as they filed out the door – a raising of the spirit, not only to have Andromeda’s sermon unceremoniously cut, but something that spoke of the anticipation of good works.

Outside several Brothers had broken into a trot behind Brother Robin’s awkward loping gait. Some people instinctively knew how to run. Brother Robin did not. His anticipation and excitation turned him into a comical figure.

The shout of ‘whale’ had Acka intrigued. What would these isolated figures have to rejoice in the figure of a whale surfacing in the bay? Had their faith degenerated into a kind of totemic worship? Acka contemplated this collection of silhouettes shambling towards the dunes that protected and circled the beach, helping each other up the shifting surface. Acka caught up to Brother Red as they reached the foot of the dune. ‘Do whales come here much?’

Brother Red laboured to answer the question as they climbed the dune. ‘Yes.’ He added to his answer as they reached the crest. ‘But not like this.’ Brother Red placed his hands on his hips, and mildly puffed, dropped to his haunches. Acka’s
eyes followed the ant line of Brothers to the figure of a beached whale. Brother Red’s elation was immediately apparent in the cadence of his voice. ‘We are not forgotten.’

Brother Red went ahead of Acka as she surveyed the wide bay from which the town took its name. A huge old jetty jutted at least a hundred meters into the waters of the bay, one long finger pointing to the southern reaches of the world. The pulsing red beacon of a SkyCat docking station at the end indicated the structure still was in limited use. Out to sea a wall of rain fell like a grey shroud, blurring where the sky met the water. She peered back to the church to see Brother Peter striding towards the dunes. Behind were the stick figures of Andromeda and Brother Raven on the church steps. Andromeda was helping Raven down the steps, an action which he obviously needed though his own jerking limbs spoke that he was in no way making Andromeda’s job easy.

Peter had silently sidled up beside Acka, following her gaze over the water to the rain sheet. ‘Always it misses us. It can be as hot as blazes here and yet out there, so tantalisingly close, the water buckets down. Almost within reach.’

Acka walked with Peter towards the whale. ‘This place, Fowlers Bay, was founded as a whaling station, you know. Not only Australian, but French and American sloops regularly sailed the coast. Can you imagine sailing all the way from France or America to hunt whales? It’d take months. Madness. But they did it. They killed whales in the hundreds back then, taking home thousands of barrels of whale oil, tons of whalebone. Wholesale slaughter you could call it.’ Acka detected a hardly restrained thrill in Peter’s recount of Fowlers Bay’s bloody history that left her unnerved. ‘Imagine the thousand of litres of blood that stained the streets of this small town. It boggles the mind. A complete free-for-all.’
As each Brother arrived at the beast they tentatively touched the grey skin that was already drying out. The ocean licked the whale’s tail. The Brothers’ fingers traced lines along the flesh, smiles crossing and uncrossing each man’s face. At first Acka thought the Brothers were admiring or feeling empathy for the whale, and they’d make some effort to return the animal to the sea. With a concerted effort the twenty Brothers would be able to pull the whale back into the shallows where it would hopefully rectify its sonic miscalculation. Slowly Acka realised that this wasn’t the case. There was something about these men that told Acka they weren’t going to urge the creature back to the ocean. The hands, fingers, even cheeks, lingered too long on the hide. As looks veered and darted between them, an aggressive excitement emerged, gripping this herd of men. Acka heard an irritated voice hidden from view on the other side of the whale. ‘Where’s Crow?’

A similarly irritated voice replied. ‘Don’t be so bloody impatient!’

Another retorted. ‘The tide’s coming in.’

The sense of tension continued as Acka inspected the whale. She moved to the whale’s head and stared into the eye as big as her fist, the eyelid drooping low. Was this sadness or just the acceptance of an error? She felt a certain kinship to this animal, stranded, lost, isolated, with little hope of returning home.

A movement at the top of the dunes signalled Brother Crow’s arrival. He brandished a large flensing knife, shaking the long handled implement above his head with delight before he stumbled, then fell, down the sandbank causing several Brothers to shake their heads in frustrated disbelief. Brushing himself off, the clumsy man started again for the whale and on arrival wasted no time in horribly carrying out his assigned task. Crow swung back and delivered a hooked blow to the whale’s underbelly. Acka turned her head away from the near-field carnage, immediately
nauseous. Brother Red laughed. A jet of dark blood had sprayed from the whale’s wound hitting Brother Crow in the stomach, creating an abstract artwork. From the corner of her eye Acka saw Andromeda standing alone at the top of the dunes, surveying the bizarre situation.

The whale jerked mightily, tail and head arching to create a flattened “U” shape, paralysed there for longer than would seem real, then whacked down on to the sand, spraying water, an eclectic sized waterfall, back into the incoming surf. Acka was now doubled over holding both her arms across her stomach. Where had this pain come from?

Brother Red moved closer to Acka, an undertone of pure perversity infesting his voice. ‘Feeling empathetic, are we?’ He sniffed, looked at Brother Crow. ‘Don’t ask me how he knows what to do.’ He smiled mischievously, his attention back squarely on Acka. ‘Sometimes we get dolphins too. It’s amazing what the sea throws up.’

Wildly incensed at the remark, Acka stared Brother Red in the eye, his perversity doubling her sick feeling. Defiant, ignoring the pain as best she could, Acka turned back to the whale, peering into the beast’s eye. Brother Red laughed to himself. ‘Oh, Acka. You’re so sentimental. We’re doing nothing different to what’s been happening here for thousands of years. The earth is here for us to plunder. This will feed us for months.’ He lifted his hands. ‘Praise the Lord!’

Acka turned her attention to Peter who stood several metres away, feet apart, hands clasped behind his back, impassively watching the appalling spectacle unfold. ‘It’s true. The aboriginal peoples all along the coast used to do the same thing.’ His explanatory excuse of their behaviour was hardly comforting for Acka. What sort of
an aberrant place had Peter brought her to? Fear coursed through her as she realised how isolated the settlement really was.

A stream of water spilled from the whale’s eye and down its hide. The blowhole opened and closed rapidly as Brother Crow continued his awful activity, the rest of the Brothers standing back in reverence at his actions. Acka stared unblinking into the eye, one hand either side of the twitching orb, and as much as she could ascertain, watched the whale’s life slowly abate. The whale’s blood flowed out, mixing heavily with the sand. A number of Brothers, with Brother Crow’s direction, helped with the slaughter while several others had gone and returned with receptacles to transport the newly severed flesh. A wind whipped up on the beach suddenly, fiercely, as if trying to cover the sickening scene, the sand providing a multitude of tiny, stinging slaps.

The Brothers ploughed on. Acka realised that this is how they came to be. These men had continued to do what they wanted in the face of indoctrinated obstacles and authority. In some other inverse universe they might have been regarded as heroes for their adherence to personal principles. When the eyelid went slack she knew the whale’s essence had receded into the abyss. She felt like her own innards had been pulled onto the sand. Acka could take no more. She relieved herself from the clinical scene of slaughter, heading west along the beach. The further away she walked the more the pains in her stomach, and the nausea washing her senses, receded.

Acka made her way towards a rock shelf that had been partly uncovered by offshore winds. As she neared the rocks she could make out the curved white outlines of a large, half buried whale skeleton. This whale was much bigger than the beached animal. She walked in between the curved bones of the ribcage. Spreading
her arms out to her sides she was unable to touch either side. The idea of being caught in the belly of a whale swam in her thoughts. This skeleton most probably pre-dated the Brothers’ habitation of Fowlers Bay, but how could she be sure? If this whale had beached itself during their tenancy Acka surmised they would’ve been in a frenzied state for weeks. Perhaps this was the first time it had been uncovered since the early whaling days? Acka preferred this theory.

The wind suddenly surged through the huge ribcage, stronger blusters coming at random intervals. Wanting to taste more than the remnants of a lapsed mammal, the cold current of air easily penetrated Acka’s unsuitable clothing and seemingly her skin. At the same time the wind seemed to play the bones, an in situ instrument. Combined with the ocean crashing to the beach the noise became a strange singing coming from the lips of the sea, relayed through the sandblasted skeletal frame. The weird lilt cut through like a buzzing in her ears, a cross between the sounds of whale song and a distant children’s choir. The organic symphony quickly rose in intensity and level, the vibrations of the bones almost visible, vivid colours flashed in vision hurting her eyes. All at once the music turned to a discordant scream reaching a crescendo. Physically shaking, she lurched to one side, catching a rib bone to steady herself. Then the aural assault abruptly tapered away to nothing, leaving Acka blinking quickly, trying to dispel the remaining sounds from her ears and eyes. What was going on? She felt like she’d just been whacked with an atonal musical interpretation of her situation.

The Brothers down the beach appeared sharper in her vision, their jerky, stick figure like movements resembling characters in an amateur stop motion animation. Like on the train trip, Acka experienced a sense of time dislocation. Watching the Brothers toiling away, Acka felt that no-one here moved at the appropriate speeds,
that time had engaged her in a sinister game. Acka knew that even in this abnormal setting, the actions of the Brothers couldn’t be labelled normal. Her anxiety raised at the prospect of staying any longer in this surrealistic narrative into which she’d been thrust, she determinedly walked back down the beach.

A long wet slash of dark whale blood had cut a path through the sand to the surf. The blood slick in the water marked the direction of the strong beach current, sweeping to the east down the beach then in an arc out into the bay. Peter continued to survey the ugly scene of worker ants methodically devouring a carcass. This indeed was a landscape mutated over centuries by the deaths that had leaked into the ground. It seemed the Brothers had wholeheartedly welcomed such mutation with open arms.

Acka spoke to Peter’s back. ‘When are we leaving?’

Peter slowly turned, first his head then his whole body, an impassive bird. ‘You’re a treat, Acka.’ He smiled almost apologetically at Acka’s innocent question. His look told her that Peter never intended for Acka to leave Fowlers Bay.

Acka took a stunned steppd back and immediately felt a host of staring eyes upon her. A group of Brothers including Brothers Red and Crow had formed a semicircle behind Peter, a phalanx of personal vultures. The whale slaughter had instilled an excited bloodlust in the congregation. Their eyes spoke of imminent butchery.

Brother Peter’s voice never wavered. His even tone of understated menace showed he was at ease with himself and what he was doing. ‘You’re perhaps a little too old for most of our liking, but as with the whale, we generally have to make do with what is provided for us.’ His actions, like his voice, were of a natural, well-versed, knowledgeable predator, comfortable with his self-taught skills. At the same
time Acka felt she may have been misreading Peter’s tone, and at any time he might quickly reveal he was playing an elaborate joke.

The punch line never came. Acka backed away, one step, another, warily looking at the Brothers’ faces, sand squeaking under her feet. The group of cassocked men stepped forward moving almost as one abject entity, Acka receiving the impression of them as a seething tentacled thing. She was determined not to let those tendrils wrap around her.

She turned and ran.

Peter remained statue-like as his brethren surged passed him after Acka’s fleeing figure. On the ridge of the dunes Andromeda had watched the short, menacing exchange between Peter, Acka, and the Brothers. Waving her hands, she called to Acka, motioning her to follow. With nothing to lose, Acka ran towards Andromeda in the plain hope that she wasn’t running to, rather than from, her imminent demise. Head down, legs pumping, her muscles were screaming by the time she’d scrambled to the top of the dune. When she looked up, Andromeda was nowhere to be seen. Acka was just about to scream bloody fury in frustration when she saw Andromeda’s figure on The Esplanade, jogging backwards still waving her arms indicating for Acka to follow. She’d already started back towards the town and, Acka realised, was heading towards the nearest safe haven, ironically, the church. Though she was seriously unfit, Acka’s youth held her in good stead long enough to get her to the church where Andromeda stood in the doorway watching the pursuit.
Andromeda puffed loudly even from her shortened run as she ushered Acka into the church then bolted the door shut. ‘What’s going on? What are they chasing you for?’

Acka looked around not sure what to do. ‘I think they want to kill me or something.’

‘What did you say to them?’ Andromeda and Acka barricaded the door with the nearest church pews, then quickly looked at each other and ran separately to every other exit they could find, making them locked and secure.

‘Nothing!’ Acka yelled to Andromeda as she did. ‘You’re not one of them?’

‘God, no, love. No, I’m not one of them.’

‘But you were giving a sermon this morning.’

‘I was making it up as I went along. I can’t help myself. I’m a performer. And they’re a captive audience. I also have a bit of leeway here. They abide me because of it.’

Even in this precarious position, Acka relished Andromeda’s direct answers.

The pursuers hadn’t fared so well. The dune ascent had taken a heavy toll on the Brothers. They panted and coughed at the top of the dune, sweat pouring from their ill, red faces. The chase had turned into an almost comedic spectacle as the wheezing and stumbling pursuers haphazardly made their way down the other side of the dune secure in the knowledge that Acka hadn’t gone far. Peter arrived at the church first. He had laconically strolled the distance from beach to church as if without a care in the world, while the puffing and panting stragglers sporadically arrived behind him. Brother Wren collapsed against the heavily adorned door, sinking down to the bottom only to speak into the gap between step and door, his voice floating erratically into the chamber. ‘Come out, come out, Acka. I want to…'
fiddle with you, lovely.’ The comment was made with all the enthusiasm of a deranged child presented with a new toy.

‘Quiet!’ Peter’s voice was commanding from the other side of the door, leaving Acka with no doubts who was the senior party in Fowlers Bay. He tried to explain their position. ‘Not all of us want to do bad things to you. But I am sure those who don’t, won’t help you. It’s just the way we are here. I tell you this so you can prepare yourself. There’s nothing like sharing.’

‘What about your religion? Your order?’

‘I never said we were pious.’

Acka tried to bluff them, offering money to leave her alone.

‘Don’t be stupid, Acka. Do we look like we need money here? You’ve got none anyway. I know that. You’ve got nothing, Acka.’ The words were reminiscent of something Stone had said.

‘Fuck you, arsehole.’

‘And what are you doing, Andrew?’

Acka looked to Andromeda, confused.

Andromeda pointed to herself. ‘He means me, the shit.’ She shouted at Peter through the door. ‘No offence, Sparrow, but I think you’re a little fucked in the head.’

‘I’m fucked in the head? That is rich coming from one such as yourself.’

‘Takes one to know one, honey.’

Acka couldn’t help but laugh at the comment even in the face of their dire predicament. Andromeda pulled an innocent face at Acka. ‘Well, a community consisting entirely of men. What was I supposed to think?’
‘Andrew. If you open the doors and deliver Acka to us, you’ll be delivered from us. We’ll grant you asylum due to your association here. He’s our patriarch is Brother Raven. You know that.’

‘I sure do now.’

There was a lull as both sides took stock of the situation. They both listened at the door as the Brothers mumbled between themselves. Then the door shuddered, kicked from outside. ‘LET ME IN, YOU FUCKING INSECTS!!’

Peter’s patience had momentarily reached its limit. Acka and Andromeda waited tensely for the proceedings to develop. Acka was mentally preparing for another physical assault on the premises, one she knew she and Andromeda couldn’t withstand for long if the Brothers combined their efforts.

‘Two can play at that game, ladies.’ The clicking of the locks echoed across the church chamber and at all the doors of the church. ‘So we’ve come to an impasse. Just as we cannot get in, you can’t get out.’ Regaining his even tone Peter addressed the besieged pair. ‘We’re not beyond giving chances here. We were given another chance. That’s why we’re here. It’s what you do with that chance that counts. We have made our chance… practical. So, it has been decided that a church setting invokes a biblical conundrum.’

Acka mouthed to Andromeda, what? She returned a frown.

‘What do you mean?’

Peter continued. ‘We’re prepared to grant you safe passage from the church if you, like Daniel in the book of Ezekiel, can interpret our dreams.’

Acka was stalling for time now. ‘I thought you said you weren’t religious.’

‘We’re not. I just like the conundrum it presents!’

‘How am I supposed to interpret all of your dreams? I’d need days.’
‘Not all. Just the one dream. Our dream.’

‘What dream is that?’

Peter laughed like he was trying to stop himself spitting out the funniest joke in the world. ‘We… huh ha ha, we can’t remember! You have to tell us.’

‘You want me to interpret a dream you can’t remember?’

On the other side of the door he smiled lasciviously. ‘Precisely.’

‘How the fuck am I supposed to do that?’

‘There’s no need to use… profanity, my dear.’

‘That’s not fair.’

‘That, my dear Acka, is not my problem. You have until morning. Then we come back with work tools.’

‘What if I do it?’

‘You can walk free from the church.’

‘What about after that?’

‘Where you go after that, and how you get there, is up to you. We’re generous, but not that generous.’

From their side of the door, the pair heard the predatory group shuffle away.

‘Will they keep their word?’

Andromeda frowned. ‘Who knows? Really, I should’ve known there was something weird going on. I’ve known enough weird people in my time. I should’ve sniffed their bullshit a mile away. I didn’t think they were sick, though. Like that.’

‘So you think they’re deranged?’

‘They’re as sober as judges! Completely sane. In possession of all their faculties. I thought they were real men too.’

‘They’re not men?’
‘I don’t mean like me, darling. As you may have guessed, I’m six inches less of a man than I once was. No, I mean at least the common type.’

Andromeda dispelled any lingering thoughts Acka had as to whether Peter was actually one of their number. Her spirits sunk. She sat in one of the pews with head in her hands. Well, there wasn’t much to do now. ‘What are you doing here? They don’t seem like your sort of people.’

‘Are they anyone’s type of people?’ Andromeda sighed. ‘Brother Raven’s my uncle. Well, my grand-uncle actually. He’s loopy. Though I didn’t exactly make it clear I wasn’t Andrew anymore, so my position’s somewhat precarious. Still, when your family’s sick you go, don’t you? He paid for me to get here.’ Andromeda explained however that her presence wasn’t completely altruistic. ‘Don’t think I’ll be seeing any of his leftover assets now when he drops off the perch.’

‘Why didn’t they attack you?’

‘I’m pretty sure they thought I was “real”, one of those common type women, when someone was corresponding with me. I think, well, I know it was one of these fruit cakes. When they found out I wasn’t, they’ve basically left me alone. I don’t think it’s got anything to do with being related to Raven either. I mean, apparently when he lost his mind and couldn’t drive up and down The Esplanade, they just told him they’d driven him. So I don’t see why they wouldn’t say the same type of thing to him if they did anything to me. Maybe they’re only interested in the real thing. Maybe they thought I’d become one of them. Who knows? You can’t argue with psychos.’ Acka was reminded of Stone and the incident on her way to Sydney where the passengers suspected she was somehow psychotic. Truly, there was no arguing with psychos. And if you couldn’t argue the point then what chance was there of
winning? Andromeda continued. ‘But it looks like I’m stuck right in it now, doesn’t it?’

‘Thanks.’

‘That’s alright, dear.’

Acka sighed and looked around the empty church, safe for the moment.

‘Why do you call yourself Andromeda?’

She shifted her weight to one leg and raised her opposite hand into the air, the pose of a 1950s starlet. ‘Because, honey, I’m a star.’

Acka realised she’d managed to get herself into a dire situation with little chance of escape. These men were obviously capable of inflicting a world of trauma judging by their collective slaughter of the whale. There was no point in trying to run away. Apart from the fact they’d easily catch her, she didn’t know where to go and could only end up in the middle of nowhere without provisions or water. She’d be lucky to last a day on the Nullarbor even if she did evade them. Despair swamped her. The scales of luck had once again tipped back to the bad side. How foolish she felt, after escaping Sydney and the seemingly hopeless situation she faced in Adelaide only to end up in this black hole of decrepitude.

