

Praise for The Paperbark Shoe

... one of the most original Australian novels I've read for a long time ... the writing has the profound lyricism and sometimes almost hallucinatory quality you find in the work of Eudora Welty. It has some deep, dark undercurrents: it's a tale of rural Australian xenophobia, insularity and ignorance in the tradition of Patrick White and Barbara Baynton. It's witty, poetic and has some brisk insights for our times. – Sydney Morning Herald *Pick of the Week*

... an extraordinary first novel; may Goldbloom release more freaks and wonders yet. – The Australian

Goldie Goldbloom promises to be one of Australia's most important and imaginative voices of the future ... a masterpiece of description and characterisation and I can only wait in anticipation for more of this astounding author's work. – Good Reading

... an assured debut written in beautifully precise language.
– The Age

... a haunting tale of extreme hardship ... startlingly provocative ... it is impossible not to be touched by her characters.
– The West Australian

A strange but beautifully written story; one to savour.
– Notebook Magazine

... [an] extraordinary voice and exhilarating writing talent
– Scoop

... a story of love and bigotry, sensuality and vulgarity, truth and deception, loss and discovery. – Wet Ink

Her book runs like a live current between poles of emotion, searing a path between delight and pain, the local and the universal, and finally between love and loss. I can't remember when I last heard a new voice as exhilarating as this.

– Rosellen Brown, author of Half a Heart

A story of love and loss, of beauty and ugliness, grace and vulgarity, told in the beautiful, wildly irresistible, darkly playful cadences and idioms of Western Australia. And every part of it feels both dreamlike and true. Feels like it could only have happened in this harsh place, been told in these shimmering words, by this supremely gifted writer. – Molly Gloss, author of The Hearts of Horses

I have never read anything quite like this, nor has anyone else. The voice is acid, funny, at first commonsensical and unself pitying, later lyrical, later madly deluded; the voice is gorgeous, it is brilliant. How Goldie Goldbloom makes us feel the absolute reality of another human soul while simultaneously making us shriek with laughter is beyond me. But this is exactly what she does, and the result is dazzling. – Andrea Barrett, author of The Air We Breathe

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THE
Paperbark
SHOE

GOLDIE GOLDBLOOM

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*T*here are people alive today in Wyalkatchem who can tell you stories about when the Italians came to the wheatbelt, and about Toads taking two POWs down to the Moore River for a spot of fishing. They'll tell you that there isn't a road to the river, not even a track, that it's a rough ride the whole way and that Gin Toad was six months gone and it's a wonder her unwanted child wasn't jolted free to land like a bloody rag in the dust. They'll sip their tea and suck their ill-fitting teeth and fifty years later, they'll still be tut-tutting over the way those Toads carried on with the enemy. They may tell you that schoolchildren pelted the wagon bearing the Toads and the POWs with stones and tomatoes, and that women waiting at the siding for the train to Perth pointed at them. Gin Toad had to stop the prisoners from waving and tell them that those women thought the Italians had killed their sons over in Libya. Those women thought they were murderers.

And if it's your lucky day, those old fogeys from Wyalkatchem or Binjabbering or Goomalling will pull out their black and fraying scrapbooks and show you the articles they cut from the papers, way back in '44, about Gin and Toad, and the Italian man, Antonio.

L

1

I was hiding in the orchard, pretending to check for creepy crawlies rutting on the beginnings of the fruit when the Italian prisoners of war arrived, descending from the sergeant's green Chevy: one fella tiny, nervous, prancing sideways, shaking his glossy black mane, a racehorse of a man, sixteen if he was a day; the other bloke a walking pie safe, draped in a freakish magenta army uniform, complete with a pink blur in the buttonhole that I reckoned was an everlasting. Some prisoners. They looked more like two obscure French artists mincing along behind the curator of a museum of primitive art. The curator, my husband Toad, pointed to the house, and I imagined him saying, 'And over here is the Toady masterpiece – The Farm House – painted in a mad rush in 1935 before the wife had her first child – notice the delightfully eccentric stone chimney, the listing veranda, the sunburned children lurking under the mulberry.' And the tame cockatoo, Boss Cockie, saw them coming and raised his crest in alarm and muttered under

his breath. ‘Shut up,’ he said. ‘Go away. Bad bloody cockie.’

