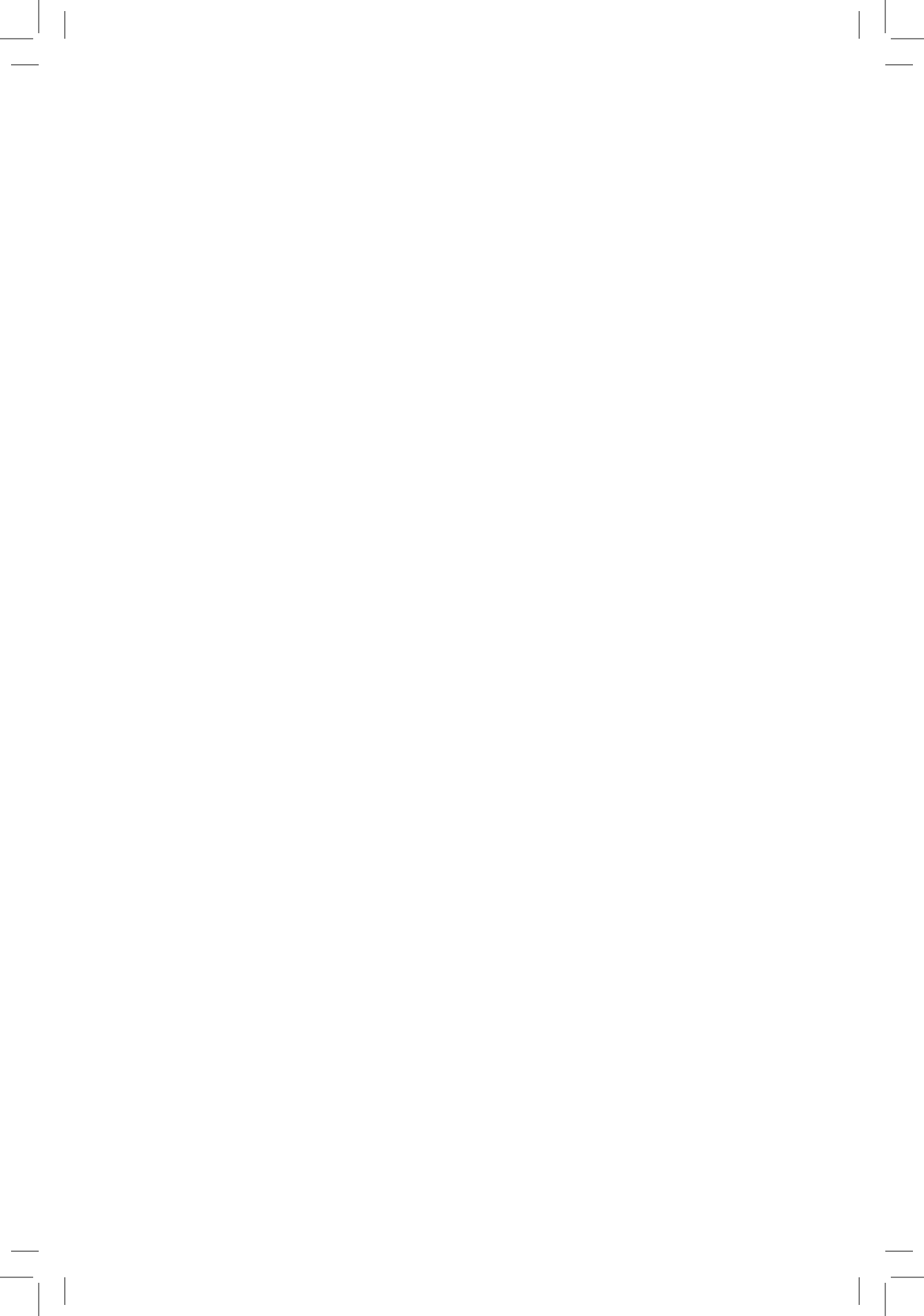


It is absurd to say that the age of miracles is past. It has not yet begun.