Andromeda advised her to get some sleep. She couldn’t. She lay awake worrying about one simple, important question. Who could she trust? Peter had lied to her, just as Cord had. Andromeda had helped her and seemed at least sympathetic to the situation but what if she changed her mind in the middle of the night? She hadn’t said a word to her before they barricaded themselves in the church. What if her story was only one to get her on side, only to give Acka up in the morning and thereby get herself off the hook? Acka resolved to stay awake all night just in case
but around three in the morning, and after hearing Andromeda’s heavy snoring from one of the pews, she felt herself edging into slumber.

For all their bravado and bluster Acka sensed something brittle about these “Brothers”, like they could shatter if hit in the precise weak spot. The key was Peter’s sudden frustrated outburst. With that image receding in her mind Acka drifted to sleep.

Acka woke to heavy knocking on the church doors. Peter’s muffled voice penetrated well into the room. ‘This is your wake up call, Acka. You too, Andromeda.’

Andromeda stood next to the door with head inclined towards the wood.

‘They’ve been milling around for about half an hour. I hope you’ve got something, love, because I certainly don’t.’

She’d survived the night. Andromeda hadn’t given her up so there was at least one positive thing to focus on. Acka almost automatically started moving the pews from the door.

Andromeda looked at her stunned. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m going to tell them their dream.’

Andromeda put one hand to Acka’s forehead, checking for fever.

‘It’s okay. I know what it is.’

Andromeda placed one hand daintily to her chest. ‘You do?’

‘I do.’

‘How?’

‘I don’t know.’ And truly at that point Acka didn’t know how she knew. Nor did she know what she was going to say.
‘Well that’s all very heartening, dear. I’m glad you’ve got everything under control.’

‘I guess you’ll have to trust me.’

‘I guess I will.’

Acka removed the remaining pews and opened the heavy wooden doors to the congregated Brothers at the foot of the steps. Peter now dressed in the Brothers’ uniform black cassock stood at the head of the group. With his arms folded behind his back he looked like he was a bust of himself on a covered plinth and supporting column. The rest of the Brothers milled about, aping Peter’s stern, though willing to listen, expression.

‘Now, Acka. Tell us.’ He smiled, amused at his own cleverness. ‘What does our dream mean? What do we dream of?’

Acka felt it was perhaps ironic that they had asked her about a dream when that was all she seemed to be doing lately, and thus was feeling a growing connection to the realm of Morpheus. If the dreams had been talking to her, then perhaps it was time to listen.

She took a deep, confident breath, not knowing what she was going to say. The Brothers stood tensely, the soft ripple of waves breaking beyond the dunes providing the musical backdrop. Acka looked over their heads to the bleak surrounds of the town, focusing beyond the things that existed before her eyes.

Images materialised out of the air, swamping her like a freak wave with such force she had to blink to make sure they weren’t real, though in fact, she knew them to be real, of a certain quality. These were night visions from a dream she was only just remembering. The images were jumbled, mixed together, out of order. They
crashed through her like a hot wind trying to take her flesh into their realm and she
fumbled trying to put them into the proper order.

‘Whenever you’re ready.’ Peter’s fast rising glee was palpable.

‘You see… wind… um… an…’ No. That wasn’t right. Acka started again.

‘Uh…’

‘Yes?’ Brother Robin’s raspy, eager voice was unsettling, distracting. She
quickly recomposed herself. The Brother’s were on the verge of rushing her. She
concentrated and the images swirled together in a sloppy, though understandable,
geometric landscape, each with its particular place, a map she could walk through, at
least in her mind. This was her only chance.

‘You dream of a giant statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver,
brass belly and thighs, legs of iron, and feet of clay.’ Acka walked towards the statue
in her dream map. A wind struck up, quickly gathering into a massive dust storm
with pieces of debris barraging the statue, the metal cracking, shredding, and
screeching in pain, the shards collected and carried away by the fierce winds.

‘Underneath the metal there’s a tree, so magnificent, so huge, that it stretches almost
to heaven.’ In her dream map the tree was located in the bare back yard of the
Fowlers Bay church, fenced in by a dry, rotting paling fence. ‘All around this strong
tree is a beautiful, lush landscape.’ The buffeted tree, shaking and swaying,
threatened to be uprooted. The frenzied wind ripped the top layers of earth away into
the ether exposing the deep and twisted root system. ‘This tree is flowering and each
flower has its own unique pattern and colouring.’ She flicked her gaze momentarily
to the Brothers. ‘Each one of you.’

The vision’s vivid colours and sounds intensified. Intertwined with the tree’s
roots, puncturing them in a myriad of places, were the bodies of women, girls, and
boys, their mouths splayed open, horrid, silent black holes. Acka instinctively knew that the remains of these people, the Brothers’ previous victims, were scattered somewhere throughout the township’s precincts. ‘Birds and insects and other animals, live in the tree’s crevasses, holes, and between the buttresses.’

The bodies were soon flayed by the whipping winds, the flesh, muscles and sinews stripped from bone. The tree had similarly been reduced of foliage, a grey, mutated, yearning skeletal thing. ‘The animals are thankful they have such a wonderful and beautiful place to live.’

The Brothers were shifting nervously, looking at each other quizzically.

In Acka’s vision the wind died down to a mere bluster. The skeletons raised themselves from the ground and held hands. The wind whistled through the bones, and they sang to Acka. Each one of these people had their own story, now told as one. The images flashed behind her retina faster than she could collect them, but the message was clear. Their smiling faces on arrival in Fowlers Bay, the Brothers’ lurid faces, Peter’s or one of the others, then the silent stricken, drawn, howling, distorted faces, expressions of fear, agony, pain, suffering, and torture. Acka could hear the sounds of their final moments in the music of the bones that was infused with the desolate landscape. The sounds weren’t music as could be described from traditional instruments but more a humming and vibration across a forgotten spectrum. And through this ghostly music, the dead spoke to her, speaking the truth.

‘And this place is where they live, and die, eternally happy.’

The church and its surrounds disappeared and Acka and the skeletons stood on a stretch of sand in the black vista of space. Behind her there was something else, a presence, although “behind” wasn’t the right word. No, more than one. Several presences permeated the space between reality and dream. This existence covered the
skeletons, wrapping them once again in their flesh and blood forms. They collectively nodded at her, and she knew that with this discovery they had the simple pleasure of “talking” to someone. Someone had heard their stories. Was this where her dreams had been pushing her all along? Certainly this was the only time so far they’d made any sense – apart from the fact that she was dreaming while awake.

The images faded quickly and she returned to reality, her eyes focusing on the present situation, addressing Peter with a direct stare. ‘That’s what you dream.’

Peter’s smug countenance had turned to shock, and then a sour sneer during Acka’s answer. ‘How could you possibly…?’

Surprising herself, Acka spoke defiantly. ‘It’s the only dream you could all have had.’

‘How…?’

‘Because you think you’re special. You thought you were doing me a favour, bringing me here, didn’t you?’ She squinted from the morning sunlight. ‘But it’s all a lie. And you know it’s a lie. You’re not special at all.’

‘We are. We are very special.’

‘Sure. Sure you are.’

‘We are.’

‘Fine. I won’t argue with you.’

‘You won’t be the last, Acka.’

‘We’ll see about that.’

Acka found herself panting, suddenly out of breath.

Coming out of his shock, Peter had found another level of rage. ‘By the time you tell anyone and they make it out here, we’ll have made provisions. All they’ll
find is a community of humble men, going about their business with little fuss and with no concern for the outside world.'

‘Maybe, Peter. Maybe.’

‘You’ve got no family, no money. What are you going to do? Nobody would miss you. Why not be thankful in serving our purpose?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Take your chances then. The Nullarbor is all yours.’

She heard Brother Wren’s voice quiver from somewhere among the group.

‘She is a devil.’

Another disagreed. ‘She’s a saviour.’ Acka thought the dissenter may have been Brother Crow. Then a string of Brothers staked their claim to what Acka was.

‘She’s not human.’

‘She’s a prophet.’

‘She is a witch. A hag.’ Brother Wedge spat. ‘We can’t let her go. She’s a ruiner.’

Peter looked at his companions. ‘Perhaps…’

‘You promised!’

‘Who’s going to know? You are feisty, Acka. No doubt quite tasty too.’

‘I’m no beached whale, you fucker.’

‘We’ll see about that.’

Each looked around. Who would be the first? Crow stepped forward. Acka delivered a straight punch to his nose and heard two distinctive cracks. Pain shot through her pinkie finger indicating that one of the cracks was a broken bone of hers. The other crack was self evident. Blood poured from Crow’s nose, over his hands and lips, the flesh immediately swelling up furiously. He dropped to his knees, the
gleaming crimson drops splashing to the ground contrasting vividly to the bleak township setting. The stand-off remained as Crow crawled out of the way. Knowing there was no chance of escape, Acka prepared herself to inflict as much damage as possible on this perverse mob. She fixed her eyes on Peter. Without fail, he’d bear the brunt of Acka’s assault.

From the next street a distinctive thick, low rumble sound settled over the group. All eyes turned to see Raven’s Falcon swing round the corner into the street and hurtle toward the church. The Brothers scattered to either side of the road. Andromeda sat cheekily behind the wheel.

While Acka was involved in her game of words, and not trusting the Brothers, Andromeda had silently crept from the church making her way to Raven’s garage. Faced with the choice between the Falcon and Peter’s solar car, there was no choice. The car fairly gleamed muscle and rage, a relic from a time of pure excess.

Andromeda pulled up in front of the church, got out and stood next to Acka.

‘I thought it didn’t work.’

‘What? Of course it works. The old fool had just disconnected the battery and a couple of other things so no-one could drive it but him. He’s crazy, you know. Paranoid. And none of these loopies know the first thing about cars. Not that I do, but a girl’s got to take care of herself. He told me what he’d done so I just reconnected everything. Now, I don’t know what you did, but they won’t hang off forever.’

The dust stirred up by the machine beast was already settling, scarring the immaculately polished paintwork. The collected Brothers stared at Acka and Andromeda with a barely suppressed ire as Andromeda ushered Acka to the car.
Peter’s voice fairly dripped wolf fury. ‘What do you think you’re doing, Andromeda?’

‘Just taking you up on your offer. Raven won’t mind.’

‘I think he might.’

‘Are you men of your word or not?’

Peter scowled. The other Brothers continued as if competing in a word game for the shocked and numb.

‘She’s destruction, thrust at us from the heart of the desert.’

‘She is mud and stone.’

Andromeda opened the driver side door. ‘Get in. I’ll distract them for a while.’

‘What?’

Andromeda pushed Acka into the driver’s seat. ‘Go, girl!’

Acka stared blankly at the car’s controls, pressed the accelerator too hard, over-revving the engine. And stalled it. She glanced at the Brothers whose gaunt faces had changed from sourness to a palpable anger. Andromeda was horror-struck.

‘What are you doing?’

Embarrassed, shaking her head, Acka whispered. ‘I don’t know how to drive.’

‘What?’

Acka slid across to the passenger seat, looking at the Brothers out the back windshield. ‘C’mon, will you!’

‘But my clothes are…’ With Peter in the lead, the Brothers began to stalk slowly toward the car. Startled, Andromeda realised the gravity of the situation,
jumped in and slammed the driver’s door shut. ‘You’re right. There’s no need to be a heroine here, love. Let’s blow this shop of fruity pops.’

She dropped the car into gear and roared away fishtailing up the road. Andromeda checked the rear-vision mirror and shrieked. Acka jumped and peered through the back windscreen, unable to see anything for the dust. ‘What? What’s the matter?’

‘Oh! Look at me. I’m a wreck!’

Like iron filings to magnets, the Brothers had attracted each other in some esoteric manner to the far flung outpost of Fowlers Bay where they could carry out their shared delusions. The whale was a symbol of the Brothers’ degeneration, isolating itself, even if only because of a sonic miscalculation. Each one of the Brothers had also effectively isolated themselves, voluntarily beaching themselves in Fowlers Bay’s secluded environment.

Driving away from Fowlers Bay Acka had the distinct impression that these were men who would eventually devour themselves. Death would one day come to one of their own. When it did, Acka couldn’t imagine there being any more remorse for that poor soul from the remaining Brothers than that which they’d displayed for the butchered whale or their previous human victims.

‘Tell me something. How did you know all that shit that you went on about at the church?’

‘I… I don’t know… I guess…’ She wanted to tell Andromeda about the dream, how the land talked to her, how the ghosts put words into her head and they came out of her mouth the next morning. ‘I guess I’m just a good judge of character.’
‘Oh, really, darling? And that’s how you ended up back there? Because you’re such a good judge of character?’

‘Yeah, well… shut up!’

‘You said it.’

Travelling in the Falcon increased the weirdness factor for Acka. The vehicle was so similar to the one in her dream it was uncanny. Could it be just a strange coincidence? If she had only come upon the car she would’ve said yes, but the revelatory vision of the previous night had made her think twice. She felt like she knew this car inside and out. This knowledge of course didn’t extend to operating the machine. Andromeda cut in on her thoughts. ‘Do you think the car’s worth anything?’

‘It’d have to be, wouldn’t it?’

‘I suppose we’ll find out, won’t we?’

‘Y’know, I think I had a dream about this car.’

‘This car?’

‘This type of car, I guess.’

‘When?’

‘Back home.’

‘Dream much?’

Acka said nothing. The heavy roar of the engine pushed Acka into a state where she mused on her strange dreaming events, brought on by Andromeda’s question. For all that had happened she hadn’t had time to investigate the links that were forming somewhere in her subconscious. The repeated episodes indicated there
was no denying something was going on, the images becoming stronger since leaving Sydney. Was she in fact experiencing anything at all? She’d never been superstitious in nature, or indeed believed in the supernatural. Living in Sydney with her family had taught her there was nothing except reality, and dealing with that was hard enough let alone trying to work out if there was something “else” going on in the world. The visions at Fowlers were the first that spoke to her directly, affecting events in the waking world. Had the other dreams simply been a prelude or a signal in preparation for the Fowlers Bay confrontation? How could they possibly mean anything more than coincidence? Maybe the clearer air and the constant storm of new experiences coupled with wildly fluctuating emotional states had jolted Acka’s subconscious into overdrive, after the barren state of what she was already thinking of as her previous life.

A sign proclaimed they’d reached the Head of the Bight. The sun was setting and they decided to stop somewhere to sleep lest they collapse in a narcoleptic schism at any moment. Andromeda pulled over to a long disused truck stop and they discussed where each of them was headed. Acka pointed out she needed to get to The Fitz, at least that was where she hoped to end up. Andromeda hailed from Darwin, “or thereabouts”, and well, she supposed they may as well head north together. Andromeda investigated the back seat, and to Acka’s amazement, adjusted the seat to a flat position so that they could stretch out completely in the back.

Much later when the sun had disappeared, replaced by the endless night sky, Andromeda pointed out she hadn’t slept so close to a woman for a long time.

‘Since when?’

‘Since forever.’
Acka swam through the silent, light blue underworld, a labyrinthine system of flooded underground caves... her body the immense, floating, bulk of a whale... the millennia old water’s icy coolness permeating her thick skin...

The cave system’s passageways narrowed, rock scraping her extremities...
she felt her body elongating in response...

Although at home in these mysterious depths, she was naturally, instinctively, searching for the surface...

...via a myriad of holes in the ground above, shafts of sunlight penetrated the water, the light catching the millions of particles of dust suspended in the fluid...

She sped up through the water, guided by the light, eager to burst through to the land above, her body now longer than any whale...

She had changed forms...

Choosing the right opening she speared from the water into the brightness of the sun...

The route to the surface was predetermined by all that had come before...

* * *

The sun woke Acka, warming her face. Andromeda remained asleep beside her. The night before, the distant muffled roar of the ocean had lulled her to sleep. The car was terribly uncomfortable. Her back ached. She got up gently ensuring Andromeda remained undisturbed. Acka headed towards the ocean and in ten minutes came across the most spectacular coastal scene. Here was the Great Australian Contradiction, where the waterless Nullarbor Plain met the vast expanse of the Great
Southern Ocean. Driven by the cold southern winds the water lashed the cliffs the same way they had for millions of years. She stood looking at the sheer cliffs, as if savagely bitten by a leviathan in one clean chomp. The cliff’s coloured layers showed a silent history of millions of years. Here she had the distinct feeling that she’d also been bitten, chunks ripped, excised from her. If she was cut open, what would the layers set down inside her tell someone? That moment, staring out at the ancient blue expanse, was perhaps the first time Acka had ever been physically alone, in the sense of a solitary being standing on their own.

She was on her own.

Her two escapes from Fowlers Bay and Stone’s pursuit had in part given Acka a new sense of herself and enough confidence to ask Andromeda what she quickly realised she needed to.

By the time Acka returned to the car, Andromeda was awake leaning against the Falcon’s rear door, waiting.

‘Knew you couldn’t have gone far. Ready to go?’

Acka stopped Andromeda as she was about to get in the car. ‘I have to ask you something.’

‘Ooh. Sounds serious, love.’

Acka held her stern countenance. ‘Before we go any further, I need to know whether you’re going to fuck me over too. Because if you are, you may as well leave me here. Right now. Okay?’

Andromeda’s eyes widened in shock, she placed a hand on her minimal breast. ‘Why would I do that, love?’

‘Why does anybody do anything? It’s just… look, I’ve already been shit upon from a great height twice in the last week by people who pretended to be my
friend, or at least made out like they were helping me. I appreciate you helping me get out of Fowlers Bay, but if you’re just gonna, y’know, turn into a, I dunno… a… whatever, I don’t know… just tell me the truth.’

‘Acka, honey.’ Andromeda stepped to Acka, took her hand and looked directly at her. ‘I won’t fuck you over. I promise.’

Acka kept her eyes focused on the ground. ‘How do I know? I don’t even know you.’

‘Look at me.’ Acka did, noticing for the first time Andromeda’s deep green eyes. ‘Do I look like someone who’s had an easy ride? I’ve had my fair share of being fucked over, under, up, down, and sideways, and it’s shit. I wouldn’t want to make anyone feel like that. Okay?’

Acka felt something she hadn’t felt for a long time – the small, flickering flame of hope.

‘But you were trying to screw your uncle out of money?’

‘Oh, that’s *completely* different.’

Andromeda opened her door and got in. Acka did the same.

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because that, my dear…’ Andromeda kicked the engine over and revved hard. ‘…is *family*.’
Part 3

Perth /The Fitz
Chapter 5

The Western Australian Border Office checkpoint was flanked by two huge billboards advocating and reminding travellers that in the state of Western Australia water was a precious and valuable resource, the misuse of which was a punishable offence. Andromeda brought the Falcon to a stop at the checkpoint’s boom gates. A tall, well built, and clearly bored, Western Australia Border Guard sporting dark sunshades stepped from the checkpoint office. Delighted at this hunky turn of events, Andromeda produced a compact from somewhere on her person and quickly fixed her make-up and hair. ‘A girl has to be prepared.’

The square-jawed guard asked for their license, registration papers, fuel permits, and purpose in Western Australia.

‘We’re just out for an afternoon jaunt, darling.’ Andromeda smiled coquettishly at the guard, while she flicked her hand at the glove box, indicating to Acka where the required documents were kept. ‘You wouldn’t see too many girls like me out here, would you, love?’ The guard agreed, he didn’t. ‘Ask for my number and you might see a lot more of a girl like me, if you wanted. I’m open to requests.’

When the guard blushed noticeably even over his sun-reddened features, Acka got the impression he wouldn’t mind that too much. She handed the papers to Andromeda who in turn passed them to the patrolman without checking them. ‘I’m sure you know which is which.’
He checked through the papers methodically. ‘Says here the car is registered to a, Randy Bush?’

Acka couldn’t help herself. ‘Randy Bush?’

Andromeda leaned over to Acka, quietly stating, ‘Oh, I know. His real name would you believe. I couldn’t have come up with something better if I’d tried.’ She turned back to the guard. ‘That’s my uncle. Is there a problem?’

The guard asked if the Falcon was a replica. ‘Of course not. It’s all original.’ She smiled sexily. ‘Just like me.’