I turned thirty the year the Italians came to our West Australian farm, and I was afraid of them, so afraid of those oversexed men we’d read about, rapists in tight little bodies with hot Latin eyes, men who were capable of anything. Of course, we didn’t know much about them, just what we’d heard on the wireless or read in the paper and if Mr Churchill had said donkeys were flying in Italy, I do think we’d have believed him. We women of the district, none of us wanted the Italians, but who were we to say? It was impossible to get help for ploughing and seeding and shearing, the young bloods gone to splatter themselves all over Europe, New Guinea, North Africa, and even the old retreats in the Volunteer Defence Corps were busy drilling on the football oval. They didn’t know that their crushed paper bag faces were enough to repel any Japanese invasion. Men were rationed, like everything else, and so when the government offered prisoners of war as farm labour, the control centres were mobbed from the first day by farmers in search of workers.

Oh, I knew those dagoes were coming all right, and that’s why I hid in the orchard, crouching there in Wellington boots, the hem of my dress bunched in one hand. Over sixty trees were in bloom, and I was busy brushing petals out of the valley of fabric between my knees, trying to breathe, because the scent of orange blossom was chokingly sweet. And the rabbits – the bloody rabbits – had ringbarked all the newly planted almond slips, their buds already wilting.

I didn’t want to put those men in Joan’s old room. I

didn't want them in my house at all. But we couldn't keep them in the shearing shed like a mob of sheep, so I was forced to scrub her tiny room – really just a closed-in part of the veranda, a sleepout – and beeswax the jarrah boards, and spread the old hospital beds with sheets white and brittle as bones. And, as a final touch, a welcoming note that I didn't feel, I stuffed some golden wattle in a canning jar and put it on a box between their beds. I'd cleaned the whole house too, so that if the prisoners killed us while we were sleeping, the neighbours wouldn't have anything to talk about, and I'd sent my children, Mudsey and Alf, to pick up the wee droppings that their poddy lamb had left all over the veranda. And lamb chops were on my mind, with mint sauce, baby potatoes and – on the side – a fricassee of brains.

I had a fairly good idea why Toad wasn't taking the Italians over to the room, and even though I knew it was wrong, even though what he was planning to do to them was possibly a breach of the Geneva Convention, I waited, gurgling with delight in the lusty orchard, attacked by platoons of bees drunk on orange blossom wine. All my senses were walking with the men, waiting for the sound of those baby-eaters howling when they were shoved into the sheep dip. They'd bellyflop into the stinking, arsenic-laden waters and they'd wonder about the greasy black pellets floating past them like mines and they'd be picking some of the sheep shit from their eyebrows right when Toady pushed them under again with his crook.

You'll have to forgive me for my language. Gin Toad is

no longer a lady.

Oh, those men would be unhappy to be deloused the way we out here in Wyalkatchem delouse our sheep. They might even complain to the authorities at the Control Centre, but it would be worth it, because it would make a good story. It's a story we will be telling for years.

Toady told me that when he saw Antonio Cesarini's cordovan wing tips, he gestured to the man to take off his shoes. This consideration didn't save the men from a plunge in the long concrete cesspool that thousands of sheep had just swum through to rid themselves of fleas, ticks, lice and other blood-sucking parasites, but it did save their shoes, and especially the wing tips, which were such a luxury item, an Italianate extravagance. Toady had stroked those shoes while the men drip-dried in the hot spring sunshine; the leather looked as if it had been tanned in blood, and gave off a heady aroma reminiscent of the one and only cigar he had ever smoked. The soles were tissue thin, unscuffed, impossibly new. Toady had just resoled his ancient boots for the third time, with slabs of ironbark.

He tried to remind himself that the Italians were fascist pigs, cowards, and prisoners as well, lowly slaves in the Australian hinterland, but it felt more like jealousy speaking, so he kicked the shoes back to their oily owner, and satisfied himself by thinking he had bruised the bastard things with his boot.

Their watching scuttled me as I moved from woodstove to table, carrying hot plates of lamb chops and browned potatoes and pickled beetroot and a monstrous loaf of homemade bread that could have killed a horse. They rudely stared at my scarf, which still boasted that it had once held Dingo Flour, and why not? Flour bags are made of soft cotton, and the stamped dingo isn't bad looking if you don't mind him showing up on your towels and your shirts and your underwear. They ogled my white skin, so different from their own burnt flesh that their eyes hung out on stalks and they nudged each other and whispered and I dropped the beetroot on the linoleum and scooped it up again and served it, just to shock them about something else.

'Would you like some chops, Mister Cesarini?'