– Oscar Wilde, *Letter from Paris*, 1900

DREAM



She is lost in the forest looking for two heart-shaped leaves, but they are terribly hard to find. No one tree will have two identical heart-shaped leaves, at least the ones she has examined. The forest rustles in the dark with the sound of the sea. She may be wrong, she may be seeing difference where difference does not exist, but it is the heart-shaped leaves which seem to be the odd ones out; that is, the distortion amongst the norm, perhaps even the mutation. She hopes this is not so, she wouldn't like to think of it being so. She runs from tree to tree. Every one is different, and every leaf of every tree is different also, so why not every cell of every leaf? There are plenty of leaves in the shape of a heart, plenty of the greeting-card and Valentine's Day hearts, but in the natural world she can find no two the same, not even from the same tree. Gum trees appear to have the greatest incidence of this heart-shaped anomaly, some with lumps and bunions. Fuel for the fire. Others torn and made to fit an unfamiliar mould. The greeting-card heart is an idealised shape. It's too perfect. There is no resemblance to the heart's actual function which is to

provide a conduit between the body and the other. Isn't it? To palpitate the ethereal clay. Placed horizontally, bisected with a scalpel, the shape looks more like a whale, some leviathan breaching. Sound of the sea slapping at the green and greasy legs of a pier. The crashing of dishes. A cartoon whale. Two symmetrical halves, sundered. A shape that might be placed together again, belly to belly, to form a whole. Repaired. Scarred. A creature breaking forth from its element into the smoky air.

MORNING



Dawn cracks like an egg against the fibro walls of the derelict shack. An egg? Is that quite the right assessment? The yolky light makes itself known to the windows. She can smell it. The eastern sky pales quickly through the trees. Within the walls she has already been awake for over an hour listening to the various creatures rustling outside, inside, tramping about, creating bigger footsteps than they own. The blankets pulled up to her chin. The bedsprings squeaking their familiar dirge. There are other noises in the ceiling she doesn't recognise. On the plaster overhead a galaxy of mildew.

And now the light is hatching, she has no excuse. She sits up. Her breath steams into the cold air of the room. A porcelain doll sits watching her from the top of the wardrobe, its hair sticking up in tufts. Miss Min-Mog. The curtains are yellow in the windows, cadmium yellow originally, now faded to the colour of jaundice. Again, not quite right, but it will have to do – she hasn't got her thinking cap on yet. One of the cats sits with its nose to the gap between the bedroom wall and the floorboards. That's where the draught gets in.

The ash benign in the fireplace. The language of dreams dropping away. Blackened leaves fragile in the grate like the shadows of leaves.

Morning at last.

Her feet search for their slippers under the cot. She finds one. Where's the other? Never mind, she'll find it in a minute. She yawns broadly, her mouth tacky. The cats stir and move about her legs, purring for favour. She goes to the dunny bucket just behind the door to the bedroom (it'll be freezing outside, there'll be frost), and, sitting, lets the last dregs of the night drain away. She'll empty it later. She stamps her feet to get the circulation back into them. Her liver gives a little lurch. She feels it. *Pissupprest*: there's a word, the holding in of urine. She's got to learn to get up in the night more, but what's the point? Funnel-web spiders migrating across the floor give her the willies. She knows they're not after her, per se, but nevertheless they're another worry. Other creatures besides. A slug underfoot in the middle of the night can cast sleep to the wind. Catching sight of herself in a little wedge of mirror perched on an exposed joist, she stops. Who is that hideous creature? What form dost thou take? Her hair like the thatch from a mattress used for nesting material, with lavender bags under her eyes.

It is Ava, she thinks. It is me. If only I had another life.

If only she had another life. If only she could have been born someone else, it's a small enough change. Another woman. A child. Oscar Wilde, for instance. Why not? What might that have been like? To be someone else. Resurrection.

She lies on the kitchen floor – is that her lying there? No blanket pulled up to her chin.

The mildew.

She goes to the kitchen door – the only door – and opens it to the wind. The scrub is still there, close and claustrophobic. If anything, it has come a little closer during the night, as if it is playing Grandma’s Footsteps, and has only just frozen still now that she is watching. What’s the time, Mr Wolf? Their leaves wash in the wind. She’s right. On the clear patches of ground near her washing line there is frost. Her singlets hang out there stiff with cold. The morning light is weaving between the trees to the east, birds adamant about the dawn. Frost lies on the outside water tank also. Everything still. At her feet upon the welcoming stone is spread a tiny explosion of feathers. Which one of them has done this? she asks herself, giving the nearest cat behind her a toe-poke out the door.

‘Bastards,’ she curses, and slams it shut. The house shudders. The other cats all seem to have vamoosed. They know when to stay out of her way. Ava on the warpath. Hurricane Ava. The sudden tempest of her anger in the air. Perhaps they have gone for good?