The guard arranged the papers into a neat stack, smoothed the creases as best he could, and returned them to Andromeda. Surprisingly to Acka, everything was in order. Brother Raven’s fastidiousness lived up to the legend.

Realising that this was the first point of call for an agency of any authority, Acka asked the guard if she could make a report of a certain incident in Fowlers Bay. The guard took a hand held computer from his belt and told Acka to speak her details and a statement of the incident into the microphone on the device. Once she was finished the guard assured Acka he would forward the report to the relevant jurisdictional authorities.

With a ‘Welcome to Western Australia’ the guard ushered them on their way, Andromeda smiling and waving her fingers at him as they drove away.

Crossing into Western Australia Acka got a renewed sense of hope. Considering the turmoil she’d already endured she could hardly believe her journey was halfway over. If she made it no further than Perth, then maybe in some small way, she could be happy.
A vintage XC Ford Falcon was not a normal occurrence on the streets of Perth. Citizens stopped and stared as the black beast throatily gurgled past. Andromeda took this as a sign. She slowed, rolled down the window and waved to the onlookers, blowing kisses, proclaiming she always attracted attention, wherever she went, a confirmation of her star status. They were stopped several times by the police to check the car’s permits. The amount of law enforcement agency cars and officers patrolling the streets was astounding. They were everywhere. In opposition to their role, there seemed to be an underlying tension to the town, indicating that at the slightest provocation the police might take out whoever they suspected of disrupting the heavily held peace. Indeed there seemed to be more governmental cars – Police, Military, Water Board Authority, Environmental Agency – on the road than anything else.

Andromeda decided they needed some “down time” after the tension of Fowlers Bay and had to go to this bar she’d heard about called, Live Ones. ‘It’s great, heaps of great guys apparently. Probably not your type, though. You’ll love it.’ Acka wasn’t sure that she would.

The A-frame chalkboard out the front of the bar declared the band Jiwarli was playing. As soon as they entered Andromeda went to get them drinks. The mainly inattentive crowd talked among themselves, a few people were on the dance floor. Almost imperceptibly Acka felt herself drawn to the stage like metal to a magnet. A singer, guitarist and double bass player were performing. The guitarist was an Aboriginal woman, her dreadlocks were intertwined with gold, red, green, silver ribbons like thick fireworks exploding from her head and wore a leather jacket with a dot painting on the back. The male bass player, also Aboriginal, was virtually black, his body shape resembling his upright bass. The guitarist exuded a cool
sexuality as opposed to the spiked and bleached blonde haired singer who struck just about every rock cliché that wasn’t appropriate for the acoustic sounds the band was producing. Wearing a long brown leather jacket that reached to the floor he looked as though he would’ve preferred to be in a high-powered rock band. Indeed, his put on swagger suggested that was where he thought he should be.

Koko strummed her guitar, her stomach turning like it was actually being twisted. She’d been experiencing the increasingly acute pangs of nausea for the last few hours which had increased terribly in the last few minutes, receiving one massive jolt that made her sway. Someone, or something, that was upsetting her guts was closer than ever. Who they were or what they looked like she didn’t know, she just felt their presence. She’d only felt a similar thing a few times before in her life. Whoever it was, she knew that meant good and bad tidings for both of them. Already she’d hit several wrong chords in previous songs and had started the current one in the wrong key. She mouthed “sorry” to the lead singer who glared at her with thinly veiled anger. Sweating heavily, feeling sicker by the second, Koko looked at the crowd, saw a thin, plain looking girl wearing a heavy black vest moving toward the stage. Yeah, she was the epicentre of the feeling. An invisible beam seemed to be cutting straight from the girl into Koko’s guts.

After she played the last chords of the song, Koko unceremoniously vomited all over the stage in a sudden uncontrolled spasm. Patrons near the stage scattered to miss the splash, Acka catching the most vomit spray of anyone.

The disgusted singer blew up. ‘Oh, for fuck’s sake! That’s it!’ He jabbed two fingers pistol-like at Koko. ‘Fuck you!’ Then he pointed to the bass player who
remained stony-faced as he attended to the doubled-over guitarist. ‘And fuck you!’

Dripping black ego-angst, the singer stormed from the stage and left the venue, bustling patrons out of the way.

The bass player announced they’d be taking a short break.

Half an hour later, her churning stomach now under control, Koko approached Acka, pointing to where Acka had cleaned the spew from her vest. ‘I’m really sorry about that.’

‘It’s okay. I’m sort of used to it.’ Acka elaborated after Koko’s quizzical look. ‘My mother was sick for a long time. Cancer.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry.’ Koko held out her hand. ‘I’m Koko.’ Acka was about to shake her hand when a bolt of static electricity arced between their fingers, propelling their hands away from each other.

‘Ow! Shit! Sorry. I’m Acka.’

They both rubbed their fingers and then delicately shook hands.

‘Acka? Like Acca-Dacca?’

‘What?’

‘Y’know, AC/DC. The band.’

Acka was still drawing a blank. Koko began singing. ‘Y’know, you... shook me all night long, and all that.’

Acka frowned unknowingly.

‘Not into rock ‘n’ roll history?’

‘Sorry.’

‘Well, the least I can do is buy you a drink.’
Koko came back with one for herself and the bass player whom she introduced as Djambuwal. Andromeda excused herself from a group of new acquaintances and strolled over, a martini perched delicately in her hand. ‘Making friends with the band, Acka? You groupie slut.’ Andromeda introduced herself noticing the bass player standing silently off to one side behind Koko, and gave him a long look up and down. ‘Who’s this tall, dark, and handsome?’

‘That’s Djambuwal.’

‘You’re a big hunk of a man, aren’t you?’

Oblivious to Andromeda’s chat-up compliment, Djambuwal sat down. ‘Yes.’

Koko giggled. ‘He doesn’t talk much, but he writes a lot of songs.’

Andromeda sipped deeply of her drink, pinkie finger outstretched. ‘What happened with your singer?’

‘What hasn’t happened? Ego, mainly. Rich kid with dreams beyond his ability.’

Acka smirked. ‘I know the type.’

Koko looked to Djambuwal. ‘He’s gone? Yeah?’ The stoic bassist nodded. ‘Probably best.’ She sighed. ‘Unfortunately, it was his van we were using to get around. So, looks like we’ve got to find another way to get back up the coast.’

‘How far?’

‘All the way.’

‘To The Fitz?’

‘Yep. Round about there or so. Got some gigs on the way. Djam’s going back to the Kimberley for a while afterwards.’
Acka looked at Andromeda. Knowing Acka’s monetary situation, Andromeda pre-empted Acka’s question. ‘The more the merrier, I suppose. Share the expenses and you can come with us.’

Koko turned to Djambuwal who paused for a moment before coolly nodding his head once. ‘Well, that’s one problem solved. Can either of you sing?’

Andromeda smiled wider than a setting sun. ‘Oh, darling! I thought you’d never ask!’

‘Great. I’ll get my Songbook and you can use that to learn the songs.’

‘Sure. What’s a songbook?’

Koko explained that a Songbook helped you learn songs quicker. Using an earpiece music and lyrics were transferred to the “learning centre” of the brain via ultrasonic waves either subliminally while you were asleep or listening normally while you were awake. ‘It’s not 100% effective, maybe eighty five to ninety percent. So every now and again you’re gonna fuck up and sing the wrong word or something. But that’s okay until you learn them properly. And there’s not so much time. Your first gig’s tomorrow!’

* * *

Djambuwal and Koko finished the gig as a mainly instrumental set, Djambuwal providing some sparse and esoteric lyrics to a handful of songs. Live Ones was a twenty-four hour venue and early in the morning the four of them poured out of the venue half drunk, and loaded the Falcon with the band’s equipment. All agreed that they probably needed some sleep before pushing on and eschewing searching for a hotel room, they flaked in the car. A pair of police officers tapped on the window
about eight in the morning, informing them they’d have to move on or incur a loitering fine. Koko was less than impressed. ‘Fucking fascists.’

Soon they reached the outskirts of Perth, travelling along the Great West Coast Road through the coastal suburbs. Much the same as those of the East Coast did, the suburbs along the Western Australian coast blended into one another, though stringent building and environmental codes had produced a less condensed version. Andromeda drove in silence, Songbook in her ear head nodding along to Jiwarli’s music. Djambuwal played a combat game on his 3D handheld hologram gaming machine. The figures swirled in front of him in the back seat. Surreal splashes of blood seemed to hit the seats as an upright, muscled humanoid tiger did battle with a female cyborg elf. The two characters jumped and smashed each other in mid-air. The elf executed an elaborate running jump-kick manoeuvre, spinning in the air several times and finished with her firing shoulder mounted guns. The tiger swayed, stars circling its head, then slumped to the ground, defeated. Djambuwal scowled and clicked the “YES” icon to start again. Koko noticed Acka watching the mid-air tourney. She caught Acka’s eye, nodded towards Djambuwal. ‘He loves that retro stuff.’

Acka had been free of dreams for the few days since Fowlers Bay. Perhaps they were only preludes leading up to that intense situation. She’d heard of things like that happening to people, their sixth sense coming to the fore for one shining moment. Yet, even though her reasoning was plausible, she was still unable to convince herself that was the end of it.
Andromeda’s first gig with Jiwarli, at a dive on the suburban outskirts of Carnarvon, initially had the makings of one of the great disasters of modern history. Andromeda opened her mouth and hit the flattest note known to humanity and possibly inhumanity. Acka nearly fell off her chair. Koko grimaced. Djambuwal remained his stoic self, cocooned in his own musical capsule. Koko’s Songbook obviously had no function to help singers hit the right key. To compensate for her first up stumble, Andromeda screeched the next line. Koko grimaced again. By the end of the song she’d at least managed to find a listenable medium. Even though the small audience provided only minimal applause, Andromeda did nothing to suggest she was in any way floundering. She moved slinkily across the stage and by the time they finished their third and final set she had them eating out of the palm of her hand, her bawdy quips, short stories, and expressive nature offsetting her vocal deficiencies. Throwing air kisses to the audience as she left the stage, Acka decided Andromeda’s self-proclaimed star status was at least minimally justified.

*   *   *

The next morning of their journey up the Western Australian coast Koko suggested they go to her favourite place, Jiwarli Beach. Her excitement at the agreement was infectious leaving the car’s eclectic group of occupants feeling uplifted.

The cloudbank of a major storm formed off-shore and travelled parallel with them for several hours hugging the coast of the Exmouth Gulf. The billowing clouds resembled sharpened mandibles, and twisted claws, and the elongated muscles of unknown sea creatures inhabiting the depths. Darkened patches of sky became black gates, trapped in the moving clouds, opening in to sky-space. They arrived at Jiwarli
Beach only to meet the storm front viciously converging on their position. Koko was going to suggest sleeping on the beach for the night but the storm put an end to that and Andromeda was ‘tired of sleeping rough.’

They emerged from their shared motel room in the morning and headed back to Jiwarli Beach. The gurgle in Koko’s stomach was at a low ebb, her nausea controllable but Andromeda noticed her sick look. ‘You’re looking a bit green again, dear.’

‘I was sick again this morning.’

‘You’re not pregnant are you? I don’t think I could fit a child into my life at the moment. Not since my singing career’s started to take off.’

‘I’m not pregnant.’

Djambuwal looked to Koko. She allayed his concern. ‘I’m okay. I’ll be okay. It’s fine.’

Andromeda whispered to Acka. ‘She’s pregnant, I tell you.’ She raised a finger in emphasis. ‘A girl knows.’

Koko heard, rolling her eyes, and let the matter go.

The clouds clumped in the sky over the beach like dark stepping stones tracing a path to the horizon, leading to a distant truth, a distant time. Koko threw her shoes off, and following her lead, Acka did the same before stepping down onto the sand. Djambuwal pulled out his acoustic guitar from the rear of the car and sat on the grassy embankment bordering the beach, absently strumming, immediately looking like he was a permanent fixture of the landscape. Andromeda remained in the car. Acka called to her. ‘Coming?’
‘Not me, dear. Not really my scene, the beach.’ She put her hands on her cheeks, and sucked them in. ‘Too harsh on the skin.’ She pulled out her compact and began an elaborate make-up regime.

Koko and Acka walked silently for a number of minutes, the affinity that Koko professed for the beach readily evident in her walk and demeanour.

‘So what’s so special about this beach?’

‘This is my real home. This beach.’ She pointed to the north end.

‘Underneath that coconut palm was where my father, Padaru, found me when I was a baby. That’s why I’m Koko. Or it could be that he named after where I live, Kokoberra up in the Gulf, but I like to think the other.’

‘You were abandoned?’

Koko was matter-of-fact. ‘That’s what I’m told.’

‘And Koko’s not your real name?’

‘No, it’s my nickname. My real name’s Wilintji Jitai. Wilintji was a Dreamtime woman who defied men and sang the sacred songs reserved for them. She danced some warriors to death and ate them. Jitai was this bold woman in another aboriginal story. And now it’s me. What about you?’

Acka didn’t think she could top such a story but told her of the events that had led up to them meeting in Perth. ‘My stepbrother tried to, y’know. I fought him off though.’

‘Fuckin’ prick. You should have it cut off.’

Acka acknowledged the support with a quick reticent smile. ‘I left my mother there, for him to take care of. Her body, I mean. Feel pretty shitty about it. He’ll probably just dig a hole… actually, he’ll probably get someone else to dig a hole in the backyard and dump her in. But what was I supposed to do?’
Koko didn’t know what to say. They continued down the beach, sand scrunching underfoot. Acka stared out to sea, scanning the meeting place of ocean and sky. She had the sudden urge to explain herself, perhaps just because someone had bothered to listen. ‘I don’t want to be somebody. Just a person, y’know? Just have a life.’

Acka seemed to get lost for a moment, as the words exited her mouth, realising their meaning. Had she even ever had a life before now?

Koko put her arm around Acka and hugged her close. The tension in Acka’s muscles released, a silent wave breaking through her body. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been hugged. ‘We’re the same, I reckon. You and me. We’re sort of orphans. But there’s no use thinking about that, eh? Just live for the now, I reckon. The future will bring what it will and you can’t do anything about that, so you may as well deal with it when it comes along. Whatever it throws up.’

‘Maybe.’ Acka yawned. ‘Just as long as it doesn’t throw up on me anymore. I’ve had enough of that. Wish I could get a good night’s sleep though.’

‘Why can’t you?’

‘I keep having these bloody dreams.’

‘The same one?’

‘No, just similar ones.’

‘What about?’

Acka kicked the sand. ‘One was a snake eating the sun. Other times, I can’t remember them, but I know I’ve had one. It’s just there, hovering in the back of my head, ready to strike or something.’ She related the events of the Fowlers Bay getaway. ‘They stopped for a couple of days after that. I thought that must’ve been the end of it, but they started again in Perth. I think they’re getting worse.’
‘Sounds like one did strike. Lucky for you that it was there. Sounds like powerful stuff.’ Koko grinned broadly. ‘We like that Dreaming stuff, my mob.’

Acka smiled, then shrugged. ‘I dunno. It doesn’t mean anything.’

Koko thought exactly the opposite. *Oh, I think it does, Acka. I’m almost sure of it.*

The previous night’s storm had hit with a ferocity nothing short of explosive, the sea throwing up a carnage of flotsam and jetsam all along the beach. Amongst the mounds of washed up seaweed debris were the strange forms of dead sea animals, scraped from the ocean floor and nearby headland, spewed onto an unwelcoming sand.

Out to sea the spectacle of a massive supertanker carting water to Perth dominated the horizon, its white polymer sails glinting in the sunlight. The future of shipping had returned to the past. Using the sea’s natural winds the sails cut down on fuel costs. Out of the backdrop of the supertanker’s grey body, two fast moving objects emerged. As they neared the beach, the vehicles became recognisable as two hovercraft sporting the blazing red and yellow stripes of the Western Australian Coastal Patrol.

‘Great. Now we’re gonna get hassled by the fuzz.’

‘By who?’

‘The authorities. Or at least one of them.’

In a regimented manoeuvre the two hovercraft came sliding up on to the beach, circling Acka and Koko before pulling up either side of them. Acka noticed the heavy machine guns mounted on the front and back of the craft. The pilots remained in the vehicles while the rest debarked with military precision. Four patrolmen brandishing heavy rifles acted as perimeter guards, the remaining five
waited for instructions from the black capped and goggle wearing captain. The patrolmen wore dark blue, skin-tight fitting uniforms – essentially padded wetsuits incorporating light body armour – sporting pockets down the legs. The Captain jumped from the rim of the vehicle, landing on one of the washed up animals which exploded with a wet plop. Hands placed majestically on his hips, the Captain surveyed the length of the beach, then pointed at several of the beached creatures. The two closest patrolmen pulled mesh bags from pockets and started collecting specimens, chucking them indiscriminately into the bags. Led by his oversized chin, the captain strode determinedly to the two women. He produced some shiny identification. ‘Captain Armstrong, Western Australian Coastal Border Patrol. I’ve shown you mine, now show me yours.’

Koko huffily pulled out her identification. ‘We’re not doing anything, you know.’ Armstrong was unmoved as he scanned Koko’s ID across the screen of a hand-held computer he’d taken from one of his vest pockets. ‘All beaches in National Parks are routinely monitored.’ He returned Koko’s ID to her. ‘In order.’

He turned to Acka and held out his hand. Acka fidgeted nervously as she spoke, head slightly down. ‘My wallet was stolen a few days ago in Adelaide.’

‘Did you report it?’
‘No. What’d be the point?’

His face sternly impassive, Armstrong shoved the hand-held computer towards Acka. ‘Press your thumb and forefinger here and speak your name into the microphone.’

Acka did as she was told. He then held the computer up in front of her, ‘Stand still.’ He took her photo, pressed the screen and waited a few seconds. Acka looked at Koko who shook her head. She didn’t know what he was doing either.
‘Aurora Christine Katherine Ackland. Your belongings were found and handed in. No money.’

‘They were? Where? When?’

‘Not on record. It happens. Inefficient practices and personnel.’ He pressed the screen a number of times. ‘I have verified your identity and let the relevant authorities know your present location and that you are not deceased. You can pick up replacement identification at an electoral office in any major town. I’d advise you to do that as soon as possible.’

‘Oh, right. Thanks.’

‘In the meantime, use this.’

The captain handed her a small printout with a barcode and a string of numbers from a slot in the computer’s side. Koko refused to hide her indignation of a patrol coming from way offshore solely to check their identification. ‘What are you doing collecting all those sea creatures?’

‘We’re also authorised agents of WACEA.’

‘Whacky?’

Acka almost burst out laughing at Koko’s bemusement at the word.

‘Western Australian Coastal Environment Agency. If there’s anything unusual, we collect and, or, report it. But there’s nothing unusual here. It’s just routine.’

‘Right.’

Acka then thought of something. ‘Is there anything about a Fowlers Bay report? I filed one.’
The Captain tapped the hand-held screen a few times. ‘The report was investigated. Says the township was deserted when the officers arrived.’ It looked as though Peter and his cohorts had cut their losses and relocated.

‘Anything else?’ Acka shook her head. ‘Good day, to you both then.’

The captain turned on his heel and strode just as purposefully back to the craft as he had towards the two women. He whistled as if calling a dog and the patrolmen boarded their crafts. Within seconds the two vessels were speeding back out to sea. Koko looked dirty at the quickly vanishing patrol. The incursion of the protection officers had almost been like a home invasion to her, sullyng her space and time. ‘They were probably spying on us from out there, hoping we’d do something illegal, or kiss or something. Filthy bastards.’

‘He was nice to me.’

‘I guess.’ Her tone indicated she wasn’t convinced. ‘They’ve got every piece of information about everyone these days. They probably know the number of creases in your arsehole.’