My voice was strangled; I sounded like a trollop from Sydney, the kind of woman who might be glad that two young Italian men were seated at her table, their hands caressing her willow pattern tea cups. The heat lifted a scent of sandalwood and lavender from their skin, and dear Mr Toad curled his lip and flapped his nostrils at them. Could they be wearing perfume?

'How about you, Mister Toad? Chops?'

His busy eyes had noticed everything – the tenderest chop had gone to the dago with the nancy shoes. He turned his head and glared at a red button on my dress, slightly below my heart.

'I'll take two, Mum,' he said to the button, and with that I lifted the last chop, *my* chop, and placed it on his plate. He raised his cup to me, his pinky cocked like a dog lifting its leg on a fence post, and asked for more tea.

'Did you hear about the bombing up Drysdale Mission way?' he said.

'What bombing?' I said, terrified all over again that we were about to be overrun by hordes of little oriental men with single hairs sprouting from their chins. I was glad I had put Mudsey and Alf to bed early. Enough that they played out in our own pathetic air raid shelter and lobbed mallee roots on the corrugated tin to terrify one another. Enough that Alf had pointed his two little fingers at the Italians and mimed shooting them, and then, when the big man clutched his heart and fell on the ground, ran and hid in the laundry, sobbing.

The first time I laid eyes on Alf, not only did he have his father's grated red skin, but there was another strike against him; he had that funny little hose between his legs that is normally found on all male infants. It made me squirm to think he had been in my belly. But from the start, there was something wise and innocent about him that put a hook right through my heart.

'Why are people afraid of dying?' he asked as I was making the beds. 'It sounds like a lot of fun.'

And a different day, 'Are the clouds really angels, Mum?'

And once, 'Who's the man standing next to the sewing machine?' When I swung around to see if a bagman had

crept up on me, there was no one there. ‘The man with the yellow shoes,’ he said, pointing. My father, my real father, had yellow shoes, but he’d been dead over thirty years when Alfie asked this question.

He ran wild in the bush, dug underground tunnels with Mudsey that radiated out from our air raid shelter, developed inch thick calluses on his baby feet from the burning ground. He came home without his shirt, his puny chest brown as a piece of polished mahogany. In secret, he’d grown a watermelon behind the tank stand, and the day that Mudsey burst in, shouting, ‘Come see the bloody great melon out the back!’ he rose up wailing and scratched her face. ‘You bugger!’ he shrieked. ‘That’s for Mum!’

Mudsey tried to immunise him, she did. She warned him that we weren’t perfect parents, that we were full of faults and peculiarities. She told him we couldn’t be loved with everything he had, but he stared at her with his thumb in his mouth until she couldn’t stand the expression in his eyes and had to turn away. Each morning, as I bent to feed wood to the stove, he’d grab me around the knees and kiss my calves. ‘You’re a yummy Mummy,’ he’d say, ‘the yummiest Mummy in the whole world.’

He’d bail Toad up and demand to be taken along on the horse, and Toad, smiling, would lean down and lift the little bloke up into the saddle.

When he has grown up and left us, Alf will remember Toad hugging him after he fell from the big horse, and how his father brushed the red dirt from his baby face, and he will remember the great blue-black hooves of the horse. And he will remember swimming with Toad in the water tank,

and the long body of the drowned king snake they found floating there. And Smetana, *The Moldau*, played every day on the Bechstein, the sound of it bringing tears to his eyes even as he listens again years later. He will remember the smell of the oats cooked in milk and the bread rising yeasty above the black stove and the round pool of yellow light cast by the lamp on the table on a cold winter morning and the hiss of the rain on the tin roof of our lopsided house in the sand plains of Wyalkatchem. He, who was raised in that solitude, will yearn for the silence his whole life and find himself floating away from crowded trains and business meetings and talkative lovers, to dreams of lying at the bottom of the abandoned air raid shelter, looking up at the cloudless sky, the only sound the ceaseless thud of his heart in his chest.

'Says here,' said Toad, rattling the newspaper, 'twenty-one Jap planes bombed the blazes out of Drysdale Mission, first thing in the morning. Says there's an air force base up there, on the King Edward River, just south of Broome. Killed a priest and a bunch of darkies. Sad about the priest but good riddance to our native friends, say I. Bomb hit em in the air raid shelter. A ditch in the sand. What a place to die. Ammunition hut exploded and now the mission is only good for toothpicks.'

I leaned over to look at the date on the newspaper. Twenty-seventh of September 1943. The paper was more than two weeks old.