She stirs the ash in the grate with a little twig. The scorched leaves disintegrate. An old plough disc sits at the back of the hearth like a Chinese soldier’s breast plate. She finds a still-warm coal at the fire’s core. It glows with exposure to the air. She piles on some newspaper and kindling kept in a box for just this purpose. The headline in the paper says: *Junie Morosi love nest*, but that is of no concern to Ava. Good luck to her. That is not why she has the paper. It’s a few weeks old anyway. She puffs and pants at the grate, blowing up gusts of ash until the paper catches. The exertion makes her dizzy, which is okay.

Ava does not dislike dizziness as a state of being in the world, she tells herself, trying to ratify her thoughts into a state of kitchen sink sagacity. She does not discriminate between one point of view and another. Male, female, you, me, alive, dead. The world would sometimes seem to demand it, an altered state of dizziness, or so she thinks, and what a time of day to be thinking it. Why did she get up so early? Apart from her usual night terrors. The slugs underfoot. Ah yes, she remembers, the appointed time is nigh. She needs to prepare.

Against the wall, on the kitchen table – the only table – under a stone paperweight lies the wrapped parcel containing *The Saunteress*. The typewriter beside it with its mouth closed. *Imperial Model T Made in Leicester, England*. O the sparks it spat out yesterday, she recalls, those keys falling like slain infantrymen on the fields of Flanders, resurrected, marching on. Today will be a great day. She circles the date on the calendar and scrawls *Great day* beside it. On the calendar is a picture of a ghost gum in snow. The first of June, 1974. No other date is circled for this month. Nor the one previous, but she's not going to revisit that. Time past is time past, but oh what glories time continuing contains. Soon the fire is blazing away and all the last vestiges of her dreams have been banished. Is that too strong a phrase for it? Banishment. Exile. Never mind. Let all the creatures that lurk in the shadows begone. She stomps about the house making a ruckus, claiming back the definition of the walls, her space within them. And also to give the spiders something to think about if they want to mess with her. And the warmth. She opens the door – the only door – glances out, slams it again. I am here. Beyond

the windows the bush seems to take a step backwards and the faces hidden in the mistletoe look away. A bird whistles nearby. There's no denying it. Time for breakfast.

The Weeties sit in the high cupboard. The rats do not appear to have disturbed them. But the packet is nearly empty and here's the first dilemma of the day. She can be frugal and divide what's left so as to stretch her resources. A small, miserly breakfast today, another one tomorrow, averting starvation like a gastropod crawling along on her stomach over the mossy ground. Or she can splurge and enjoy a good old satisfying banquet now, and hang tomorrow. Who likes moss, anyhow? Cross that bridge when the river rises. Luck is with her. It is, after all, a great day. Why? Because of the parcel on the table. Because of its imminent voyage and all that is invested in it.

The milk bottle is outside in a bucket with a square sheet of tin on top and a rock weighing it all down to stop the crows having a go. A clever bird is the crow, its feathers as black as snow. No, that's not right. Like describing the light as 'yolky', that's just an affected prose style. Kitchen sink foolishness. Outside it's the coldest place. The milk might even be frozen. She goes to check. It's not. She has all the Weeties. May as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, Ava decides. While she eats, a rat, one of the white ones, pokes its little pink nose out of the hidey-hole and twitches at the air. She's careful not to startle it. From the wall it approaches tentatively along the table, yet with gumption enough. Brave little fellow, really. Ava takes a single Weetie flake from the bowl and delicately holds it between thumb and fingertip. It is shaped like a tiny

comet. She stretches her arm out along the Formica tabletop, slowly, subsiding gently, until they meet in the middle near the typewriter. She lies awkwardly like that for a time. The rat sniffs, then takes the flake of cereal between his paws. He holds it like a supplicant with a holy chalice and nibbles. Which one is it? Plutus or Bacchus? Ah yes, Bacchus, she can tell by the mottled, albinotic pink near the base of its tail. She has to sit up and the sudden movement makes the rat scurry off through its alcove into the wall cavity, presumably to share its news. Is this reading too much into it? Yolky light, what was she thinking? And a gastropod? More things in heaven and earth, Red.