Acka ignored Koko’s anger and knelt down to inspect one of the creatures left behind by the patrol – a crab with one upside down leg, and half of its shell soft and clear, leaving the insides exposed to the elements, a life form horrifyingly clinging to a stunted existence. ‘Why’s it all like that, do you think?’

‘Who knows? With what we’ve been putting into the sea for so long, it’s a wonder Godzilla hasn’t turned up.’

‘God who?’

‘Godzi… don’t worry.’

‘Poor thing.’ She stroked the crab’s back, which feebly tried to pinch her with one of its small pincers. The effort seemed to drain what little resources the creature
had. Acka stood and walked away down the beach watching the Border Patrol speed back to open water. Koko took a last look at the crab and was about to follow Acka when the crab shuddered violently like an electric shock had just coursed through its body. The crustacean spasmed again and the soft shell contracted and firmed, growing over the soft, inner flesh, creating a crab’s normal exoskeletal armour. The crab then turned round on the spot several times before scurrying away sideways across the sand to the rocks bordering the headland. Koko stared in wide-eyed wonder at the animal’s transformation, her breath taken away. ‘Jesus…’ Did Acka know what she’d just done? Obviously not, otherwise she would’ve been doing it for all the washed up animals on the beach. Koko watched Acka walk away. Her gut feeling about Acka was firming by the minute. Koko headed back to the car.

Koko leant against the back of the car whispering into her cupped hand.

‘I need you take a message to Padaru for me.’

‘…’

‘I know it’s a long way.’

‘…’

‘Because I want you to. You know he doesn’t listen.’

‘…’

‘Oh, will you stop complaining. Look you don’t have to go all the way.’

‘…’

‘Talk to Birrinyooloo or Goorlinyi.’

‘…’

‘They’re not that bad. What about Malimali?’
‘…’
‘Yeah, you’re right. She is a bit slow. Look, don’t be a pain.’
‘…’
‘I don’t know why he won’t get a mobile. And he might’ve gone bush anyway. Just tell him…’
‘…’
‘Thank you.’
Koko was so engrossed she didn’t notice Acka approach. The events on her journey had unsurprisingly made Acka suspicious of any behaviour she thought out of the ordinary. ‘Who were you talking to?’
Koko looked up startled. ‘Huh? Oh, nobody. Just myself. So what are you gonna do in The Fitz?’
Acka explained her plan to stay with Pussy before hopefully getting herself set up some way. Start a new life. ‘I’ve got this far, I think I can probably do just about anything now.’
‘You can come and stay at my place in Arnhem Land if you want.’
‘Thanks. But I should be right once Pussy helps me out.’
‘Think about it anyway.’

On arriving in Broome Acka did as Captain Armstrong had advised and gathered her necessary identification. Her Living Wage payment was due in a few days and she’d be able to pay back some of the money she’d mooched off Andromeda. On a whim she accessed the births, deaths and marriages register. A search for her mother’s name in the death registry came up blank. Maybe they hadn’t entered the details yet.
Then again, maybe Stone had done nothing, and Dora’s body was rotting away in the chair where she took her last breath. Almost two weeks had passed since Acka had left Sydney. Leaving had been the right option even though she felt she’d been on an emotional rollercoaster since crossing the mountains west of Sydney. The luck she’d encountered getting out of Adelaide had only led to more trouble – the nadir and despair, of Fowlers Bay. With Andromeda’s help, and an uncanny knack of dream interpretation, she’d made it out alive. And now she did indeed feel alive. She was looking forward to seeing Pussy, effectively signalling the end of her Australian Odyssey, and certainly it couldn’t come too soon. The more she thought about it the more appealing creating her own place, a new life, was becoming.

That night in Broome was the last gig for Jiwarli. After the first two shows Andromeda had completely moulded into the role for the last performance of their “tour”. A larger audience helped. The gig was their most successful and it seemed a shame for it to end when the band had started to “click”. Even Djambuwal managed a wry smile at some of Andromeda’s antics, indicating she’d won him over too.

With the goal of making it to The Fitz in sight, the end of her journey nearing, there was no mistaking that the days since leaving Fowlers Bay had been the best of Acka’s short life.

Affectionately known as The Strip, the four hundred kilometres of Great Northern Highway connecting Broome to Fitzroy Crossing was a melange of urban and commercial development. The North-West Light Rail System ran down the centre of the divided highway. From one end to the other, Eco-Tech high rise buildings lined the road like sentinels. “High rise” was somewhat of a misnomer. Like Perth, many
of the buildings were predominantly underground, extending up to ten stories down and none standing taller than fifteen. The designers and architects strove for the buildings to be organic entities, and for the most part had succeeded. With bush shapes and figures in their design they incorporated all the best water saving, heat dissipating, and energy saving technology. In a feat of engineering excellence most of the city’s parks and reserves were built on, or retrofitted with, a heavy polycarbonate sponge which retained groundwater and water from excess building run-off.

As they drove past the Derby turn off, the five enormous kilometre high towers of the Dampier Downs Solar Power Plant stood in the distance thrusting themselves into the sky. The wet season had hit with a vengeance across the top end. The flooded waters of the Fitzroy and Margaret Rivers and their subsidiary creeks had once cut the roads for days. In response the highway had been redesigned as a raised carriageway hovering comically some five metres above the brown plains of water that stretched up to a kilometre wide in places. Acka had never seen so much water. Koko explained that at this time of year there was always some level of flooding. The highway may have circumvented the problem along the Strip, and on to Halls Creek and Kununurra, but throughout most of Northern Australia and Arnhem Land it was a different story.

Pussy shrieked child-like upon Acka’s arrival, hugging Acka so hard her spine cracked. Acka introduced her companions after which Pussy unceremoniously informed Acka her parents were getting divorced.

‘Again?’
‘Yeah. Again. I think it’s because Dad’s going bankrupt or something.’
‘Really?’
‘Yeah.’
‘That sounds bad.’
‘Yeah, it’s been awful around here.’

Raising her eyebrows, Koko turned to Andromeda, who winked back in acknowledgement.
‘Don’t worry about it. What happened to Steve?’
‘Steve?’
‘From the boat…’

‘What bo… Oh, right, him. God, that was ages ago. He was completely throwaway. Made me want yooroog.’

‘Made you want what?’

Koko laughed. ‘Yooroog means, to vomit, Acka. Still can’t get away from vomit eh, Acka? Where’d you get that from, Pussy?’

‘I heard someone up here use it.’

‘So you didn’t sleep with him then?’

Pussy looked at Acka like she was crazy. ‘Yeah, of course I did. He was gorgeous.’

‘But… what?’

Pussy raised her hands and made them into claws, a scratching gesture. ‘Too clingy.’

Pussy’s phone rang. It was her father. Even before he could start speaking Pussy hijacked the conversation. ‘Are you going to be home tonight?’

‘…’
‘Because me and Acka and her friends want to have a party and drink all your
grog.’ She covered the mouthpiece with a finger and raised her eyebrows to Acka
and Koko, she mouthed to them, he thinks I’m joking.

‘…’

‘I’m joking, Dad.’ Pussy pulled an, oh shit, face. Acka and Koko had to stop
each other from laughing.

‘…’

Pussy clicked off the phone. ‘No problem. No one gonna be here but us.’

Acka peered over the city and suburbs of Fitzroy Crossing as dusk descended like a
fine snow. Pussy’s apartment was in the middle of the city and the contrast to Sydney
was stark. If cities were people then these two were siblings flung into different
worlds. Sydney was a godless, heathen junkie with limited means of kicking the
habit. The Fitz was the golden child lavished with praise and support. Fitzroy
Crossing looked like it had grown out of the landscape, deflecting the idea, the
visage, that it was a city. There was a sense of calm here, that everything was
running to a comprehensible and achievable order. Acka couldn’t help comparing
places to her previous home. It was all she knew. But now there was another way of
living, of doing things, and she was going to do just that. Still, Acka found the
abundance of fountains and monuments with water features dotting The Fitz’s plazas
and malls almost grotesque even though the majority of water was recycled. Koko
concurred. ‘It’s the grotesquery of affluence. All affluence is grotesque. It’s never
about beauty. It’s about trying to convince people the grotesque is beautiful. Throw
enough money at something and eventually it’ll be beautiful. They’ve certainly got
enough money here.’ Koko took a long sip of her drink. ‘Still, to me, The Fitz, the way they designed it with the buildings in harmony with the land. It’s the only Australian city that can truly be called Australian.’

With the vigour of demigods they celebrated long into the night in what they termed the Jiwarli “End of Tour” party. Djambuwal entertained with an impromptu rendition of one of his songs, the most anyone had heard him say since they left Perth. Pussy was the perfect host acting as music programmer and just as she had indeed jokingly told her father, was excessively liberal with his stash of wines and spirits.

Koko shouted to Acka over the raised sounds of the stereo. ‘Have you thought about coming to Arnhem with me?’

‘Thanks, but Pussy said I could stay here, if I could get here. And, now I’m here, I guess.’

‘Did she even ask how you got here?’

Acka paused, sucked in a deep breath of cooling air. ‘Pussy is Pussy, y’know. Take her or leave her. She could’ve done nothing.’

Koko didn’t see how this was any comfort. Acka smiled. ‘Now I’m here, I think I’ll be okay.’

They all woke groaning with searing headaches. Andromeda pulled a bottle of prescription pills from her bag. ‘Have some of these, darlings.’ She dispensed a couple of small pills to each person. ‘They’ll do you the world of good. You can’t get them in Australia, but believe me, you’ll be lobbying medical associations soon enough.’
‘What are they?’

‘What they are is fucking amazing. Nano-tech. The little ones in there go through your bloodstream, and process the alcohol away. Instant hangover cure.’

Fucking amazing they were. Their hangovers were cleaned up within half an hour and the pall of bad spirits lifted.

Late in the morning Djambuwal headed off, picked up by a bunch of his brothers in a battered ute to take him back to his home deep in the Kimberley. With a plain smile and effortless wave like he was playing his bass, he was gone.

Andromeda took Djambuwal’s departure as a cue to take her own leave, heading off to stay with some of “her people” she knew in Darwin. ‘I’ll get us some gigs in Darwin,’ she promised as she hugged Koko goodbye. ‘I know people. We’ll be huge!’

The Ford gurgled away, Andromeda’s hand waving furiously out the window as she went. Koko widened her eyes in a mock jest. ‘I don’t know if I’ve made the right decision letting her in the band.’

Back in the apartment Acka took a deep breath, smiled at Pussy. ‘Can’t believe I actually made it!’

Pussy suddenly looked very awkward and ill at ease. ‘Yeah… I’ve been meaning to tell you.’ Her voice began to wobble. ‘It might not be such a good time to stay. Y’know, with the old fools and all that. It’ll probably be a bit difficult.’

‘Why?’

‘Because Dad’s sold the apartment and he’s got people coming to move stuff out and, y’know…’

‘When?’

‘Like in…’ She winced. ‘In a couple of days. Sorry.’
‘Sorry?! What d’you mean sorry? You said I could stay.’

‘I know. I know I did. I didn’t know till last night when I talked to him. I’m sorry, Acka. And it’s not like you’ve been contactable lately.’

‘Did you at least try?’

Pussy looked decidedly sheepish. As they had so often done recently, Acka’s hopes plummeted hard enough to crack concrete. ‘Oh, man. You said I could stay.’

‘It’s no birthday party for me either. Hell, I don’t even want to hang around with them going at it hammer and tongs. It’s just bad timing. Maybe in a couple of weeks or something we can work something out, I promise.’

‘A couple of weeks?’ Acka flopped into a lounge chair, defeated her head in her hands. ‘What am I supposed to do till then?’

Koko saw an opportunity when it presented itself. ‘Come and stay with me then. You can have as much time as you want to work out what to do. It’s not stylish accommodation but it’s comfortable.’

Acka was reticent to accept. The last time she’d been taken to an isolated settlement she’d almost been murdered. She glared at Pussy. ‘Well I s’pose I have to now! Don’t I?’

‘I said I was sorry. It’s not my fault.’

‘No, it never is, is it?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Nothing. It doesn’t mean anything.’

There was an uneasy silence. Acka was well and truly flustered. ‘Well, how the hell are we supposed to get to Arnhem Land? Everything’s flooded. And I’m broke.’

‘I can fly you.’
Koko turned to Pussy. ‘Eh?’

‘We can take the gyro.’

Acka scrunched her brow, confused. ‘I thought you only had a one-seater?’

‘I do.’ Pussy smiled and pulled out a set of keys, dangled them from her finger tips. ‘But Dad’s isn’t.’

‘And your Dad’ll let you?’

Pussy raised her eyebrows, smiled smugly, and shook her head. ‘No way.’
Part 4

Arnhem Land
Chapter 6

Pussy’s father’s Gyro was one wicked piece of machinery. Painted completely black with gold and red trim, it wasn’t so much a Gyro, as a spectacle. Pussy shook her head with wide eyes and a not-too-worried smile. ‘He’s gonna be so shitty at me.’

She punched in a flight plan to the onboard computer and sent it to the relevant authority, receiving clearance for take off a few minutes later. From Fitzroy Crossing aerodrome they headed east towards Halls Creek and entered Northern Australia near Nicholson. They crossed the northern sections of the Tanami Desert, the flat plain stretching nearly the entire distance between Northern Australia’s eastern and western borders. The normally arid area was receiving the flow-on effects of the recent floods. The creeks, streams and rivers that were closest to the West Australian border had become green arteries injecting life into the land. Koko donned her sunglasses, giving a spare pair to Acka. ‘When in Rome…’

‘When in Rome what?’

‘I’m sort of getting tired of these conversations.’

‘You’re the one who keeps saying weird stuff.’

They were speeding towards the Northern Australia/Arnhem Land border when the radio sparked to life. A border patrol HULA was requesting identification before allowing them access to Arnhem Land airspace.

Pussy looked puzzled. The voice sounded familiar. ‘Is that Arrow?’
‘Yes, this is Arrow. Who’s this?’

Pussy put on her most charming girly voice. ‘Arrow, you know who it is.’

There was a short pause as Arrow searched his memory banks. ‘Pussy…?’

‘Hey, baby.’

‘Pussy! Where you off to girl?’

‘Taking some friends home to Arnhem. You?’

‘Just working, y’know. Hey I can’t talk on this channel. Work only, yeah?

Give me a call when you get back to WA, yeah?’

‘Sure.’

‘You’re clear to enter, Pussy. Catch you later.’

The channel went dead. Pussy turned to Acka and made with her finger in her mouth, like to induce vomiting. ‘Yeah, as if.’

‘Makes you want yooroog too, huh?’

Pussy nodded. ‘Massive cock, though.’

Crossing the thin grey line of the Stuart Highway far below marked their entry into the state of Arnhem Land. The precincts of the Barkly Tableland, the starting point for many of the rivers that flowed into the Gulf of Carpentaria, fairly teemed with bird life, buffalo, even camels. From the air Acka found herself mesmerised by the shades of green and brown, the beautiful vibrancy of the land below. It was as if as soon as they entered Arnhem Land airspace the landscape below became a new territory the like Acka had never seen before.

Pussy swept the Gyro over Burketown and out over the waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria, when she suddenly spoke in awe. ‘Oh, glory. We’re in for a treat.’
Hanging heavily in the air was the southern end of a spectacular Morning Glory cloud formation, an example of the Gulf’s strange and arcane potential for beauty. The roll cloud’s diameter was at least a kilometre wide, and snaked north. For three hundred kilometres they were sandwiched between the coast of Cape York Peninsula a few hundred metres to the east, and the white and grey streaked glory cloud a similar distance to the west, the gyro’s shadow following below like a brazen stalker. Like a stern companion the smooth textured cloud seemed to shepherd them to their destination of Kokoberra before tapering away out into the gulf. Pussy circled Kokoberra before descending to the township’s aerodrome. From the air Kokoberra township sat pretty amid the striking pale red earth, the vivid green of the coastal swamp forest, and blue waters of the gulf. Further inland the terrain around the river systems became isolated wetlands changing to a natural patchwork of scrubland and open savannah. The settlement was spread out without one particular centre. Acka could make out a general store, the town hall, school house, church, and supermarket. The town Canteen proclaimed its existence in bold white letters painted on the roof. Sparsely situated and diverse looking houses cataloguing the town’s history and culture in their styles were scattered around like thrown rocks on thin dirt roads that disappeared into the distance.

Stepping from the gyro the travellers were immediately hit by a wall of humidity, and were sweating almost instantaneously. A small group of people had gathered to watch the gyrodine land and after they got out Koko hugged and greeted each one warmly, introducing Acka and Pussy to members of her extended family. Pussy approached the mechanic on duty who duly agreed to service and refuel the gyro. Soon back with Acka and Koko, Pussy’s phone rang. ‘Uh oh. It’s the old man.’
She put on her sweetest of sweet sugar-laced voice. It seemed to Acka that there was no limit to her range of voices. ‘Hi, Daddy.’

‘…’

‘Yeah, I took it.’

‘…’

‘I’m at Kokoberra,’

‘…’

‘Somewhere between Kowanyama and Pompuraaw in Arnhem.’

‘…’

‘Western edge of Cape York.’

‘…’

‘Acka and her friend Koko needed a lift. I didn’t think you’d need it.’

‘…’

‘Well it’s not like we can’t afford it. Oh, and by the way, I’m charging the fuel to the card.’

‘…’

‘Pretty expensive.’

‘…’

‘We’ve got to get back somehow.’

‘…’

Pussy rolled her eyes. ‘Yes, I know you’re going through a divorce. Why do you think I’m here?’

‘…’

‘Don’t worry, Daddy. I’m alright. So’s the Gyro. I wouldn’t do anything silly.’
‘…’

‘I explained that.’

‘…’

‘I don’t know… Soon, I guess.’

Pussy’s conversation sounded like it was devolving into a bickering match, which was going to continue for some time. Koko motioned with her head to Acka.

‘C’mon. I’ll take you to see someone.’

Koko led Acka, and Pussy who followed behind, a few hundred metres to the north to what Acka supposed were the outskirts of the town proper. Koko’s relations who’d greeted them had summarily disappeared, and now the streets of Kokoberra were mainly vacant. They passed the church-run coffee shop and solitary guest house for any tourists who made the trip. The place reminded Acka of a half sleeping dog, lifting its head in greeting but not interested enough to stand. ‘Where is everyone?’

‘Oh, they’re around. Probably out bush or somewhere up the river. Most of the time people only come into town when they need to. There’ll be a mob over at the canteen. They’ll be wandering around when it closes later on. It’s wet season too, so some might be stuck up river or something.’

They came upon a small house, half made, it seemed, from remnant building materials. Koko frowned. ‘Didn’t look like that when I left. Wait here for a sec. Don’t want to surprise him too much.’

On entering Koko was immediately beset. From the kitchen at the back of the house emerged Padaru, Koko’s surrogate father. ‘Koko, girl! What are you telling me?’ He was a short, shirtless, potbellied Aboriginal man with frizzy grey hair and beard. He wore cut off pants and a homemade necklace of shells and shark teeth. ‘What’s this yuk maak all about? Why would you say this thing?’
‘I’m happy to see you too.’ She kissed him hello on the cheek. ‘What did Nhrudu say?’

‘Not Nhrudu. Nyeeny.’

‘Nyeeny?’

‘Yep. Nyeeny said Ngirrinyi told him, and Nhrudu told him.’

‘Okay. What did Nyeeny say?’

‘He said, *found a girl powerfully coming for your home. Look out.* What does that mean? I’m all worried here. And you turn up at this place with two people.’

‘Those bloody flies. Always in a *bloody* hurry. They’re *hopeless* sometimes.

What I told Nhrudu was “tell Padaru that I’ve found a girl. Maybe very powerful. I’m coming home with her for you to have a look”.’