'Looks like the Japs are heading our way, eh? First they bomb Darwin twelve, thirteen times. Then it's Broome and Exmouth. What's next, you reckon? Lancelin? Yanchep?

Maybe they'd like us to give em Fremantle on a silver platter.'

'I heard there were Japanese submarines in Fremantle harbour,' I said, 'just like in Sydney. We're lucky they didn't torpedo anything.'

The Italians weren't eating. Their faces worked, lines appeared and disappeared in their chins, it seemed that something burrowed under their skin. The beautiful one, Gianpaolo – who we later called John because we couldn't get our Australian lips to loiter on his name in the sultry Italian way – slopped his tea on the tablecloth and wailed, '*Basta!*' which I mistook for 'bastard' and was horrified over. I blushed for him.

They were pitiable in their gratitude for a home-cooked meal and the pathetic clink of china. Poor men. The army had swallowed all the niceties, transformed women from wives and mothers to whores and hostages, made hot canned spam a red letter meal. At my table, they looked like rabbits, trembling, suspicious that an iron-toothed trap lay under the tablecloth, unable to enjoy their first meal with a family in years.

Mr Toad, his desire for the Italians' untouched meat scrawled all over his chipped Toby jug of a face, called for the pudding, and out it came, jam roly-poly, steaming sponge, almost spoiled jam and freshets of custard, like so much pus on a suppurating wound. It must have struck the prisoners that way too, because they stared at the pudding with looks of imminent emesis and pushed back their chairs.

'Thank you, lady,' said the one with the Frank Sinatra shoes, and the two men slipped from the room, and I was left

staring at my white fingernails, and at dear Mr Toad's hand creeping across the tablecloth in pursuit of the abandoned chops.

Two days after we were married, he'd brought me up to Wyalkatchem on the train from Perth, the carriage cold and unheated, me wrapped in a blanket and shivering. As the sun set, the sand plains outside the windows, treeless to the horizon, were lit with a brilliant red light.

'But where is the water?' I asked Toad, and without turning, he replied, 'There is none.'

Abandoned stations flashed past the windows, but at one, a man ran after the train, shouting, 'Paper! Paper!' and Toad kneeled on the cracked leather seat, raised the window and threw out the newspaper he'd brought with him from Perth.

It was a sixteen hour trip on the slow moving train. 'How much longer?' I asked again, as we passed the Number Two Rabbit-Proof Fence.

'Bloody government railway,' said Toad. 'Mentioned in the Bible, they are. "Creeping things that crawleth."'

'Aren't you hungry, Toady? How much longer do you think it will be until we get there?' I was imagining a trim limestone cottage under a lemon-scented gum, the foggy clang of cow bells in the distance. The train had emptied out and we were the last passengers remaining.

'Here,' he said, shoving a tin of pickled sheep's tongues at me. 'That'll hold you.' Sheep's tongues. The corpse of a meal moth lay trapped under the key.

'No, thank you,' I said, handing it back and stalking to

the tiny lavatory in the corner of the carriage.

My face, so white, looked back at me from the tin mirror. Even pinching my cheeks didn't improve my appearance. Albinism is the name for what ailed me. The total absence of pigment in the skin. Ugly was what I thought. Not oyster, cream or eggshell, not ivory, platinum or argent, not pearl or even alabaster. I was bone white. Everywhere. I drew a wet brush through my hair and my white white hair became transparent, like fishing line. I shut my eyes. I couldn't believe that Toad had wanted to marry me.

Earlier, Toad had told me about the farming near Wyalkatchem. The first class land was forested, he said, and if it was cleared it made for beautiful grazing. The second class land was mostly mallee and box poison. And the third class land was gravel plains dotted with low scrub, stunted mallee, tamma thickets and rock poison. No trees worth climbing.

'Ha!' I laughed. 'You probably picked the third class land because it's all short, like you.' I'd only been thinking that. I hadn't meant to say it out loud. He snapped his fingers, just once, and after that, hadn't spoken until I'd asked about the water, several hours later, not out of interest but out of desperation.

More than thirty years before the station master helped me down from the train, the first white settler had staked his claim on the land near Wyalkatchem. Billy Law Macfadden, old Mac, built a bit of a place out between Warramuggan Rock and Twattergnuyding back in 1903. He was an old man,

over sixty, and he called his farm Lonelykatchem, because he was the only white man for a hundred miles. Three years later, Toad's father took up land there too. He was advised to select forested land, first class land, but, thinking it would be a hell of a job to clear it all, took third class land instead. There might have been other men in the district, but he never would have known. In all that wild desolation, there was only one very old man, Toad's father, and Toad.