Ava eats. She shovels in the Weeties like they're going out of fashion. She tips up the bowl to her mouth and slurps down the last of the milk. Her stomach sings happily. Afterwards she takes a butter knife and carefully slits the empty cardboard box along each edge so that, after the operation, she is left with two perfect matching rectangles. She places King Willy Weeties face down on her stockpile on top of the cupboard for later. She stares at the grey sheets. The blank canvas of her day ahead.

Cardboard scraps in the fire – *whoosh* – breakfast bowl in the sink.

The day ahead.

On the window sill her dolls sit side by side watching the room. Other dolls sit on the bookshelf: one in between Immanuel Kant and Enid Blyton, another separating *The Magic Pudding* and Aristophanes. Not to mention the works of Ava Langdon. Two books. Or rather ten copies each of

two books which makes it look so much more impressive. *The Apple Pickers*, yellowing now, in pride of place, and beside it *The Golden Cravat*. Her oeuvre. And, of course, the immortal medal.

She untucks her singlet and holds it to her nose and inhales. It's a bit ripe. Not quite the clobber for such an auspicious occasion as today. She dashes outside to the line. Her feet scuff the leaves and twigs. Look, she's managed to find the other slipper. Where did that come from? She unpegs a clean singlet and scampers back to the warmth, the relative warmth, of the hut. She holds the singlet in front of the hearth to thaw it out a little, flaps the ghosts of frost out of it. She whips off the old one. It has ink stains on it. She rolls it in a ball and tosses it into a corner. From her skin she unpeels the sheets of newspaper that have lined her singlet through the night. Some of them stick to her. These she tosses onto the fire. They roar up the chimney like flaming parrots. There's a smudge of newsprint on her belly, but who is going to see that? She sluices some cold water from the tap into her armpits and rubs vigorously. Christ that's cold. The dolls think so. She thinks so. It's the middle of winter. She pulls on the clean singlet which is toasty warm now and gives definition to her biceps. Next, off with the pyjama bottoms and on with the big white underpants. What did that awful boy call them? She hobbles from foot to foot like a flamingo on hot coals. Don't trip over, old girl, she says to herself, you might do yourself an injury, you might freeze to the floor and stick, like a dog's tongue to a block of ice.

Next: inside the wardrobe she reveals the pinstriped

trousers hanging neatly folded from a coat hanger. She brushes them down with the flat of her hand and lays them on the cot. They are beautiful, the cut of the cloth and the line of them. Oscar Wilde would take Piccadilly by storm in trousers like those. She places a cream linen shirt above the trousers, and if she squints, blurring her eyes, yes, they match, forming the simulacrum of a man. A man on her bed, albeit a flattened, two-dimensional man. Hello, stranger. The opal cuff links? The bowtie? No, a cravat for today. The gorgeous yellow one. She takes it from her chest of drawers (a slice of cardboard under one foot to stop it rocking). She pulls on the trousers and clips the braces to the waist band. The elastic snaps at her shoulder. She loves that sound, crisp as a rifle shot on a winter's day. Last of all, the overcoat, like a plundered bear, or a Cossack's embrace. She wraps it around herself like a chieftain. All these similes. She could weather blizzards in this coat, climb glaciers. She could metamorphose. Ava contemplates whiskers, but a glance out the window to the north, plus the feeling in her kidneys, tells her it may well rain today. It's not beyond the realm of possibility. And a sagging, water-logged beard would be unbecoming, in Piccadilly as it is in Katoomba, it would not serve the purpose it was designed for. God's design. Or at least some immortal fellow. But what purpose? The glory of Man? Hardly. It's still too early in the morning for this sort of plum-pudding rhetoric. She belches voluptuously. Or rather, eructates, if you prefer – she can after all be a lady. Her heart gives a little hop, skip, and a jump in relief. Ahh, so far life is pretty good. Now, what about shoes? The choice is limited. These plastic sandals? Or

the thongs? No, too cold. Her chilblains. How about these staunch campaigners (she selects the steel-capped work boots), conquerors of abstract lands. Boots of yore. Head kickers.

As she buttons up the linen shirt a transformation takes place. Her spine straightens, shoulders pushed back. She strikes a pose in the little mirror. The line of her jaw appears more chiselled, carved from granite, as if she was daring someone to knock her down, to challenge her to a duel with a white glove. Gloves? No, not today. She knots the cravat expertly at her throat. What a figure she shall make. Cut? Caper? Confabulate? What an imago, an illiquation. Inside her head and outside of it. The two rats, Plutus and Bacchus, emerge from their crevice, ostensibly in search of more Weeties, but also to inspect the ritual, the opening gambit of her getting ready for the day. She twirls for them. No, twirling is the wrong verb for the wrong gender. Instead she *promenades* (although there is a tiny residue of a girl in her that enjoys the sensation of the twirl).