‘Who’s this girl?’

‘Her name’s Acka. She’s outside.’

Padaru peered out the window at Koko’s companions. ‘Which one?’

‘The one with the short hair. C’mon. You’ll see what I mean. What happened to the house?’

‘Ah! Storm took a bit with it. I fixed it up though. Works good!’

Acka waited outside the cobbled together shack. Even with its thrown together appearance, the place looked like a home. Pussy finally finished her phone conversation and joined Acka. ‘Weird place, eh?’

Koko came back outside, an aboriginal man following her. ‘Acka. Pussy. This is Padaru.’

Padaru raised his eyebrows and shook both their hands. ‘Ah. Like Acca-Dacca?’
‘Like who? Oh, no. Did you really find Koko on the beach?’

Padaru smiled broadly revealing a missing front incisor. ‘True story! I found her on the beach under a coconut tree leaf. This was a good sign. I said, if whoever don’t want her, I’ll take her. She’s mine now. I didn’t mind.’

‘See. Told ya.’

Padaru looked at Koko. ‘You going to tell her or am I?’

Koko was dumbfounded. Acka groaned inside. ‘Tell me what.’ She figured Koko must’ve overestimated that she’d be allowed to stay.

Padaru shrugged. ‘There’s no point beating about the bush, girl. I think you’re right.’

‘But…’

‘It’s alright. It doesn’t matter. I can find somewhere else to stay.’ Acka turned to walked away.

Koko put one hand out. ‘No, he doesn’t mean that, it’s…’

‘You’ve got some dreaming in you, girl.’ Padaru shook a wobbly hand at Acka in emphasis. ‘Pretty sure. I can feel it.’

There was a weird silence between the three of them. Pussy looked on from behind.

‘I’ve got what? What is this?’ The uncomfortable silence continued, Acka glancing from Koko to Padaru and back. ‘Why did you…? Is this why you asked me here?’

Koko was visibly fuming over Padaru’s blurted admission. ‘Well, I was going to let you settle in first… but, in fact, yes.’
‘This is bullshit!’ Ready for the jagged offering of a lie, Acka was taken aback at the truth’s heavy thud. ‘I can’t believe this!’ She folded her arms angrily across her stomach. ‘I thought you were trying to help me.’

‘I am, Acka. I am.’

‘Funny way of showing it.’

‘Look, I’m sorry I wasn’t truthful with you, but what was I supposed to do? Hi, I’m Koko. Did you know you’ve got a dreaming spirit in you? Hang on I’ll just activate you. Yeah, right.’

‘What do you mean “activate”? What? What’s that?’

Koko realised her sudden slip. ‘Oh, right. Look why don’t we sit down or something, and talk this out. I’ll explain.’

‘Screw this.’ Acka began walking back to the aerodrome. ‘Come on, Pussy let’s go.’

‘Why?’

Acka kept walking, calling over her shoulder. ‘Because this is all bullshit.’

‘What if I don’t want to?’

‘What if you don’t want to what?’

‘What if I don’t want to go back? Not yet anyway.’

There was little Acka could do but let her jaw hit the ground. ‘Why wouldn’t you?’

‘Why would I? The oldies getting divorced certainly isn’t pleasant and it’s end of semester so I don’t have to be anywhere. And this sounds pretty interesting, I reckon.’

‘Are you kidding me? You’re a piece of work.’
‘Yeah, but, Acka, you’ve never lived up here. Sometimes, things happen up here people can’t explain. No-one talks about it, but everyone knows.’

Koko was just as surprised to find Pussy as a hidden ally. Still Acka had hardly been convinced but like so many other times, she was stuck at the mercy of others. She tried to change and everything came up against her. ‘Fine. We’ll stay’

The sun was setting and the temperature beginning to drop. Padaru set off without prompting to start a fire. Pussy was amenable in helping out. Acka wasn’t and refused to help at all, sitting on Padaru’s makeshift porch, brooding as the sun rapidly set.

Acka and Pussy lay in their beds, sharing a room in Padaru’s house. Padaru doffed on a rug beside the fire outside. ‘I don’t mind. Good for an old body, to feel the ground next to you.’

In contrast to Koko’s suggestion they didn’t talk about Acka and her supposed special-ness at all. She blankly refused Koko’s attempts to broach the subject, so Koko let the matter rest. They settled in for the night, a mixed scent of ocean and the earth infusing the house. Acka was drifting to sleep when Pussy’s voice pulled her awake. ‘He’s cute for an old guy.’

‘Pussy!? For chrissakes…’

‘What? I’m not allowed to like an old guy? I like a little pot belly sometimes.’

‘Good for you.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘About what?’

‘About this thing Koko’s talking about.’
'I don’t know. Nothing probably.’

‘Why are you so resistant to it? Aren’t you angry, Acka?’

‘Why would I be angry?’

‘The world, if you want to think of it that way, has given me something. My parents got lucky with some money and the old man ran with it. Now I’m rich so I’m pretty set, y’know? I’m gonna go with it as far as I can, and I’m gonna stay rich. I know what it was like living in Sydney and it sucked. I knew that even when I was a kid and I’m not ever gonna end up back there.’ Pussy rolled onto her side to face Acka. ‘I don’t want to sound mean, but the world hasn’t been too kind to you, Acka, y’know? It’s basically given you nothing.’

Eyes flaring, Acka almost spat hot oil vitriol at Pussy, but her friend raised a finger, silencing her before she could start. ‘Except this thing Koko says you have. Says you are.’

‘And what’s that? What is it really?’

‘Don’t you know? It’s power, Acka. Power.’

The next morning Acka rose to find Pussy sitting next to the rekindled flames of the previous night’s fire sharing toast with Padaru.

‘So, Paddy, do you have a wife?’

Padaru spoke more with his hands, arms, and head, accenting each phrase with some bodily movement. ‘I had one. Ah! She left me. She was no good!’

‘Really?’

‘Yep.’ Padaru raised his eyebrows. ‘Then I had another one! She was a good one. Yes, she was.’
‘Where is she now?’

‘Ah, she died, a while back now.’

‘That’s too bad.’ Pussy saw Acka in the background and winked cunningly at her. ‘You need a new woman.’

Padaru nodded, oblivious to Pussy’s charms. ‘I do alright. Got fourteen kids! They’re around here somewhere…’

Koko had arrived unannounced behind Acka. ‘He’s got magic in him, Padaru. In his body. Some say more magic than body. He knows the spirits around here, and special places too. Knows them real good.’

‘He’s like you then?’

‘Different. He’s Mooncumbulli. He has different business. Some I’m not allowed.

‘What’s Mooncumbulli?’

‘Man of high degree. Top medicine man, weather man, all rolled into one. They say he can change shape, but I’ve never seen him.’

‘Then how do you know he can?’

Koko was confused by the question. ‘I just do.’

‘He certainly seems to have cast a spell over Pussy.’

Koko sat down on the edge of the porch and motioned for Acka to do the same, which she did. ‘When did you start getting those dreams you told me about?’

‘I’ve always had dreams. Everyone has dreams.’

‘You know what I’m talking about. When did you start having specific dreams?’

Acka looked straight ahead, looking into the past. ‘Before I left Sydney. Before my mother died.’
'And they’ve been getting stronger?'
'The one at Fowlers was the most vivid, but it wasn’t even a dream really, I suppose.'
'More like a vision?'
Acka shrugged, she didn’t know.
'Has there been anything else?'
'Like what?'
' Anything weird?'
'You mean weirder than everything that’s happened?' Acka could feel Koko enveloping her in a web of data that she might not be able to break free from, and she was providing all the information for Koko’s argument
'I met, well, sort of met, this guy, Jack, in Broken Hill.'
'Jack?'
'Yeah.'
'Jack Wiljakali?'
'Yeah, that’s him, I think.'
Padaru still talking to Pussy, stopped in mid-sentence at the mention of Jack’s name, peering intently at Acka. Pussy was put out at Padaru’s change of interest. Koko took note of his abrupt silence. ‘What did you talk about?’
‘We didn’t talk about anything. He couldn’t speak. Or that’s what they said anyway.’
‘Oh, he can talk alright.’ Koko motioned to Padaru. ‘Padaru knows Jack.’
‘No, I don’t.’
‘He does.’
‘No, I don’t.’
‘Don’t listen to him. He does. They had a falling out awhile back. That’s all.’

‘What happened?’

‘You don’t want to know. One of those stupid petty things that men think are important.’

‘Ah!’ Padaru threw his hands in the air, exasperated, dismissing Koko.

‘See. Anyway. What did he tell you?’

‘He didn’t tell me anything. He showed me this snake that ran the whole length of one of the side streets. He’d painted the whole street actually.’

Acka caught Koko’s surprised look. ‘What?’

‘He’d painted a whole street?’

‘Yeah. The buildings, the signs, windows, pavement. Everything. What? That’s bad?’

Padaru and Koko stared at each other, silent knowledge passing between them, before Koko turned back to Acka. ‘He knew you were coming.’

‘How could he know I was coming? You’re nuts.’

‘Jack doesn’t paint anymore. And he hardly ever shows anybody anything either.’

‘Well he’s started again.’

‘I’d say he’s finished. Finished before you ended up there. Something like that, you don’t just decide to do on a whim. That means something. Something big.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like he thinks you’ve got something. Just like we do.’

‘How do you know I’m so special?’

‘I never threw up on someone before.’

‘You seem alright now.’
‘You caught me by surprise in the bar. I knew something was coming. My body was telling me, but still… I wasn’t ready. It’s not easy but I’ve been able to keep it under control.’

‘And you didn’t tell me?’

‘What am I supposed to say?’

Koko then explained how she saw Acka unknowingly heal the crab on Jiwarli Beach. ‘It was a beautiful thing, Acka. The most amazing thing.’

‘How do you know that was me? Maybe the thing wasn’t even… wrong. You said yourself the stuff that’s been put into sea could be making creatures weird.’

‘I know what I saw, Acka. And you saw what it looked like too.’

Acka had to admit Koko was trying terribly hard to convince her. What did she have to gain out of this? Acka couldn’t think of one reason. She had no money, no possessions, nothing of value on her person. Of course that didn’t mean that somehow her person, her body, wasn’t of value. ‘Ok. So what else can you do?’

Acka asked unbelievingly, testing.

‘I can talk to insects and frogs.’

Acka remembered Koko “talking to herself”. ‘Insects…’

‘And frogs.’

‘Is that what you were doing at the beach?’

‘Yeah.’

Acka turned to Pussy, raising an eyebrow. ‘Riiight.’

Pussy ignored Acka’s unbelieving comment, completely intrigued. ‘Really? How do you know all their names?’

‘Flies have the same name in one area. Frogs have their own names but don’t mind collective terms. They understand.’
Pussy was excited. ‘Really? How cool.’

‘Pussy!’

‘What?’

‘Don’t encourage her.’

Pussy sulked. ‘I’m not. It’s just cool, that’s all.’

Acka sighed. ‘Look, I’m not aboriginal. My mother wasn’t aboriginal. Not that I really know. And I never knew my father. She never talked about our family.’

‘I know what I see.’ Padaru didn’t even lift his head. ‘Jack saw it too, I suppose. We can tell. Might not have been your mother’s side. Might’ve been your grandmother or grandfather. Probably further back than that even. The essence. The essence is there. Strong too.’ Padaru traced a line down his inside forearm following the raised blue-purple course of one of his veins. ‘In there. In the blood.’ He tapped his chest. ‘In your ticker too. Always there. Sometimes strong. Most of the time weak. But always there.’

‘There must be a lot of people with aboriginal heritage. Why me?’

Now it was Pussy’s turn to pipe up. ‘Why not you, Acka?’

‘Why you?’ Padaru shrugged, frowned. ‘Just lucky, I s’pose.’

Just lucky. There was that word again. Lucky. Why am I suddenly so lucky? Why does this make me a lucky person all of a sudden? Acka had never been lucky her whole life.

Padaru pulled at his beard, and continued. ‘Who knows? Can’t predict these things. Don’t work that way. Why can some people run faster, throw better, paint better pictures than others? Why are some people smarter than others? Why do people think differently and solve problems other people can’t? How do they become like that? They say a runner is faster because of the muscles. Then you ask, why do
they have those muscles? Maybe because of genetics. So what is it about that
person’s mother or father that gave them fast runner muscles? Well, maybe it’s the
way their cells combined. So then you ask why did they combine that way? Why did
those cells choose to combine with those other ones? Well, maybe they didn’t.
Maybe it was just random. Maybe science says, it’s genetics, something in the body
or in the brain. But then you ask again, why is that? Then maybe you get an answer
to that. Then maybe you ask, why is that? How did that happen? Pretty soon you’re
askin’, what am I doing here? How did I get here? How did we all get here? Pretty
soon you just keep on askin’, why to everything. If you answer that, you answer
everything. Maybe science can explain some of these things. Maybe all of them. But
there’s one thing you gotta know. All you gotta know, all we need to know, is that
we are here. So, Acka, why you?’ Padaru threw his arms wide. ‘Big question!’ Then
brought them down and lent close to her. ‘Small answer.’ He smiled and spoke
quietly, boldly, nodding his head once for effect. ‘Because it is you.’ Then he
motioned with his arms and hands in a finishing gesture. ‘That’s all.’

‘So what does that mean? What will happen to me? I mean, physically, if you
activate me.’

Koko glanced sideways to Padaru who waved his arm in the air back at her,
and ambled away. Koko called after him. ‘Thanks.’ She turned back to Acka. ‘I don’t
know what will actually happen. It’s always slightly different. This is… what we’re
dealing with, the forces involved… they’re… old… big. This isn’t an exact science.
It may affect you physically, it may not.’

This admission was hardly comforting for Acka. ‘Right, I’m sick of this “it
may do this and it may not” shit. Is it dangerous?’
Koko sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly, only then did she look at Acka. ‘Activation’s dangerous.’

‘How dangerous?’

Koko paused again. ‘Pretty dangerous.’

‘How dangerous is, pretty dangerous?’

‘Of the activations we know of over the past three hundred years or so, about one in ten songs are complete and successful.’

‘So there’s about a ten percent chance something will happen.’

A question or a statement, Koko stood silent. Acka considered. ‘That’s not so bad, I guess.’

Pussy piped up innocently. ‘What happens to the other nine?’

Acka shrugged her shoulders. ‘Nothing, I guess. Right, Koko?’

Koko remained silent, head tilted slightly down, a solemn, stoic expression.

Acka leaned forward slightly in emphasis. ‘Right, Koko?’

Koko turned away, shoulders slumped.

‘What happens to the other nine, Koko?’

Koko closed her eyes hard. There was no way of getting out of telling her. She sighed. ‘One will be a “dud”, so to speak. The song isn’t complete, or is only manifested in small ways.’

‘And the rest?’

She turned back to Acka. Her voice now almost a whisper. ‘They… ah… they don’t make it.’

‘They don’t make it?’

‘You’ve got to remember that this changes your whole structure. It’s like… like… manifesting your soul, making it tangible, making it real.’
‘This just gets better and better! So what you’re saying is there’s actually a one hundred percent of something happening, except eighty percent of that involves not living! When were you going to tell me about the eighty percent chance of dying?’

Koko looked down, away.

‘Were you going to tell me?’

‘To be honest. I don’t know.’

‘Fantastic.’

‘I don’t do this everyday, y’know?’

‘That’s just as well by the sound of it! How often do you do it?’

Koko kicked the dirt.

‘How often, Koko?’

Her voice dropped again, she stumbled. ‘I’ve done it once before.’

‘And?’

Koko kicked the dirt a final heavy boot time. ‘Fuck off, Acka.’

Pussy leaned over to Padaru. ‘What happened?’

‘Not pretty.’ Padaru’s low voice curled over her. Koko stood uncomfortably as Padaru related the story. ‘She tells me the song burned that person right up. From the inside. Flames come out that person’s eyes, mouth, stomach. In the end, only ashes left. That what you wanted to know?’ Padaru stepped close to Acka. ‘Koko’s a good girl. She does the right thing. Just that, that time, the right thing didn’t happen. A lot of power, lot of energy involved in these things. Long time ago, one in Western Australia. In the nineteen-nineties. Big explosion over in Nana and Kuwarra country. Nobody knew what it was. After a while they said it was an earthquake, then they reckoned maybe a meteorite. Not one of them though.’ Padaru spat, unhappy to
remember. ‘I knew that fella. Knew the fella who did it too.’ He gave a look that said neither of them had survived. He looked to her with such affection then. ‘She didn’t tell you ‘cause she’s proud. But you remember this too. The chance of surviving got to do with both of you. Not just one.’

Koko was jolted from her mood. ‘But you…?’

‘That’s right.’

She rubbed one hand across her torso. ‘And I ended up like this.’

Pussy and Acka looked at each other, confused at the unspoken narrative between the other two.

He nodded, sadly, to himself. ‘I’m worried about you.’

‘You think I can’t do it?’

Padaru made no move, nothing to indicate his thoughts, though Koko had a good idea.

‘You activate her then!’

The elderly man remained calm against Koko’s anger. ‘Can’t. Over time, it fades. Almost gone in me now. See how I’m not sick like you.’

Padaru was right. Koko had managed to keep her sick feeling to a low level nausea, a certain tinge of green around the gills. Padaru on the other hand was bright as a button. ‘I can still tell. Just not strong enough to do it.’ He patted his belly. ‘Out of shape. Anyway, I’m allowed to be worried about you! You’re my daughter! Ah… kids!’

‘So were you too old to activate me?’

Padaru shrugged. ‘Maybe.’

‘Maybe!’
Acka quickly did the maths, getting herself muddled doing so. ‘How old are you then?’

The old man chuckled. ‘Older than I look, eh?!’

Padaru’s joke had lightened the situation, but the scene quickly became an uncomfortable silence between the three of them, Koko pondering on Padaru’s comments, and Acka contemplating her situation. ‘What if I don’t do it?’

Koko rubbed a ditch in the dirt with her foot. ‘Nothing changes.’

‘And if I do? What then?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe everything. On the other hand, maybe nothing. Different things happen to different people.’

‘Don’t bullshit me.’

‘I’m not.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘How can I answer if I don’t know the answer? Why would I lie?’

‘I don’t know.’ Acka stared at the ground then turned to Koko, a searching, searing stare. ‘Why would you?’

Acka saw Koko’s face stiffen, and suddenly felt bad for questioning Koko’s motives. Then she quickly changed her mind. Why should she feel bad? She was the one who had to risk everything. ‘Well, Koko, it’s not like I can talk to anyone about it, can I?’

‘You have been. For days.’

Acka then realised what Koko and Padaru had been talking about. She pointed to Koko, who nodded. ‘You’re lucky. Some aren’t given a choice.’ Koko wiped sweat from her brow. ‘When Padaru found me, he knew I was the same as you are now. As he raised me, he came to know me and how I reacted to situations. But
he knew too, that I wouldn’t have taken the chance. So he took a chance, and activated me.’

‘Well it obviously worked for you!’

‘No, Acka. It didn’t. I’m a dud.’

‘Yeah, good one.’

‘Fine.’ Koko, fed up, doffed her jacket, landing in a heap on the ground, then removed her t-shirt. Acka almost said something to stop her but by the constant glances Koko speared her way knew this wasn’t negotiable. Padaru turned his back. Koko removed her bra. Her right breast was missing, now just a lumpy collection of malformed flesh surrounded by a grid of burn scars travelling in distorted, crosshatched lines down and across her stomach around to her back. She stood proudly, though understandably, a little self-consciously. Almost inaudibly Koko murmured, ‘And I can’t have children.’

‘I’m sorry, Koko. I didn’t mean…’

‘No-one ever does.’

She put her clothes back on. ‘There’s something else too.’

‘More?’

“We’re not the only ones who can do this. There are others who, how should I put it, who know about this stuff too. If they come across you, they mightn’t be as, ah, benevolent, as us.’