A man without a horse had to walk the forty miles to Goomalling to fill out the paperwork for a land application, and he had to carry his own water the whole way, both directions, in a kerosene tin slung from a stick over his shoulder. And Toad's father had been a man without a horse. By the time I arrived, Wyalkatchem had grown to a population of sixty-eight adults and forty-three children, counting the ones in the cemetery.

On the wall of the railway refreshment room were nailed two notices. One was for Hanrahans' Pioneer Boarding House: 'Comforts, Conveniences, Cleanliness, Tariff Reasonable. Own Cow. Mrs Biddy Hanrahan, Proprietess.' The other notice was for a Popular Girl competition. 'You should enter,' said Toad as he pushed open the door. I knew he wasn't talking about the competition. He'd bought me a dark red lipstick down in Perth and told me to put it on 'all over.'

'Gawd, Toady. Don't even think of taking her to stay at Old Ma Hanrahan's,' said the refreshment woman. 'It's not a proper place for a lady.' She held out an unsquare black plush cushion embroidered with a parrot. On one side was a strip of burnt fringing, for fancy. 'You'd be best stopping

here overnight and then getting Mister Flannigan to whip you out to your place in his gig in the morning.' Her hair was pulled into a tight bun and a fat cluster of velveteen violets trembled on her bosom. 'Or you could try the police station.' She paused and then stuck out her hand and patted my shoulder. 'That's good luck! We heard you was coming, deary, but no one really believed a woman would marry our Toad.' She stared for a moment at my flat stomach and sighed.

'It's *not* good luck to touch an albino. But maybe it's good luck to touch an idiot,' I said, tapping her shoulder.

So Toad and I spent the night in the police tent with a hard, thin, collarless man chained to a log. 'He was only drunk and disorderly,' said the policeman apologetically, when he showed us to our quarters. 'Nuffink to worry about.' In the night, the wind shifted around to the south and cold rain blew between the flaps of the tent and woke up the prisoner. 'Bloody hell,' he said, when he caught sight of me. He bent and, groaning, lifted the log. I watched him make his unsteady way back to the pub.

Five miles west of town. The Cemetery Road. An impression of dirt and disorder, a whiff of meat, a low zuzzing of flies. My new home looked like a broken bee skep, or a pile of twigs for an auto de fe. The door was nothing more than a chaff bag hung from a plank. A kerosene tin stuck out of a domed heap of rocks, and it was only later that I understood it was a chimney. The logs that formed the walls had been driven upright into the ground and draped with greased hessian sacks. The floor was made from a scree of crushed

ant nests. Behind the hut stood a wooden wheelbarrow that had been used as a latrine for many weeks. ‘Fertiliser’ said Toad and he rolled it out to a scraped patch of earth where a few onions languished and dumped the maggoty load on the vegetables. The hot desert wind rose and threw a handful of quartz shards in my face. A kookaburra laughed. *Fiddle dee fee. Fiddle dee fee. The fly has married the bumble bee.*

The water that ran off our first bark roof and into a tank was wine red and tasted like goat meat, strong and dark. Water from the dam looked like creamy coffee and tasted of mud. I settled the sediment with a few flakes of oatmeal. When we finally got a metal tank, the water tasted as if it was filled with iron filings. During a drought, Toad dug up the roots of the red mallee, shattered them with the axe and collected the water that was stored in the fibres. He followed pigeons at dusk to the small pools of water they drank from. Emus and parrots and magpies were reliable signs that water was nearby. Dew could be collected by dragging a blanket across the ground until it was saturated. Gum leaves exuded moisture at night and come morning could be sucked dry.

I had thought, when we were first married, that closeness might be possible. I left presents for Toad, under his pillow or in his boot, but it turned out he hated presents. He hated surprises of any kind. To him, they felt like pressure to be jolly or civil at the very least, neither of which he was good at. I had thought we might read the classics out loud by lamp light and take long walks together and laugh at the same jokes, but he thought it was funny that he’d once eaten his

father's cat, and I liked Elizabethan riddles. We didn't have a thing in common besides the basic need for companionship and a joint wish for protection from the eyes and comments of the people of Wyalkatchem.

In those days, I still had delusions of grandeur, imagined that one day Mr Toad and I would be lord and lady of our manor and the sere Australian hills surrounding our farm would miraculously sprout soft green grass dotted with daffodils and bluebells and sheep that never got flyblown. The wind would carry sounds of menial labour being performed by someone else, the honking of white swans from the dam would replace the incessant clanging of the windmill, and the Bedford truck would once again have tyres and petrol.