‘What do you think, lads?’

She brushes her hair. She rubs a pomade of perfumed hair gel into it and smooths it flat. God’s grease. She takes a breath. And she is done. *Voilà*.

Voilà. Yes. In a flash she opens the not-yet-sealed parcel on the table and gently removes the contents, *The Saunteress*. She feeds the last page of the typescript into the roller of the typewriter, lovely the sound of the ratchets. It’s a sound that sends shivers rippling across her scalp, like a peacock’s tail over a corrugated roof. She rolls it up and down until she finds the spot, a gap between the penultimate paragraph

and the – what’s the word? – the preantepenult one. The one before that. Just the spot. She flexes her fingers and types:

He raised his chiselled chin as if he was daring someone to knock him down and challenge him to a duel with a white glove.

Perfect. Slightly longer than the space available, but no matter, all her life has been the pursuit of the perfect line. The line of her jaw, the line of her pinstriped trousers, the line to encapsulate a God she doesn’t necessarily believe in but would like to capture anyway. She whips, no, not whips, carefully releases the captured page from the roller and returns it to its place in the rose-coloured pile. *Consummatum est*. She picks up the cover letter placed atop the title page and reads it once again.

To the Senior Editor
Angus & Robertson

Dear Senior Editor,

Please find enclosed my latest manuscript, the first option on which I offer to you exclusively. I think you will find this is my best work yet. And after all I have put into it how could it not? It will finally bring to a conclusion the trilogy – may I say the prize-winning trilogy – we have achieved together. To think it has been over twenty years since we last conspired in Art’s great adventure.

If your decision is to accept this manuscript for publication then would you please reply to Ava Langdon, care of Katoomba Post Office, at your earliest convenience? If, however, your decision is the converse then could I ask you to address your correspondence to Mr Oscar Wilde, care of the same address, above.

Oscar can handle the rejection.

Alas, I cannot.

If this latter is the case then I would beseech you to preserve the manuscript for me in the bowels of your deepest archive, don't fret about publishing, merely guard it with all your being. I shall be o'erlooking from the vaults of Heav'n.

Yours in sincere anticipation

Ava Langdon.

Ava Langdon compares the tone of this to her last cover letter, or was it the one before? Where she declared, what were her words again? Yes, that they were reducing her to a *puking, retching gangrenous corpse*. That had some style: *a puking, retching gangrenous corpse*. This is much more civil and optimistic. She slips the two rubber bands around the whole bundle. She slides the wad of paper, all four hundred pages of it, like a brick, back into its parcel, and places it in her calico bag. Bag, it's more of a sack really, but it's all she has. It has its own memories, its own sense of ambition. She glances at herself in the window's reflection. What's missing? Ah, the final touch – her white topee, the pith helmet lined in red

velvet hanging on its nail beside the photograph of Red with her heart-shaped face. I dips my lid.

She is ready. With her helmet she can face the world.

The rats have disappeared.

Before she leaves, Ava takes another sheet of newspaper from the basket by the fire. The headline is something about Mr Whitlam. She's heard of him. Been in the news a bit lately, although she doesn't really care why. She opens the door and, crouching carefully so as not to spoil her trousers, she picks up the bloodied feathers that are lying on the welcoming stone. She lays them side by side on the sheet of paper, the quills all pointing in the same direction, though not the feet, curled in a final clutching spasm; these she tosses aside. She wraps the feathers in the paper, folding it delicately but firmly. Then, locating a square of chicken wire amongst the scraps scattered outside the shack she folds it around the parcel of feathers, bends flat the wire ends so they do not snag. She takes it inside and adds it to the others in a corner by the tubs under a window. A great day. A day with great purpose, looming large.