‘I’m in danger?’

‘Not here. I don’t want to put a weird…’ Acka pulled a face. Koko acknowledged, ‘okay, weirder, spin on this than it already is, but have a look at what’s happened to you lately. It’s been trouble all the way. Right?’
Acka thought back to the start of her journey from Sydney – Stone trying to keep her down; her mother always berating her; the molestation on the train; Cord’s robbery; Fowlers Bay. Trouble followed everywhere she went. She even wondered about the homicide in her street. Could that possibly be attributed to her presence in the area?

‘It’s not my fault.’

‘No, it’s not. It’s their fault, absolutely. What I’m saying is they can, feel you, what you’re capable of, not in some necessarily tangible way, but it makes you a target. Make people want to try and crush you down, so you’re not a threat. Know what I’m saying? And still, after all that, you’ve made it here. You didn’t give up. How many people would’ve made it this far, after the things that have happened to you?’

‘I’ve had help, though. You, and Pussy, and Andromeda.’

‘Sure, but through it all, how sure are you that you weren’t directing this whole episode? That this was where you were going to end up all along?’

It was a fair enough question considering the circumstances. ‘Then how do I control it?’

‘You don’t, really. I guess in some ways, it chooses you. But you have to decide if you want to do it.’

Strangely she heard Stone’s words leaching into her head, echoed by Peter – I’m offerin’ you a chance here. What else you got? What else did she have? She wanted to lose herself, to fugue, leave the decision to some other person, or personality. Had she been fighting the visions all along? She couldn’t tell. They let the matter rest then, to let Acka consider her path.
Acka expected to dream that night and thus before drifting to sleep she made the conscious decision, if it was at all possible, to untether her dreaming mind and let it roam free in the storm-buffeted psychoscapes and wild theatres of her extended unconscious. Maybe there in that vast realm she’d discover an answer.

Acka woke from a suffocating blackness, scared shitless and sweating. She checked the time – almost three in the morning. Her untethered dreaming unconscious had gone somewhere unknown, to a frightening dark carnival of clowns and beasts stalking a weird patrol in her head, leaving her with nothing solid. Jagged impressions of cut up and rearranged images, the echoes of experimental sounds, words without meanings, feelings separated from emotions, actions performed without conscience filled her mind. Hanging in the deep void of cold space she had fleetingly encountered a realm of pure primal sensation, a crowded bazaar filled with howling ghosts. An unsettling feeling of exposure lingered, like her insides were on show glowing a myriad of neon colours.

Breaking from the remnants of the nightscape, she took herself outside to Padaru’s front porch, wrapping herself in a coarse blanket against the pre-dawn chill. With the deep croaks and hopping thuds of cane toads for company, she waited for the sun to rise.
Chapter 7

By the time the fireball that had sucked the South-Eastern Australian earth dry was firmly set in the sky, ready to deliver another telling blow, Acka had made her decision.

‘I’m going back to Fitzroy Crossing.’

‘What?’ Koko pleaded. ‘Acka. Why?’

‘Because I’m sick of being lied to and taken advantage of. I was nearly killed in Fowlers Bay and Sydney. I haven’t escaped two places where I could’ve been killed only to die here. You said I should take the time to decide what to do with my life. Well, I have.’

‘You said you could do anything now.’

‘I said just about anything. This isn’t just about anything! This is like, the complete opposite of just about anything.’

‘Yeah, but that’s why you should stay.’

The comments were spoken calmly and firmly, halting Acka in her tracks. If it were true, then…

She stood with hands on hips, head down. The fear that had shredded through her dream lingered. ‘No. I can’t.’

She continued to the gyro, Koko following. ‘Acka? But you could be in danger. What are you gonna do?’
‘Something. I don’t know. Start a life like I was supposed to do. Call Andromeda. I’ve made it this far, I’ll make it further if I have to. I’ll go to Darwin. Jump a ship. Become a pirate! Something! C’mon, Pussy, let’s go.’

Pussy watched Acka stride purposefully away, turned back to Padaru and Koko. ‘Thanks for having us.’

Padaru watched from his porch, shaking his head, then threw his arms in the air, frustrated. ‘Ah! If she don’t want to... Ah! Can’t make a tree grow upside down.’

This was something he reckoned might happen, seeing the conflict inside her as plain as a kangaroo’s tail. So many questions! That was the whitefella, non-spiritual, part of her talking, coming along with big weapons, making a big fight, like might is right and all that stuff. The spiritual part of her he could see too. It wasn’t fighting the fight, it was just sitting there, maybe under a melaleuca, maybe a paperbark, sweating, shiny and just ignoring those fighting questions. That spiritual part wasn’t just heritage either. No, that part was magical too.

Acka pushed on to the aerodrome. By the time Pussy had ambled her way to the gyro, Acka was already waiting in the passenger seat.

‘You sure you want to go?’

Acka stared straight ahead.

Pussy sucked in a deep breath. ‘Alright then.’

She got in, punched in a flight route, and fired up the engine.

Koko stood sullenly watching the gyro’s rotor blades speeding up, when she felt a presence on her left shoulder. She glanced down. A green tree frog with bulbous black and red eyes was ogling her. The frog croaked several times.

‘She’s leaving.’

The frog croaked again, this time deeper.
‘Because she doesn’t understand.’

In her right ear a fly suddenly buzzed furiously. Koko turned to the hovering insect. ‘I know that. I was the one who saw it first.’

The fly flew in front of her face, buzzing again.

‘Don’t you think I tried?’

The frog croaked in an urgent manner.

‘Well you stop her, then.’

The fly hovered and then settled on the frog’s nose. They engaged in a heated debate involving the exchange of croaking and high pitched squeaks.

With the flight route confirmed and approved, Pussy lifted the gyro into the air, hovering for a few moments to check her systems. Koko stared at the black machine, its high powered whine filling the open spaces in the vicinity. ‘You’d better hurry, guys.’

Finally the fly buzzed away. The frog sat quietly on her shoulder.

Pussy put on her headset before turning to Acka. ‘Last chance.’

Acka remained unmoved, staring intently out the passenger window, the gyro’s blades sweeping the dust into a miniature storm cloud. Pussy swung the gyro around to head westwards and home.

And held the gyro there in mid-air.

Ten metres in front of them was a huge swarm of insects, six or seven metres in diameter, nightmare thick and black. The two women stared at the shifting mass unsure what to do. Before Pussy recovered her senses enough to redirect the machine around the phenomena, the ball of flies, butterflies, and wasps, moved with a single deliberation, a uniformity that caught Acka’s and Pussy’s attention, the thousands upon thousands of insects taking a more solid shape. At first the swarm looked as
though it was coalescing into a large sphere before methodically forming into a human head and face. Acka didn’t recognise the face at first. Awestruck, Pussy’s jaw sagged open at the spectacle. The facial image quickly became clearer, the features of nose, eyes, cheeks and chin becoming prominent and smooth as the insects settled into their respective, hovering, places.

Acka now recognised the face the insect swarm had created.

The face was her own.

The mouth and lips of her giant replica pulled a perfect replica Acka grin.

‘Oh, wow.’ Pussy turned to Acka. ‘That’s pretty convincing stuff.’

The swarm-face watched on as Pussy had set the gyro back down, and then quickly dispersed. The two women walked back to Koko, who hadn’t moved from her spot. Acka’s intense thoughts were written all over her face.

‘Hey, that was really cool!’ Pussy’s voice was filled with naïve wonder. ‘I knew you guys could do weird stuff. Did you do that?’

‘No. They did it themselves. They can be a pain sometimes but with a little coaxing, well, generally, they’ll help out when they can.’

‘That’s so cool.’

Acka had remained silent, and even now her voice was hardly audible.

‘Would I be able to do something like that?’ She was thinking about what Pussy had said about power, something she was a stranger to. Was this worth it? Was her life worth it?
Who knows? Maybe.’ Koko realised she was slowly reeling her in. ‘She walked around kicking up small red atomic dust clouds, her colourfully entwined dreadlocks shining in the morning sun. ‘Maybe better than that.’

With amazing agility and strength the tree frog leapt from Koko’s shoulder to Acka’s, croaking loudly in her ear. ‘Did he just say something to me?’

‘She’ said, thanks for coming back. I say thanks too. Have you changed your mind?’

‘I suppose.’ Acka wasn’t exactly sure that she had. ‘At least afterwards I guess I’ll know if you’re telling the truth or not. Won’t I?’

Koko hugged Acka, then pulled back gently taking hold of both of her hands.

‘I suppose so.’

‘What do I have to do? Anything special? A ritual or something?’

‘Nothing specifically.’

‘When should we do it then?’

Koko took a deep breath, and squeezed Acka’s hands. ‘Now.’

The surge of energy from Koko’s hands sent Acka’s body rigid, her mouth shocked open into an imperfect ‘O’. The ground was vibrating.

Pussy was aghast. ‘Koko! What’re you doing, you deceitful bitch?!’

Koko’s speech was slurred. ‘Had to… Didn’t want her to… change her mind…’

Pussy tried to pull the two apart. Her hands were flung away as if she’d been electrocuted. ‘Ow!’ She stood shaking her hand, trying to dissipate the pain.

Koko was barely able to groan, ‘Stay back,’ in reply. Her eyes seemed to be rolling in circles. The phenomenal energy had locked the two women together. Koko
hadn’t experienced the like of it. The power coursing through her now was much stronger than her previous activation attempt and she hadn’t been able to contain that. There was something different this time. In the previous activation the energy had passed back and forth between her and her subject. This time the energy was being drawn from all around her and Acka – the earth and air – passing through her to Acka, like she was a conduit. In fact even though Acka was immobilised, Koko could feel Acka, or at least something in Acka drawing the energy from her. Acka’s eyes were shock-filled, her face grimacing like she’d swallowed a blast of furnace heated air. With great difficulty Koko managed to turn slowly to Pussy. Her expression was everything. Pussy realised immediately something was wrong.

‘It’s happening… get Padaru.’

There was no need. Padaru had been observing from a distance and was trotting vigilantly to the scene. Acka’s body tilted backwards, her weight pulling Koko with her and they both lost balance as her feet slipped out from under her. Her body hit the ground with a sharp crack like a localised thunderclap. Koko was flung backwards into the air, landing right in Padaru’s path. Pussy was knocked on her behind. Panting heavily, Koko assured the elder aboriginal she was okay, if shaken. Acka remained motionless and unconscious, her eyes had rolled back into her head, only the white showing between slightly parted lids.

The three cautiously returned to Acka’s prone figure, Padaru picking up her hand in a delicate grasp, checking her pulse. It beat an irregular rhythm. Then his eyes widened. ‘Okay, look out.’ He backed away, his arms out to his sides to keep the other two back. Acka’s skin was glowing, the light backlighting the veins and arteries in her face, turning them a deep maroon.

Pussy was reassessing her decision to stay. ‘What do we do?’
Padaru’s answer didn’t alleviate her newly formed fears. ‘No use running now!’

The three edged away from Acka’s prone form. The glow quickly spread throughout Acka’s body, searching her, wanting to know her whole structure. The three onlookers could see the blood running through her arteries, her chest heaving, sucking seemingly immense gulps of oxygen. Her skin began to ripple. The glow increased in intensity following unseen pathways, swirling and coiling itself around certain parts of her body. Acka’s back arched violently and for a second Koko thought her friend was going to snap herself in two. Now the glow occupied her whole body, her nostrils were caves with a fire at the back. Her fingers, rigidly fixed claws, clutched and scratched violently at the dirt in spasms.

Just as they were expecting the culmination of the activation, the now searing white glow waned, diffusing steadily over several minutes, and Acka’s body slumped to the ground, elastic, limp, still.

Pussy was the first to speak. ‘What just happened?’

Koko moved towards Acka’s body, but Padaru put out an arm to stop her.

‘Wait.’

‘She could be hurt.’

Padaru was unmoved, his voice now sterner. ‘Wait.’

Another minute passed before Padaru tiptoed stealthily over, his mouth set in a hard line, and crouched down. The women followed, leaning over Padaru’s shoulder, Pussy still eager for an answer. ‘Did it work? What happened?’

Unconscious, Acka’s breathing was low, barely audible. Koko couldn’t read Padaru’s face, set as it was like concrete. ‘I’m not sure.’
Padaru motioned for Koko to help pick Acka up. Her sagging body hanging between their shoulders, they carried her to Padaru’s house and put her to bed.

Pussy’s intrigue wasn’t sated. ‘What do we do now?’

Padaru shuffled sullenly from the room. ‘We wait.’

Distraught and almost numb, Koko refused to leave Acka’s bedside. When the other two encouraged her to rest, she simply stated, ‘I’m staying.’ There was no point in arguing. Confident she could handle anything, Koko was sure her next activation would go by the numbers. She’d visualised the myriad possibilities of how she’d approach and carry out the activation over and over in her head, covering every possibility, consulting Padaru and others on what to expect, what she’d have to deal with, training her mind and spirit. It seemed like forever since she’d thought about anything else. Of course, there was always a chance that something could go wrong, she knew that…. But this activation was something wholly different. It was so powerful she was simply overwhelmed. As soon as she’d touched Acka she knew she was dealing with something, a presence, she could barely imagine. For all the planning, there was no controlling, no preparing for this sort of power, this living essence. Tears welling in her eyes, Koko watched sorrowfully over Acka’s unconscious figure, when she noticed… Acka’s complexion had changed. At first Koko thought perhaps the fading afternoon light was playing tricks on her. On closer inspection, she realised Acka’s skin had actually darkened slightly. Koko watched intently as, before her eyes, Acka’s skin faded back to her normal pale colour. Then only minutes later her skin darkened again. Every few minutes Acka’s skin colour waxed and waned in tone. Koko observed the phenomenon several times over an hour to be sure before calling Padaru and Pussy.
‘Look.’ She pointed as Acka’s skin began to change again. ‘What’s happening to her?’

Concerned, Padaru watched silently as if a soft shadow was passing over Acka’s body. ‘Hmmm… Haven’t seen something like this before.’

‘Shouldn’t we get a doctor, or something?’ Pussy asked

Still looking at Acka, Padaru shook his head, frustrated. ‘Type of doctor you’re thinking about won’t help this.’

Koko placed a hand on Acka’s forehead. ‘She’s cold, Padaru. She’s cold.’ Her eyes said everything else. Koko thought Acka was dying. Tears again welled in her eyes. ‘She’s cold. What have I done?’

Padaru knelt down next to Acka, leaning his head close to her mouth, listening. ‘She’s still breathing. That’s good.’

‘Yeah. For how long?’

Padaru put one arm around Koko, concern rising steadily for Acka and the troubling effect a second failure would have on his adopted daughter.

* * *

Pussy took Padaru aside in the kitchen. ‘Why don’t you do something?’ She appealed with open palms in front of her. ‘You know, with your… you know…’

Padaru’s expression set, hard, offended. ‘You think I’d sit and do nothing? These things aren’t kid stuff. You think it’s all pretty cool, but this is serious business! There’s consequences for us, me and Koko, if things go wrong. We have to answer questions too. Can’t just go around… ah!’ He waved her away and wouldn’t
be drawn further on the subject, his expression telling Pussy he had already said too much.

During the following hours Koko sat at the end of Acka’s bed alternating between staring blankly out the window at the country and observing Acka’s condition. Her changing skin continued into the night and around midnight deepened in colour further. Over the next hour her skin became a mirror of the night sky. All over Acka’s body were tiny intense sparkling pinpoints of light, like stars. Koko was astonished. She checked Acka’s breathing and pulse. Both were faint and erratic, her body still bone cold. Koko didn’t call Pussy or Padaru in, both of whom had drifted to sleep in the lounge room. She was being selfish, she knew, but if Acka was to die she wanted to be the only person there in the final moments. Koko took Acka’s hand as she held tenuously to life. After fighting for several hours, fatigue declared victory over Koko in the early morning and she fell asleep, the two women’s hands still linked.

… a man laughing a gulping laugh… a serpent swallowing the sun painted on a dusty street… drifting in from time gone away… a song chanted over and over… to be learnt by heart, flowing through the body like blood… an existence learnt all over again… the words came back like strong, nourishing milk… words which had been taught, spoken, aeons ago… remembering… following lines and paths across a creaking, moaning landscape… remembering… a residual aching wound… the tactile sensation of rough earth, on form and skin, of water cooling a heated body… shapes fading in, like mist rising over a ridge, falling from the clouds to the ground… beings shimmering in and out of forms, in and out of language… holding no perfect
Koko jolted awake, an errant dawn ray arrowing into her eyes, momentarily blinding her. The harsh images remaining in her mind shattered. Had she been dreaming? When she regathered her senses and checked the room, she panicked.

Acka was gone.

She checked the other rooms then ran outside into the chilled dawn air.

Kokoberra was more silent than she could ever remember. No frogs croaked, no flies moving, no morning birdcalls. Absolutely nothing was stirring. Even the rays of the new day’s sun seemed to be caught in suspended animation. Koko called out Acka’s name, a weird out of place noise in a motionless landscape. Her cries roused Pussy and Padaru and they quickly helped search the house and surrounds. Padaru found an odd trail in the dust leading away from the house towards the scrub – a heavy single footprint next to a shallow trough with regular jags, like someone was dragging one useless leg.

Pussy stood with hands on hips. ‘Well she’s still alive, at least.’

Koko wasn’t convinced. ‘No. It just means she’s moved. Somehow.’

‘But it means she’s stronger. Maybe getting better, right?’

Neither Padaru nor Koko spoke. They set off, following the trail.

While Koko was anxious about Acka’s safety, she didn’t want to get her hopes up lest it overwhelm her. Pussy was right, in a sense. Acka was in no condition to move last night and now she’d managed to drag herself at least a couple of hundred metres from the house. This meant Acka was stronger, or something strong
was moving her. She didn’t want to think of another alternative – that someone, or something, was dragging Acka helplessly away.

Following Acka’s tracks, they could’ve been the only three people in the world. Where the edge of the woodland savannah began they found Acka’s clothes discarded in a crumpled heap, superfluous annoyances. The trail in the dust disappeared and Pussy was sure this was the end of their pursuit, though Koko and Padaru moved assuredly into the thicker bush. Pussy was almost left behind as the father and daughter picked up their pace moving dextrously through the long grass, Padaru impressing Pussy with his spry agility. Soon the long grass thinned as they came upon a rock plateau, with a steep drop down to the river on the far side. The sun was now half risen over the horizon. Koko pointed in that direction. ‘There.’

Acka’s stood naked on the rock plateau’s far edge, silhouetted stark against the radiant orb, her dark body shimmering in the morning light, a piece of the universe plucked from the distant heavens, an interconnection of elements and celestial objects, like an open skygate to another dimension. From Padaru’s house to this scrub surrounded scene, the only sounds had come from the three searching humans. Now Acka’s heavy, quick breaths echoed in the morning stillness like a human bellows. She was glowing again, the focal point this time residing beneath her eyelids, predominantly masked by her night-sky black body. ‘Acka!’ Koko rushed forward determined to help her friend though not knowing how, or even if, she could.

Acka turned and held up a hand, fingers spread, silently signalling for Koko to stay where she was. Did Acka recognise her? Padaru put one hand on Koko’s shoulder trying to ease her franticness.

‘We have to stop it! She’s going to die!’

‘You’ve done your part. Up to her now.’
Koko could hardly look. *I certainly have.*

Acka’s head suddenly snapped back, her eyes wide open. The glow inside her had become a corporeal substance, spilling slowly from her eyes down her cheeks like lava tears from a molten metal furnace. The two gold streams tracked down her body, across her breasts, stomach and thighs, two blazing comets striking across her celestial form. From the lip of her knees, droplets formed and hanging from the skin, stretched for a sharp moment before simultaneously breaking away from the main flow. The drops hit the ground at the same time, parallel bombs exploding. Like a rock thrown in a pool of water, the shockwave rippled violently outward from Acka as the epicentre, throwing Koko, Padaru, and Pussy from their feet.