In my youth down in Perth, at my ritzy private school, I must have read that ladies sat in their solars and embroidered items of beauty and impracticality, and so, in my dreaming, I bent to the yellow light of the kerosene lantern and with my needle – plink, plink – tried to trace the shapes of the wild-flowers that rise after the winter rains, despite not being able to see the needle. Toad, wearing his favourite puce green cardigan, read the paper, or gargled his after-dinner port to the tune of 'Waltzing Matilda', or, sometimes, 'The Wild Colonial Boy', and once in a while belched educational titbits like, 'Says here Bunyip wheat is turning out to be bloody good wheat,' and, 'Them idiots down at the air school are useless. There's a trail of crashed Kittyhawks all the way to Darwin.' I think he would have made these pronouncements even if I wasn't there because he'd never mastered the art of silent reading. I

can hear him now: his voice, so like the croaking of a frog in a bucket, his deep sniffs punctuating each sentence.

‘There’s a report here (sniff), of a POW in the Victoria Plains district (sniff). He stands accused of (sniff) indecent assault on a farmer’s wife.’

‘Poppycock.’

‘They say,’ he hesitates, ‘she’s in the family way (sniff).’

An utter lie, of course. No newspaper would dare mention such a thing. It is his own eager conjecture and predates the evil rise of pornographic reporting by four decades. I can’t blame the woman, for perhaps her own legal love is as full of charm as my own dear Toad.

But a woman on a farm, a practical woman with hands polished by lye, fingers utterly lacking fingerprints, I can’t believe she would dare defy her circumstances in the arms of our enemy. Surely she knew the delight her neighbours would take in her destruction? The way she would fade to white and cease to exist for the entire district, missing in action, forever.

And right as I am thinking this, a moth kamikazes the fragile mantle of the lamp; the mantle instantly disintegrates and, with a whiff of burnt talc, the moth is incinerated and we sit there, alone in a darkness full of night noises and the eerie sound of grown men whispering in a language we are unable to understand.

If I had to guess what they are saying, I’d guess this:

The Race Horse: What a strange pair.

The Big Man: She’s so thin. And she’s so white.

The Race Horse: I never saw an albino before. Aren’t

they dangerous? And do you think she's wearing a scarf because she has lice?

The Big Man: What about her husband? Unappetising. She's probably thin because he takes her food.

The Race Horse: So when do we kill them?

3

In the first three years after I came to Wyalkatchem, our joint efforts built the farm up to six draught horses, two sulky ponies, eight milking cows, forty hens, a three furrow plough, a thirteen foot disc drill and a Mitchell harvester with a five bag grain box. Toad built a slightly better house, and I plastered it myself with mud made of ant hill.

Clearing each paddock took two years. Trees were ringbarked with an axe. Toad bored holes into the sapwood and I stuffed the holes with plugs of salt petre. Salmon gums, because of their shallow roots, could be pulled over by a horse, and made a most satisfying thump when they fell. When the trees had all died, they were burnt on a hot day in February or March. Everyone burnt the trees at the same time of year. All over the district hung choking clouds of smoke.

While waiting for the trees to die, Toad fenced the paddocks. The year before seeding a field, he ploughed it and kept it cultivated through the summer. Four and a half acres was a good day's work. At night, I ran my fingers over the cicatrices, the line of raised scars across Toad's back. I played them, as I had once played my Bechstein. 'What

are these, Toad?' I asked, but he moved out from under my hand and told me to bugger off.

We carted water by hand from White Dam at Naramuging, three miles down the road, and when the rains came, from a grassy soak to the north of the house. Farming was slow. Chaff for the horses was made from hay cut by the binder and tied in sheaves. I learned to shock the sheaves into stooks and leave them to dry, and Toad dragged them to the hay stack. Twenty-five sheaves made a stool. Five tons of hay per horse had to be grown and cut and carried. It was impossible for one man alone. I no longer massaged cream into my hands at night. I no longer wore my mother's jade ring.

Kangaroos and emus destroyed the new fences, dingoes ate my hens, rabbits ate the grass, box poison killed the sheep and hard work killed the horses. Stinking smut made the wheat kernels foul and we lost the entire crop to septorian rust, which shrivelled the grain, not once, but many times. There were a dozen easy ways to die out there: kicked by a horse, shot by a gun, thrown from the sulky, drowned in the dam, bitten by a snake, fell asleep in the sun, caught in the chaff cutter, burst appendix, laryngitis, childbirth.