With helmet on and thoughts focused, Ava picks up her bag of priceless cargo, her coat and machete, and starts her adventure. She locks the flimsy, wooden door behind her and pockets the key, even though she knows it wouldn't take much to knock the door down altogether or pull it completely off its hinges. There is just the one door. It is the only way in or out. The cats follow her as far as the old bus in which she keeps her other, less valuable things. It is the shell of an old school bus, speckled with rust, that she cannot lock. Nothing to write

home about. More feathers. Rocks wrapped in chicken wire. Memorabilia. Dried flowers the meaning of which she has forgotten. Never mind. What does a door symbolise? A door, adore. With each step she takes, the world expands before her, opening up like a lotus. She inhales mightily. As the breath in her breast swells, the pain in her organs, the appendix and pancreas specifically, correspondingly recedes. Ava is acutely aware of these quirky hiccups inside her. All except the pain in her heart which has been a lifelong tribulation, like her tricky knee, despite which she marches forth. Forth and forthwith. And don't a machete and a white pith helmet, albeit a faded one, make for marching as the most suitable form of perambulation? Yes, they do. She gives the helmet a tap. She needs to get the fluids circulating, find the tide of the day and float with it. Her joints and limbs start to loosen up. It doesn't take long for the blood to start galloping in her like a puppy after a ball.

Birds chatter in the trees as Ava sets out on her expedition. She steps onto Princes Road, which is not very princely. She follows it for a couple of cricket pitches then steps through the trees into the nearby orchard owned by the local madwoman, Swami Apogee, or whatever her crazy name is. Strange that her neighbour should be a madwoman. Ava thinks about that phrase. The grass is crisp with frost. Her old brown boots crunch through it. In springtime there are kiwi fruits, and quince and plums and apricots. However today there are only a few left-over walnuts, their shells like wizened brains, and some unripe figs. Ava picks a few and puts them in her pockets. Swami Apogee, in her skillion-roofed farmhouse,

has been supplementing Ava's diet like this for years. In summer it's quite lucrative, perhaps nutritious is the better word. Swami no doubt believes in sharing and would let Ava take whatever she wanted, if only she would ask. She watches Ava roving like a bee from tree to tree in a measured dance. At least Ava imagines Swami watching her. Ava's imagination brings sentience to the world and casts it in a luminous light, like looking at a dragonfly in a bottle. Her hand briefly touches the bark of every tree trunk. For Ava the orchard is a gentle reminder of those glory days when she went fruit picking with Red, the way breakfast is the reminder of every breakfast and is, in fact, an echo of the breast. An orchard is a place of whispering, familiar voices. Where are they now, her happy ghosts? Why, alive in her heart, that's where. How long has the orchard, originally propagated by monks, been here surrounded by bush? Ava does not know, but she offers up a vote of thanks to the old forward-thinking Franciscans who planted it in the first place. Good lads, those chaps. She wonders if she has it in her heart to be a Franciscan. A vow of silence? Hardly. A vow of genius. Yes, more like it.

She eats a few withered apricots. Weeties and apricots, what better way to start the day's great mission? Several parrots and rosellas are helping themselves to the highest fruits that have not fallen. Ava knows all about them, the opportunists who provide a sense of continuity in the harvest; some for the birds, some for the market stall. At her feet in the grass the acrid stink of fermenting apples. She moves on before her neighbour takes it into her head to apprehend her. What a silly name, Swami Apogee. Ava supposes it has some sort of significance,

like a dried flower. A commune of some denomination, she believes. People heading in and out, wearing funny clothes. They never stay long. She has seen them come and go, living a life she can only wonder at. Enlightenment, she supposes it is they're after. Well, good luck to them. If only she could glimpse inside their heads, then she would know what was wrong with them, though why would you want to? Murky-grey is the only sense of clarity Ava's ever had, apart from that moment when a book comes alive in her and eclipses everything. Then look out. Perspicacity, oh yes. It's the vision she carries burning in her mind's eye as she returns to the road, her footsteps striding behind her in the frost like something with small feet following. Ava turns to the right and takes the next step.

* * *

It's a fair hike from her hut into town. The demons of the night at last shrugged off. A puddle from yesterday has a crust of ice on it, flawed and fractured, bubbles trapped underneath. She toes it with her boot until it cracks, and moves on.

It's about three or four miles in the old money and it never gets any shorter. Sometimes, purely for variety, she cuts through the scrub to the cemetery by the hospital; it's hardly a shortcut, distracted as she sometimes is by the narrative of the headstones, or the inquisitive pleasure of the grave-digger on his back-hoe excavating a plot. Rabbits dig and make play amongst the stones. It adds a bit more time to the trek, but there's less traffic, and what has she but time? However, that is normally a summertime distraction and it is not summer.