And everything changed.

Acka gripped tenuously to a semblance of what she knew as herself. Somehow she’d moved herself to the place she was now, out in the open, under a searing sun. Everything was familiar and unfamiliar at once, her surroundings a conglomeration of clashing kaleidoscopes, syncopated harmonics, blending colours, merging apparitions. Pure sensation in all forms overwhelmed her, senses straining to assimilate the assault. And something else was filling her, an essence that was eroding Acka’s own, like grains of sand whipped away by the fiercest winds. Her body felt like it was being held back from dissipating into the terrain by an impossibly thin membrane stretched between pinpoints of light. The landscape was pouring in to her being, the dusty, earthy flow of rock and rubble on her belly, a strange bodily memory she had no recollection of ever performing. The earth’s magnetic lines called to her. She kept getting the flicking impressions of the dream she’d had weeks ago, falling into the sun, being totally consumed by pure white heat.
Wave after wave of pure unfamiliar sensations washed away pieces of herself, replaced by something eternal, beyond existence, infinite. Her body was becoming, combining and separating at the same time in some dark recess of the universe. Vibrations shuddered through her, intent on splitting her psyche open. Fear overtook her, a spreading wildfire infection. From far away she heard a voice, a name she recognised. Was she once called that name?

Forcing its way from inside her, she had to open her mouth and eyes to a strange type of singing. Her head snapped back…

Her mind flamed with opal colours, clash of bursting supernovas, lava and waterspout, searing, slashing pain. She felt her bones cracking, breaking, and reforming thousands of times every second. The sounds sent small shockwaves arcing across the plain of her being, echoing…

Her body was a heart in cardiac overload…

In a final surge of rich energy, the last vestiges known as Acka were subsumed into the overwhelming, engulfing essence.

Acka fell heavily, face forward, onto the ground. Immediately her body started to twitch violently. As if unseen hands were pulling at her cheeks, the corners of Acka’s mouth stretched a metre, then ten, then a hundred metres behind her body, arching back, a crazy, distended, loose, obscene smile, flapping in the sand. The back of her head extended towards the stretched cheeks where the edges of the lips merged toward each other, joining like heavy paint splotches sliding down tilted glass. Her head extended out of any shape, a grotesquery with only the smallest of resemblances to anything human. Her eyes were pulled to the side of her expanding
head, her face now metres across, a wide splayed maw with thin lips behind which Koko could see the rows of angular crocodile incisors springing to life. The tongue that uncurled from her extended smile was all snake, wickedly cut into a sharp fork. The stretched edges of her form searched and found each other, combining until she’d become a long, weird, thing, no longer Acka, nor remotely resembling anything alive. She was in fact something else, a misshapen mass. Her dark and sparkle infused skin made her look like a long, flat universe, writhing, wallowing, in the rich red soil. The length of her form began to swell and convulse like rushing water filling a thin balloon. Her head became two things at once – snake and kangaroo, an uncanny demonic marsupial, with orange-brown strands of tough fur hanging from the chin. Colours flashed across the features. From moment to moment the visage was a conglomeration, having the appearance of both or either. The upright tail of the body was that of a fish. Sparks jumped from her skin and a ripple flashed down the still lengthening body, her night-sky skin transformed to tough, brilliant black scales. Acka had transformed into a nightmarish thing; a leviathan from an ancient time.

She was now a black, shining, serpent.

Coiling its huge body, Acka, the serpent, rose up, surveying the countryside, saliva dripping from its huge open mouth. The eyes caught the rays of the sun, flashing. Striking slashes of dark red, green, and blue scales graced the enormous belly.

‘Ngalyod.’

‘Yingarna.’

Padaru and Koko had gasped the words spoken at the same time. As if called by name, the giant serpent swung around to face the three humans, insignificantly
small in its shadow. None dared even draw breath. The serpent’s opal coloured eyes flared with thoughts of destruction, flowing from a time forgotten animal soul. There was nothing of Acka in that gaze.

Padaru, Koko, and Pussy, turned and ran.

The serpent’s body came down hard slapping the earth, propelling dirt, rocks, and all other loose material into the air creating a low level dust cloud. The shockwave threw the three runners off their feet. Pussy was up first and helped pull Koko to her feet. In the midst of the turmoil, Koko suddenly realised a missing presence.

‘Where’s Padaru?’

In their haphazard flee they’d been separated from the old man, the thick dust plume thwarting their quick, erratic search. Koko had to trust that the old man could look after himself… and that he was alright. The serpent indiscriminately swept its body in a wide arc behind them, smashing trees, scrub, and grass in its path, showering them with chunks of rock, dirt, clay, and vegetation. The two women sprinted through the scrub back towards town. Strangely, the serpent didn’t follow them, however unbelievable it might seem, instead slithering away in the opposite direction, down the incline to the river and disappeared.

In Kokoberra the two women were safe, at least for the moment. There was still no sign of Padaru. Pussy, catching her breath, doubted she’d ever run that far in her entire life. Koko seemed to have plenty of energy in reserve and continued running, only one thing in mind. She was heading for the aerodrome.

Heaving heavily, Pussy smiled.
Still puffing, Pussy fired the gyro into life. ‘Ho-lee shit! Did you see that, Koko!? Did you fucking see that!?

‘I saw it alright.’

‘I knew something was gonna happen, but… that was something… something special. What about everyone in the town?’

‘They’ll be alright. They know where to go to get out of the way.’

Pussy got them into the air quick smart. ‘What were those words you and Padaru said before?’

‘Ngalyod and Yingarna. Different and the same. Creator spirits. Rainbow Serpent.’ Koko kept to herself that the creator spirit was also a destroyer.

Pussy’s eyes widened in surprise as far as they could go. ‘Bloody hell! Go Acka!’ Pussy increased the gyro’s speed. ‘Well, let’s see this from the air!’

Finding evidence of where the serpent had been wasn’t too hard. A clear winding pathway through the landscape some thirty metres wide was easy to spot from the air. Pussy pushed the gyro to the limit and they soon caught up to the serpent which was carving deep ruts in the earth, pushing dirt apart and ahead of it in a massive brown wave. Pussy was mesmerised at the spectacle. ‘Whoa! How fast is she going?! Look at her go! Where do you think she’s going?’

Koko marvelled at the sheer immensity of the creature. The distinct pattern of dark red lilies could be seen in the interwoven scales all along the serpent’s back. Koko was catching none of Pussy’s potentially infectious excitement though. ‘I think she’s going… back in time.’

In an unexpected turn, the serpent’s head dipped into the ground followed by a devastating roar as earth and rocks were pummelled aside to make way for the long
body to disappear underground. Both women stared in awe, blinking rapidly. Pussy hovered the gyro over the gaping hole. ‘What do we do now?’

Koko peered over the country she had travelled and lived in all her life. She’d noticed something as they’d followed the serpent’s path. The creature was travelling through or near the waterways, and if she wasn’t mistaken, heading towards the southern point of the gulf.

Pussy and Koko had been flying over the coastal waters for about twenty minutes with no sign of the emergent being.

‘Are you sure she’d come this way?’

Koko kept searching the water’s surface. ‘No.’

A few minutes later though, her assumptions were proved correct. She pointed. ‘There.’

In the near distance the gulf waters rippled, bubbled, and eddied ferociously. Pussy guided the gyro to a safe viewing distance. They both knew this had to be Acka disturbing the otherwise still gulf waters from beneath. The snake’s giant black head surfaced a few hundred metres from the shore, soon followed by the slow moving body. The being’s head occasionally dipped beneath the waters and rose again, producing heavy waves that battered mangroves and pristine stretches of sand alike along the shore. It swirled around in circles for a few minutes, looking like it was having a relaxing time in its own giant pool, before heading off again.

As the serpent travelled up and down the coastal waters, a few kilometres one way then a few in the opposite direction, often changing tack, moving closer to the coast and out again, Koko got the impression the serpent was surveying the area,
searching… From their position in the air, they saw the creature dip below the water again, the dark shape beneath the surface, trajectory lining up directly with the coast’s largest river inlet – Flinders River – and head for it.

The serpent hit the delta at tremendous speed, expanding the width and depth of the channel in an explosive surge of muddied water. The Gulf waters, as if surprised, seemed to hold back for a split second before spilling torrentially through into the newly widened channel, the rushing roar a rejoicing, celebration, the serpent pulling the waters behind it in a slipstream. Where the mountains and hills were a barrier to the waters, the serpent’s wrath made them shudder and collapse, creating new fissures, allowing water free passage inland.

Hardly able to keep up even in the gyro, Koko again recognised the southward snaking path the serpent took back and forth using the river systems. An impossible amount of water flowed behind. There was no way that this thick mud brown torrent, wending its way down the dry river beds could be exclusively from the gulf. The only explanation Koko could garner was that Acka, the serpent, was somehow creating the extra water. As Koko looked back over the country where they’d travelled, she could see a series of primordial lakes forming. Further in the distance behind were swelling rich, dark storm clouds heavy with rain. Soon there’d be no difference between the quickly filling channels and a vast, flat, waterlogged plain.

They followed Acka for several hours as she headed steadily south and by midday they’d crossed from Arnhem Land into Queensland. Soon after the serpent picked up speed and once again pushed its way below ground. Pussy hovered the gyro for
several minutes, waiting expectantly for any further signs of movement. ‘Do you think that’s it?’

Before Koko could answer the serpent burst back through the shallow water-covered surface, light reflecting blue, gold, red and brown off black skin. A few hundred metres from where the serpent emerged, another serpent burst spectacularly through the earth, arcing into the air.

Then another.

Then another.

Then another.

Though not as large, they were similarly shaped with the same iridescent black scales and wild slashes of colour covering their bellies. Pussy shouted above the sounds of the huge crunching explosions as each new serpent smashed back into the ground. ‘What’s happening, Koko?’

Koko didn’t know. In the time it took Pussy to speak, another two had emerged like erupting volcanoes spewing living material into the air. The terrain had turned into a scene of prehistoric cataclysm. Koko was speechless at the total chaos unfolding before her. There were now at least ten serpents of various magnitudes spreading out over the outback landscape.

Almost directly in front of the gyro’s position another newly formed serpent exploded through the ground into the air, missing the gyro by metres, its long body curving in a magnificent arc over the machine before crashing back to earth. For the rest of her days Koko would remember the feeling of imminent demise accompanying the devastating image of the serpent’s black maw rushing towards her, rows of severely hooked fangs dripping with thick fluids, the fiery golden eyes, orbs of pure whipped energy.
The rocks and debris blasted into the air hit the gyro, spinning it one hundred and eighty degrees. The gyro began sputtering, losing power and altitude. Pussy struggled to keep control. ‘I think we’ve taken some damage! Hold on!’

Pussy guided the machine to a heavy landing, hitting the ground with an almighty thud. The engine cut out on impact, the landing pads crunched and bent out of shape. Both occupants sat motionless and silent as the shock of the near crash subsided. There was hardly time to gather their wits before they had to get out. The holes which the serpents had made were now gushing massive water spouts easily twenty to thirty metres into the air as if from a broken natural water main. Combined with the flood waters rushing from the north, the sandy and parched earth was quickly disappearing. The water was already ankle deep as Koko and Pussy stepped from the wrecked gyro, fluid seeping steadily from a ruptured fuel tank and oil lines. It was going nowhere fast. Quickly assessing the damage, Pussy slapped her own forehead. ‘Damn!’

As the two women headed for higher ground they could hear the rumble-slaps, feel the tremors through the ground, indicators of the collective of serpents’ continuing their leaping journey south. The water was rising at an almost magical rate, lapping hungrily at their feet. There was no rational explanation how so much water could be filling the outback plains at such a rate, even accounting for Acka’s rampage. Storm clouds came from the north in the wake of the beast, beating a steady downpour of rain. By the time Koko and Pussy made the nearest high ground – a jagged rock outcrop – the heavy mud waters were waist deep, littered with dead trees and other loose detritus. They weren’t alone on the outcrop’s higher ground. An emaciated kangaroo, two goannas, several small finches, and some cockatoos that
had somehow managed to survive the extended dry period stared at the two intruders, holding their ground.

‘I hope you can talk to them, Koko. They don’t look like they want to share.’

Running on pure primal archaic instinct, the serpents made their way through the vast dry stretches of the river systems, following the barely perceptible magnetic lines of country. The raging tail-waters and storm clouds followed like obedient pets at first filling, then inundating, the river channels. The new waters spread over the land almost with an antediluvian will of their own. Waters once submerged this land in the first days of creation and now they were to again. Millennia old land formations and rock shelves crumbled meekly under the serpents’ watery, transformative onslaught. The serpents converged in the deeper parts of the newly forming ocean, intertwining, slithering, writhing around each other, revelling in their orgiastic powers, the punishing storm rains whipping their scales. Lying somewhere deep beneath the primal euphoria, there was the distinct knowledge of something… unfinished. Something aggravating, like a terrible festering lesion.

With conjoined impulses, the serpents ventured East.

The storm’s chaotic, cyclonic fury, hit Sydney with the force of a small war. Trees denuded of foliage bent sideways in the howling fury and street posts buckled. Venomously circulating clouds filled the horizon in every direction, blackening the sky. The moisture collectors on buildings were ripped from their mounts and catapulted into the air. The harbour waters churned and bubbled with poisonous
potential, under the roar of natural disaster, continuous thunder, harsh, screaming winds.

The first darkened minutes of evening had passed when the serpent Acka had transformed into slipped from the ocean floor into the deep waters of Sydney Harbour. The journey under the ground into the Sydney basin had been like entering an abandoned field of atrocity, more devoid of life than the most barren wasteland. From the ocean floor she violently whipped her body creating a shockwave through the water. The powerful surge became a wave ten metres high smashing into and obliterating the harbour levee walls. Like a bomb’s concussion wave, the storm-whipped ocean waters careened through the city with blinding speed, inundating and submerging the city’s bleak streets.

Other serpents went deep into the dry aquifers underneath the city, sending vibrations through the unstable, deteriorating rock fissures. The tremors struck Sydney above as water from the harbour coursed through the streets. Buildings swayed, toppling into the floodwaters, high rise walkways twisted like rubber, windows shattered, the shards falling like glittering rain. Structures on the waterfront slipped into the fierce waters, the ground beneath subsiding and slipping from their foundations. The forces generated broke the electricity supply, and the city plunged into darkness.

The remaining serpents surfaced in the virtually dry major rivers, disgorging water from their giant mouths into the riverbeds in vomitus spasms. Combined with the huge waves from the harbour, the surge burst over river banks to rush through the inner suburban streets.

Their task completed the serpents converged on the heart of the city, nexus of destruction, swimming through the water filled streets, their undulating bodies
ripping up the asphalt and concrete. Buildings shattered as they passed as if detonated from within, the water rushing through the lower levels of buildings, path of demolition, washing the built up heat away. Instinctively the serpents knew where the inhabitants of the city were. The only emotion was of unadulterated fear as they approached the drowning and flailing citizens of Sydney. Open maws of a thousand teeth swallowed them whole with huge gulps of water, sucking them into their long body. The people were overcome by impenetrable blackness, taken by an unknown current. The serpents then travelled to the mountains and other areas not affected by the risen waters. There, in separate places, the gullets of the huge beings convulsed with slick wet sounds and their mouths opened, vomiting water and all the people they’d swallowed in the churning currents of the submerged metropolis back onto the land. Each person would remember little of their journey to safe haven, only the nagging remainder in their psyche of a terrible and unique presence, being trapped, sucked into a drain. They would wake up together, alone, or in groups, tired but reborn. For years afterward, these people would have the same unnerving feeling of being expelled from their environment, their dreams filled with the half remembered shapes, sounds, colours, smells, of a snake’s eyes, tongue, belly.

In the hour before dawn, the destruction complete, the storm now simply a heavy steady downpour, the serpents returned to the harbour where the serpent that was Acka silently floated on the water’s surface. One by one they circled her as she opened her jaws and swallowed each smaller serpent, reabsorbing them into her being. When the last disappeared into the black abyss of her body, and without a shred of contemplation for the destroyed city, the serpent disappeared beneath the bubbling waters.
Chapter 8

Dawn broke violently over Sydney’s new water laden landscape. Water moved languidly, placidly over areas where only hours before a multitude of feet wearily trudged. Beneath the waters the buildings silently welcomed the reduction in temperature, the cool water flowing across their battered brickwork. Steam rose from the water’s surface, twisting white flames dispersing into the hot morning air. The sun reflected harshly, unevenly off the Harbour Bridge looking for familiar angles and receptacles. The Harbour Bridge was now a place of sanctuary to a strange coterie of seagulls, ibis, parrots, finches, and another hundred species taking refuge on the structure’s once famous arch. Without the recognisable arch and the ruins of buildings sticking defiantly above the waterline, this might ’ve been a prehistoric swamp. Perched like unconcerned sentinels, some searched the new waters for a food, while others preferred to carry out regulated preening. An eclectic group of human survivors a few thousand strong milled on the bridge’s roadway, dazed and unbelieving of the new surrealistic setting that surrounded them.

Pussy and Koko were stranded. Overnight they had to edge further up the outcrop as the waters continued to rise, sheltering under a rocky overhang, cold and tired, with the group of similarly marooned animals. The rain had abated to a misty drizzle in the early daylight hours leaving the high ground a small island in the middle of a
vast, steaming swamp. The sun now peered hesitantly through patchy low cloud. Koko felt the rains hadn’t finished their scolding punishment and would return soon enough. Pussy threw rocks into the muddy waters, clearly anxious. ‘Do we know where we are?’

‘Somewhere in the middle of Queensland, I guess.’

Pussy checked her phone. ‘Bugger. Still no service.’

Across the water she searched for the gyro. It had been swept over during the night, and must’ve caught on something under the water to stop it from being completely swept away. Only the tip of the gyro’s rotor tail remained above the water, indicating it was resting upright, on its nose. She put her head in her hands, reiterating what she had said several times throughout the night. ‘Oh, man. I am so dead. Dad’s gonna kill me. For real this time. He loved that gyro. This is so yijgawoo.’

Koko found it hard to suppress a giggle, even when Pussy scowled darkly at her. With little idea where they were, there was nothing to do except wait for the waters to subside enough so they could make their way to civilisation, if any was left. Unfortunately that didn’t look like happening any time soon. It was then that Pussy had the first, albeit offhanded, idea Koko thought held any merit. ‘Why don’t you get some of your insect or frog friends to help us out?’

Koko internally kicked herself for not thinking of it sooner and called for Nyeeny, who promptly turned up on her nose. She asked if he could try and locate Padaru and tell him what had happened to them. She hoped too that nothing untoward had happened to Padaru himself. As she watched the fly head away Koko glanced at Pussy. ‘They’re not too happy about you.’

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88 Goonyandi language (Kimberley, Western Australia) - Bad, stupid
‘Me? Why?’
‘Because they reckon this is all your fault.’
‘Eh!?’
‘Mainly.’
‘What did I do?’
‘It’s more, y’know, what you didn’t do. Maybe not so much you
personally…’
‘Well I’m relieved about that!’

They sat leaning almost back-to-back against the only tree on their little
island in the middle of the new swamp. Pussy threw a rock into the water. One of the
cockatoos squawked loudly. ‘Where do you think she went?’

‘Acka?’
‘No. The Queen. Yeah, Acka!’
‘Dunno.’
‘Do you think she’s… gone? I mean, y’know, like gone…’

Koko shrugged sullenly. She knew it was a possibility. A real possibility.

‘Maybe.’

Pussy was struck aghast. ‘Maybe!? What d’you mean, maybe!?’

‘What?’