Shankly Lamprell died in the middle of dinner, hand on his heart, right after saying, 'Hold on a moment,' from an exploded blood vessel in his neck. Sidney Baster died because no one knew enough to get the caul off his face after he was born. Joan Toad died of diphtheria.

The winter before Joan was born, Toad took me out on a night when the moon was full, to hunt possums. He

showed me the claw marks deep in the bark of a gum that shone silver in the eerie light. He showed me the soft tufts of fur caught on the lower branches. He climbed up the hollow tree and thrust a gidji stick down into the dark bole and pulled out three chattering possums, still in their nest.

He said he learned all his horse skills from his father and all his bush skills from an old Aboriginal man, Billy Dick, one of the Balardong people, or perhaps one of the Nyaginagi. He no longer remembered.

Toad hunted the sweet-tasting emus in their nesting season, winter and spring, crouching with his face covered by a fan of branches. He gave me the oil from their legs to rub on my belly so the child wouldn't leave silver tracks in my skin. When he discovered that I craved meat, he rode to the Cowcowing Lakes and hunted mallee fowl, black swans, ducks, grebe, stilt and teal. When moulting, the swans were easily caught. He made me a sweet tea by boiling banksia blossoms. He roasted the spiny echidnas that wandered into my vegetable garden in a ball of clay until they were as tender as lamb. That first child, he was afraid of all that could go wrong. I found him cooking bardi grubs one day though, and I told him to stop. 'Enough,' I said, 'you will kill us all.'

He wore a kangaroo skin over his head and shoulders when it rained and advised me to do the same. It rarely rained. He kept a collection of women's corsetry out in the shed but I didn't find that out for years. That was all right. I kept secrets from him too. He never spent a penny he didn't need to and the day my piano and my glory box and my mother's mirror and the little boudoir chair I'd had all my

life arrived on the back of a wool cart, he wept from the sheer useless waste of it all. My stepfather had finally sent my things, ashamed at last of all he had stolen from me.

When Toad had asked the director at Graylands Hospital if he could marry me, the doctor had told him that I was involuntarily committed and said he would need to seek permission from my guardian. So Toad had boarded a bus for Dalkeith and walked to my home, a large limestone house on the cliffs above the Swan River. He'd seen the lush rose gardens, the shade houses full of rare orchids, and the intimidating man with the swagger stick who was my stepfather. That man had looked at Toad and laughed and laughed, then wiped the white foam from the corners of his mouth with his fingertips and said, 'Oh yes. Marrying you will do very nicely. Far, far better than Graylands.' And Toad nodded, delighted to have made such a good impression.

Walking the road to White Dam, a year and five months after I first arrived. A narrow red gash cut through the virgin bush, littered with quartz boulders, tangled with the vines and shattered husks of the previous year's pig melons. Magpies, cockatoos, crows, corellas, parrots, galahs, wrens scream and cry and swing through the air and mob in the few standing trees. I have just passed a rock with a veil of lichen over its face and a golden wattle bending from the weight of its blossom, when I hear another walker, coming from the opposite direction. It could be anyone. It could be no one. After all this time, it must be an aural mirage. There's someone out on the Cemetery Road besides Toad and me? 'Hullo,' says the stranger, wiping her hand on the front of her yellow cotton

frock before offering it to me. 'I'm Mavis Walleye.' Cockatoos scream. Insects buzz and tick in the undergrowth. Great plain of cloudless blue sky. Slow roll of the vast red land.

'Gin Toad.'

'I know. I heard about you when I was in town. Well worth the walk to see somethink like you.'

The sky over Wyalkatchem is hotter and bluer than any other place, and the winds are stronger, the thermals rising tens of thousands of feet straight up, lifting the litter of the desert in its embrace: shards of quartz and shale and flakes of limestone, spinifex, the lost tails of geckoes, scraps of paperbark, the hot smell of the red dirt, the taste of the sky like salt from the sea, cracked pieces of pottery, parrot eyes, wedge-tailed eagles looking for prey, the broken hearts of men and women, the souls of the children who died in that great isolation, sadness, unwillingness, anger, strands of horse hair, nuts and bolts, chicken feathers, sand.

Toad would return from the fields slick with sweat and dust and chaff, and hesitating, his hands in the kerosene tin of water that stood by the back door, he'd look at me, at the towel in my hands, and raise his eyebrows, and that was his way of asking if I might be available that night. When I nodded, he would lift the water in his cupped hands and dash it on his face, rub it over his head, rake the wetness through his hair with his unsubtle fingers, and then, smiling, take the towel from my outstretched hand. For a man who rarely spoke, gestures became important, the removal of an ant from my shoulder an invitation to another, different kind of closeness.

He liked to approach from behind, in the dark, on a moonless night when no stray gleam of light could illuminate my hair. He liked the sheets to be cool, he liked my shoulders to smell of grass, he liked to taste the skin at the base of my neck. He was embarrassed by the sound of the springs, by kisses, by talk of any kind. He liked, afterwards, to take hold of my smallest finger and to fall asleep with it in his grip.

But each morning, it was as if we were strangers again; as if, in the dark, he had lain with my twin instead of me, and I, with some other, unfamiliar man. He never touched me in the daytime, in the light, that man who ran his hands so tenderly over the horses, who touched his nose to their velvet muzzles and murmured to them as he gazed into their eyes. He had it in him, a capacity for love. But he hid it from me. He hid many parts of himself from me and not just this. And I hid from him too. As if closeness was dangerous. We were, each of us, afraid of the other.

Toad was out checking the fence line when I felt the birth pains from my first child, my Joan. I was pressing tea towels, the steam that rose from the iron tasting of burnt linen. Boss Cockie, perched on the window ledge, was imitating the sound of the sad iron. ‘Aah. Ssssh. Hssss.’ I waited for the pains to go away or become less, but instead, they grabbed me and began, inexorably, to pull me down below the surface of the earth. I could feel the broken pieces of ant nest that formed our floor gouging tracks into my skin. Terrified, I ran through the wheat field to get Toad’s help. He knocked me down with a right hook to the jaw and then dragged me

back the mile or so to the house with a hard, set look on his face. I woke up, jolting along on his back, and the screams I heard were my own.

‘Shut up, Gin,’ he said, ‘or I’ll have to hit you again.’

He’d seen that look in my eyes, he said, of an animal wild with pain, which either needs to be left alone to die or shot in the head. And the kindest thing to do is the hardest.

When we got to the house, he hefted me onto the veranda and pressed down hard on the top of my stomach, so that a wail rose from deep within me and I gritted my teeth and bore down on the source of all the hurting. And I vowed I would never again allow Toad near me when I birthed a baby.

Afterwards, he brought me a blanket and a towel for the blood and he sat with the new child in his lap, staring at her whiteness, her face with its startling transparency.

‘Whaddaya reckon we call her Joan?’ he said and so we did.

The next morning, I rose and baked six pounds of bread before the sun had topped the hill, and Toad came in from milking to corned beef and cabbage and a hot cup of tea. I’m proud of that.

These are the things that I learned to do after coming to Wyalkatchem: I learned how to make yeast, to bake bread, to make a bread pan out of an old kerosene tin, how to clean a kerosene tin and flatten it and smooth the edges with a rasp, how to trim the wick on a kerosene lamp, to clean the chimney of a kerosene lamp with a piece of newspaper crumpled in a ball, how to remove creosote from my skin with yellow

soap, how to make yellow soap from ash and lye and fat, how to make lye, how to render fat, how to cook on a wood stove, how to split wood with an axe, how to sharpen an axe, how to treat burns from a woodstove, how to treat burns from hot ashes, how to treat burns from lye, how to treat a man who has been burnt, how to treat a man, how a man likes to be treated, how to make a maternity dress, how to make a layette, how to push out a baby, how to cut an umbilical cord with the knife used for castrating the lambs, how to feed an infant, how to hang a blanket in the boughs of a gum tree and rock a baby to sleep, how to sit quietly at night with a child in my lap, how to feel for a fever, how to boil willow for its cooling sap, how to paint a throat with gentian violet and listen for the smallest breath, how to make a coffin, how to line it with pieces of cotton, how to dress a dead child, how to lower a coffin into the ground, how to put one foot in front of the other and keep on doing it every day.

4

I am not used to having rapists sleeping in my house. Every squawk of the bedsprings from Joan's room jerks me roughly awake. It sounds like the Italians are having a bad night too; the racehorse screams and thrashes and is woken by the older man, but I'm not even tempted to bring him a hot water bottle, or some milk.

My children have not been murdered. Alf and Mudsey are in the sleepout on the western side of the house, in a heap of legs and blankets, Alf sucking Mudsey's thumb,