‘You’re not supposed to fuckin’ say maybe, for fuck’s sake!’

Koko was astonished and confused. ‘I…? But…?’ Pussy stared, gleaming
harsh eyes. Koko retorted. ‘What am I supposed to say?’

‘You’re supposed to say no! Jesus Christ! You’re supposed to say, “Don’t
worry, Pussy” or “No, Pussy, she’s okay, she’s fine”, and then laugh a little bit and
make me feel better! Assure me that my best friend isn’t fucking dead!’
‘She’ll be…’

‘Well it’s too late now! The damage has been done!’

The other cockatoo squawked as an added exclamation. Koko pointed at the bird. ‘You be quiet.’

‘Can you talk to them too?’

‘No. I’m just trying to ease the tension.’

Pussy walked to the water’s edge, hands on hips, staring. Koko felt for her. This person who seemed so self indulgent possibly suffering her first real loss of someone she’d known forever.

‘I don’t want her to be dead either, you know.’

‘Really!? Well thank fuck for that! Seeing as you’re the one who got her in this situation in the first place.’

‘That’s not fair.’ Koko pointed at Pussy. ‘You encouraged her to go for it!’

Pussy threw her arms at the morning mist. ‘Well, what do I know!? Everyone knows not to listen to me. I’m an idiot! I get other people to do my exams for me!’

The two women returned to silence, listening to the flow of new waters, the occasional distant birdcall. The sound of water splashing in the distance suddenly echoed across the water. Pussy peered into the haze, then turned to Koko. ‘Did you hear that?’

Koko listened intently. It sounded like the distinct gait of someone, something, walking towards their island. Pussy backed away from the water. She was becoming seriously nervous. ‘What is that?’

‘Shoosh.’

‘Don’t shoosh me.’
Koko thrust out one hand in Pussy’s direction. ‘Shoosh!’ She couldn’t tell if the sound was coming nearer or not.

‘I only asked a question.’

‘Will you shut up? You’re such an only child.’

‘I’m such a what…?’ But Pussy didn’t have time to finish as the sound materialised into a shape emerging from the mist. Although the distance and haze made it hard to tell, Pussy at first thought the shape was human. As the sound got closer the shape got bigger, and bigger…

A towering humanoid easily five or six metres tall emerged from the mist. The spindly body and limbs were made out of branches, logs, tree trunks, and twigs with smoothened river stones in the place of joints. The skin was a robust type of bark. Like wise the semblance of a skull was a conglomeration of wood and stone. The creature had only blank holes where the eyes should have been. The two women didn’t think it had seen them until it pointed in their direction and started coming their way. In a few gigantic strides it was at their island’s shore. The stranded women, dumbstruck by the sheer absurdity of the creature, fell backwards and were both about to scream as it bent down toward them, until they saw the smiling grey-haired man sitting cross-legged on the creature’s head.

‘Koko! That you, girl?’

‘Padaru?’

‘Yep! It’s me, too right! That Nyeeny’s alright. What are you doing?’

‘What are you doing?’ Koko picked herself up and brushed herself off.

‘Couldn’t you have warned us it was you?’

‘Hmm.’ Padaru scratched his beard. ‘I s’pose so.’
Pussy hadn’t moved. She was staring at the creature. The creature was staring at her. Pointing at Pussy, the creature spoke to Padaru, with a voice of wind rustling a valley of trees. Padaru replied. ‘Oh, she’s alright. She likes you.’

The creature put one hand on his chin, thinking for a moment, then brought its hand down next to Pussy, extending a tree branch finger to help her to her feet. Still dazed, Pussy accepted the gesture.

Koko nodded at the creature. ‘Who’s this, then?’

‘This Wulgaru! Old friend of mine I sung up! Just got some branches, few river stones, some ochre, bee’s wax.’ He shrugged. ‘Y’know…’

‘I thought you were out of shape.’

Padaru patted his stomach, grinning. ‘Ah. Maybe not that bad, eh?’

Koko shielded her eyes looking up at Padaru. ‘You missed all the excitement.’

‘No, I didn’t. I saw it.’ He pointed to the south. ‘Some excitement down that way too.’

‘How do you know?’ Pussy asked.

Koko patted Pussy lightly on the shoulder. ‘Don’t worry. He knows.’

Padaru and Wulgaru had brought along a bark canoe for Koko and Pussy.

Once in the water and ready to set off, Padaru pointed one way and Wulgaru went the other. Padaru shouted, stopping Wulgaru short. Padaru again pointed in the direction he wanted to go. Wulgaru pointed in the direction he was heading and continued that way. Padaru slapped the top of Wulgaru’s head and muttered a bunch of unintelligible words. The creature stopped, frowned markedly at this treatment and picked Padaru from his head by the back of his pants. Holding him like a child he
brought Padaru face to face with him pointed a finger at Padaru, saying some obviously berating words.

‘What are they talking about?’

‘I have no idea. But if he’s as stubborn as Padaru can be, there could be trouble.’

Padaru argued, pointing *his* fingers at Wulgaru’s face, crossing his arms defiantly. Wulgaru frowned, obviously thinking deeply on the heated discussion. The creature then promptly placed Padaru neatly on the ground before turning and walking away. Padaru’s eyes widened in surprise, his defiant demeanour instantaneously vanishing. He set off after the Wulgaru, waving his hands as he ran around in front of the creature, blocking its path. After a few more minutes of animated gesturing, finally Padaru nodded. ‘Fair enough!’ The Wulgaru nodded sagely and placed Padaru back on his head.

Padaru winked at Koko and Pussy and called out as they walked over. ‘We don’t quite speak the same words, y’know? He doesn’t understand me too good. I got taught him by this fella.’ He pointed to the west. ‘Over that way. There’s something lost in the translation but we’re okay now. Okay. Let’s go!’

‘Padaru. How did you get out of the way back at Kokoberra?’

‘Oh, y’know. I’m a clever fella.’ He smiled cheekily. ‘Got meself a few tricks.’

‘What about Acka?’

‘Don’t worry. I’m workin’ on the situation.’

The two women paddled behind Wulgaru and Padaru, Koko in the bow, Pussy at the rear.

‘Koko?’
'Yes, Pussy.'

'How did you know I was an only child?'

'It’s sort of obvious.'

'Koko?'

'Yes, Pussy.'

'Do you think, y’know, I might be… y’know, I might have a little of what Acka’s got?'

Koko looked at her sideways, like Pussy had to be joking. She wasn’t. ‘You make me sick sometimes, but no, Pussy, you don’t.’

‘But maybe I …’

‘No. You don’t. Not at all.’

Koko, Pussy, Padaru, and Wulgaru traversed the new waters for the rest of the day, Wulgaru leading the way. Though the waters were sometimes turbulent, Wulgaru easily pulled them through to stiller waters. Padaru had another couple of tiffs with the stone and wood giant about their direction back to Kokoberra, providing great entertainment value for two women following.

Near dusk they had reached the shore of what they all were now suspecting to be a new inland sea. Depositing Padaru to the ground, man and giant exchanged words once again. Wulgaru nodded and set off south, back into the water. Koko reckoned they weren’t too far from Kokoberra and Padaru confirmed her thoughts. They set up camp for the night anyway. Looking over the waters reflecting the black void of the night sky, Koko thought she heard the earth breathe.
They continued toward Kokoberra late in the morning the next day and after several hours arrived exhausted, relieved and sore. Late in the afternoon, the sound of heavy footfalls indicated Wulgaru’s return.

Cradled in the crook of one arm like a baby, and just as naked, was Acka.

Acka’s unconscious body was covered in a thick amber gel. Underneath the gel, her skin had a similar colour to what it was before her transformation – a shining black, except the pinpoints of light had been replaced by a rainbow sheen. Small groups of scales remained clumped on parts of her body. Padaru looked this way and that at Acka, moving his head back and forth over her body, scrunching up his nose at certain things, shaking his head at others only known to him. Koko watched him studiously until finally he stood up, letting out a long, deep breath that made his lips wobble. The others waited on his verdict. After a minute he’d still hadn’t said anything. Exasperated at his silence, Koko had to prompt him. ‘What d’you think?’

The old man rubbed his hand through his grey curly hair several times.

‘Hmm. Looks bad.’

‘Bad?’

‘Maybe.’ He shrugged. ‘Mmm. Maybe not so bad. Have to see.’

Head lolling back in frustration at Padaru’s fence-sitting, Koko turned away. On the other hand, Pussy couldn’t stop staring at Acka’s appearance. ‘She looks amazing. Her skin… it’s beautiful.’ She flicked her hand towards Acka’s limp form, and screwed up her mouth. ‘Under all that goop, that is.’

Their efforts to clean the gel from her body were in vain the stuff regenerating as quick as it could be removed. Padaru stood with an intent look,
thinking for several minutes, then snapped his fingers. ‘Ah! Got old blackfella fix-up!’

He grabbed his clap sticks, then whistled at the sitting Wulgaru, pointing at Acka, making gestures to get the being to pick her up. The wood and stone Goliath had been drawing circles in the sand between his legs. Padaru looked very proud of himself, his stride was purposeful, belly jiggling, turning to the women. ‘Follow me.’

‘He’s cute, don’t you reckon, Koko?’

‘Pussy!? He’s my dad?’

‘Yeah. I know.’ Pussy was confused. ‘What d’you mean?’

‘Ugh. God.’

They followed the trotting Padaru into the bush for a few hundred metres. Trailing behind, Wulgaru carried Acka gently in one hand. The woody scrub country filled with Paperbark trees and sharp, prickly grasses opened out to a clear plain where hundreds of ant mounds stood like ancient guards of lost riches. Padaru directed Wulgaru to prop Acka up against one of the biggest mounds. Padaru sat down near the mound and without explaining began to chant, knocking his clap sticks together in a gentle, steady rhythm. For a few minutes nothing happened. Koko and Pussy watched anxiously for any change in Acka’s condition. They then noticed a steady stream of black ants scurrying erratically over Acka’s body, each with their own movement. Before Koko and Pussy knew it the ground was a moving liquid of brilliant red, jade, and deep honey coloured ants from the nearby mounds, climbing over Acka, an army of tireless workers covering her entirely in a multicoloured cocoon.

‘What are they doing?’

‘Have a look.’
Pussy knelt down next to Acka to see the ants eating the gel. The insects worked methodically, hundreds leaving and being replaced on her body every second. Totally engulfed in his task, Padaru continued singing as the ants did their peculiar chore.

Koko whispered to Pussy. ‘I’ve heard about this type of thing. He never fails to amaze me. Maybe he’ll teach me this one day.’

Soon enough the ants had removed all the gel.

Acka coughed.

Then her finger twitched and her eyes opened. Koko, Padaru and Pussy recoiled, astounded at the magnificent and dazzling thing they’d just seen. Around the obsidian black pools of her pupils, Acka’s irises flared with the deep burning colours of an opal – shimmering flecks and hues of red, green, blue, white, and gold.

Acka closed her eyes again, and after a few seconds, dropped into a deep sleep, her breathing easy, and steady.

Acka felt like she was being uncovered of layers and layers of thick, heavy dust. When the final veneer had been removed, she opened her eyes. The colours of the world blinded her. Blurry outlines and unformed shapes merged into things recognisable as humans and natural objects, misty tendrils floating away from them into the surrounding air space, like steam rising from hot bodies in cold morning air. The colours were too bright for her and she felt a great tiredness settle over her being. She closed her eyes again and rested.

That night there were no dreams of her falling into the sun. She dreamt of something she’d never dreamt before.

She dreamt of rain.
Chapter 9

Acka, Koko, and Pussy stared out over the new inland sea. A new sea with ancient origins. Water fowl had already taken up residence on the wind-caressed waters. Brolgas flew with fish in their mouths, carried from the ocean in the unstoppable water surge that had followed the serpent’s rampant trail. The morning sun had produced a vivid rainbow on the horizon. Every breath Acka took felt like she was breathing pure liquid diamonds. She could hardly believe this beautiful thing she was looking at. And for which she was responsible.

Pussy tentatively spoke. ‘Did you do that thing to Sydney?’

‘I can’t say it was me.’

‘What was it like?’

‘I don’t know if I can explain it. It’s hard…’ For Acka it was more a feeling of aftermath residing in her bones and limbs, a strange ache, pulsation, an alien heartbeat. She couldn’t remember exactly what it was like in that state. Even at the moment she spoke of it, she could feel the sensations slowing ebbing away. ‘Let me put it this way. It was… like… a combination of colour and emotion, and sensation. A song in a cyclone. I was a passenger but I wasn’t there, I wasn’t watching. I was… outside… somewhere…’ The thoughts were suddenly overwhelming her. ‘It’s a time and space thing…’

‘Didn’t think you hated the place that much. Could you turn into that serpent again?’
‘I don’t know… Maybe.’
Koko turned to her. ‘You’re starting to sound like Padaru.’

Acka smiled. ‘Is that so bad?’

Koko smiled back. ‘Maybe. Maybe not. Have to see.’

Acka turned to Pussy. ‘Your dad won’t be too happy about Sydney. Not much money in underwater real estate.’

‘I guess he’ll have to start again. Or something.’

‘What if they come and start screwing this up?’

‘It’s not an “if”, Koko. It’s a “when”.’ Pussy seemed terribly adamant in her assessment. ‘This is all prime waterfront real estate now. Agents will be eating each others’ corpses to get their hands on it. No doubt my dad will be one of them.’

‘Well maybe you should tell him to keep his hands off.’

‘Maybe I will.’

Acka continued to stare at the water. ‘Personally, I don’t think they’ll be allowed.’

Koko sighed heavily. ‘Who’s gonna stop them?’

Acka smiled again. She pointed across the languid waters. ‘I think they’ll have something to say about it.’

In the distance striding across the shallow waters were two spindly, robust figures of the Wulgaru. ‘This place. Everywhere. It’s full of magic now. Ready for it anyway. Do you feel it?’ The waters shimmered not just from the glint of sunlight off the steadily flowing current, but in a way that suggested everything was there at once. She knelt down and plunged her hand into the soft dirt at her feet, her hand somehow becoming transparent and solid at same time. She could feel the earth, the millions of sand particles in her veins and under her skin around her hand, but also in
her hand, the two states existing in the one space. Subtle, and yet, piercing vibrations
coursed from the ground into her body. ‘I can feel it.’

Pussy closed one eye, looked around her several times, put her hands out to
the sides, flapped them a bit, trying to detect something. She gave up, hands slapping
back to her sides. ‘Can’t feel a thing.’

As Acka stood up, her hand miraculously free and clean of earth, Koko spoke
softly to her. ‘What’s it like looking through those eyes?’

Acka hadn’t noticed Koko watching her intently as she played with the dirt.
She wanted to say that everything was stark and vivid, the hyperreal colours imbued
with soul, life, that she could see, like a double of every object. Instead she simply
stated, ‘It’s okay.’

The three were silent for another long moment, none feeling the urge to
speak, until Acka again turned to Koko. ‘I felt your presence, Koko, when I was
unconscious. Only for a moment. But you were there. Do you remember? Did you
see?’

Koko remembered how she’d fallen asleep holding Acka’s hand. ‘I did, but I
didn’t think it meant anything. Do you think that brought you back?’

‘Remember Padaru said it relies on both people. We were connected and then
it broke. The activation stopped. Something must’ve finished when you held my
hand. Completed the… process. I don’t think that we needed to be touching, you
could do it with pure will alone I reckon, but you wouldn’t have known that. When
you were asleep, it took over. Dreams, eh? Damn things. You never know when they
mean something.’

Koko kicked the dirt, and spat. ‘I was too hasty. Careless. Thoughtless.
Impatient. I was arrogant, over confident. It was too much. Too much power.’
‘It’s okay, Koko. You couldn’t have known. It wanted to happen. I’m sure, some way, it would’ve emerged.’ Acka’s rich opal eyes glimmered. ‘You’ve got a lot more work coming up, Koko. They’re coming back. I’m only the beginning. They’re coming back, and things are going to change. Some are here already, under the ground, sleeping away, like they always have. But we’d better watch out, because things are gonna change some more. Some small, some big. There’ll be a new law. And an old law. A new and an old way.’ And almost to herself, knowing how she saw things now, ‘I can see it.’

Koko nodded towards the waters. ‘Change? Like this?’

‘Not as big as this. But big in other ways too.’

‘How?’

‘If I knew…’ she smiled mischievously, ‘I probably wouldn’t tell you anyway.’

Rain started to fall.

Koko tilted her head back, catching raindrops on her face. ‘Do you know, why you, now, Acka?’

Acka smiled, deeply, warmly. ‘Just lucky, I guess.’
Glossary

Aboriginal Names and Terms Used

Yingarna

- Female serpent, creator being
- Kunwinjku (Also Gunwinggu, Source: Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia) speakers of Western Arnhem Land

Ngalyod

- male or female serpent, creator being
- Kunwinjku speakers of Western Arnhem Land
- linked with stories relating to the creation of specific sites

Wulgaru

- A devil made out of pieces of wood roughly the shape of limbs, river stones for joints stuck together with red ochre and wax

Jambuwal

- An important ancestral being of the Dhuwa moiety of North-Eastern Arnhem Land

**Mooncumbulli**


**Kokoberra**

• Also Kokoberrin, Koko-Bera, Koko-Pera
• Tribal people name and area on the West Coast of Cape York Peninsula (QLD).

**Jiwarli**

• Aboriginal people and area, now extinct, who lived in the area of the Western Australia coast around Exmouth, Onslow, Glen Florrie, Mundong Well and Maroonah
• Jack Butler, the last native Jiwarli speaker and tribal member died in 1986.

**Oondiri**

• Name for the Nullarbor Plain
• Also ‘Undire’– ‘bare like a bone’ ([www.worldtrans.org](http://www.worldtrans.org))
• Mirning people of South Australia.

**Yooroog**

• To vomit
• Gooniyandi People. Gooniyandi is spoken by about 100 people in Fitzroy Crossing and a number of outstations around Halls Creek (Kimberly region of Western Australia).
Yijgawoo
- Bad, stupid
- Gooniyandi People

Yuk Maak
- Message stick
- Wik-Mungkan People, Arunkan area of West Coast of Cape York Peninsula (QLD).

Nhurdu
- A fly
- Nyungar People (South-western Western Australia – Perth Region)

Nyeeny
- A fly
- Wik-Mungkan People, Arunkan area of West Coast of Cape York Peninsula (QLD).

Ngirrinyi
- A fly
- Gooniyandi People.

Malimali

• Butterfly
• Gooniyandi People.

Birrinyooloo

• Wasp
• Gooniyandi People.

Goorlinyi

• Mosquito
• Gooniyandi People.

Healing Ants

• Storyteller: Mrs Elkin Umbagai

Wilintji

• A female who, in a dreamtime story, defies men and sings the sacred songs reserved for men
• Dances several warriors to death and eats them
• Can call on fire and the scorpion’s bite

• Allen states that the information came from the artists, Nabadbara, and Nonganyari. Nabadbara was ‘one of the old traditional artists of the Gunwinggu tribe’ (281) although on page 260 he is identified as being of the Iwaidja people. Nonganyari is identified as of the Gunwinggu people.

**Jitai**

• Is the name of a ‘bold woman’ in an aboriginal story

• Originating from the Port Keats region of Arnhem Land. Though not specifically stated, the story ‘built from several bare episodes… recounted by the tribesmen’ (255-56) may be associated with the Murinbata and/or Maringar peoples.

**Wiljakali**

• The Wiljakali people traditionally occupied the lands around Broken Hill, visiting the Barkindji people on the Menindee Lakes each year.

**Kowanyama and Pompuraaw**

• Aboriginal communities on the West Coast of Cape York Peninsula (Queensland)

**Nana and Kuwarra**

• Nana and Kuwarra country lies in the Great Victorian Desert surrounding Lake Darlot
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