

Shadows & Wings



[A Fugue]

By Niki Tulk



Small House Press

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Printed in the United States of America
First published 2013

ISBN-10: 0985842806
ISBN-13: 978-0-9858428-0-2

Digital edition published in 2013
eISBN-10: 0985842814
eISBN-13: 978-0-9858428-1-9

Small House Press
www.smallhousepress.com
www.nikitulk.com

Cover Design: by Mark Tulk, 2013
"Death of a Bird." by A.D. Hope

*For
L. G. Mengersen*

&

*for the travelers, the immigrants, and the exiles:
we are strong.*

The Death of the Bird

For every bird there is this last migration:
Once more the cooling year kindles her heart;
With a warm passage to the summer station
Love pricks the course in lights across the chart.

Year after year a speck on the map, divided
By a whole hemisphere, summons her to come;
Season after season, sure and safely guided,
Going away she is also coming home.

And being home, memory becomes a passion
With which she feeds her brood and straws her nest,
Aware of ghosts that haunt the heart's possession
And exiled love mourning within the breast.

The sands are green with a mirage of valleys;
The palm-tree casts a shadow not its own;
Down the long architrave of temple or palace
Blows a cool air from moorland scarps of stone.

And day by day the whisper of love grows stronger;
That delicate voice, more urgent with despair,
Custom and fear containing her no longer,
Drives her at last on the waste leagues of air.

A vanishing speck in those inane dominions,
Single and frail, uncertain of her place,
Alone in the bright host of her companions,
Lost in the blue unfriendliness of space,

She feels it close now, the appointed season:
The invisible thread is broken as she flies;
Suddenly, without warning, without reason,
The guiding spark of instinct winks and dies.

Try as she will, the trackless world delivers
No way, the wilderness of light no sign,
The immense and complex map of hills and rivers
Mocks her small wisdom with its vast design.

And the darkness rises from the eastern valleys,
And the winds buffet her with their hungry breath,
And the great earth, with neither grief nor malice,
Receives the tiny burden of her death.

—A. D. Hope

Fugue:

(n): A complex form of composition, associated most strongly with the Baroque period, and particularly with J.S. Bach, where a melody is played in a number of voices. At the beginning of the piece, each voice is introduced in turn by playing the melody, after which it consists of a mix of counter-melodies, accompaniment passages, periods of rest, and returns to the main melody (often transformed in some way).

(n): A dissociative disorder in which a person forgets who they are, and may leave home to create a new life; during the fugue there is no memory of the former life; after recovering there is no memory for events during the dissociative state. A dissociative fugue usually involves unplanned travel or wandering, and is sometimes accompanied by the establishment of a new identity.

Prelude

(n): An introductory piece of music, preceding, most commonly, a Fugue.

On the edge of a lonely, sleeping city, a stoic breakwater crouched against the beating tide. Seabirds and refuse haunted its cold harbor, which at this hour held only a few deserted fishing boats and a rusting barge. A man stood on the rocks, hushed as a cormorant transfixed by fish beneath the water, his eyes to the North Sea. The hem of his coat trembled, and he wore a felt cap pulled close over his ears. From a distance he could have been mistaken for a pylon, he stood so still—more a thought, than a man.

After a long time, he pulled a brown paper parcel out from under his coat. His hands fumbled at the wrapping in the early morning chill that permeated the crevices in his clothing. On coming closer, much closer, one might have seen that the man's fingers were chafed and hardened. As he worked, languid gray water slapped the stone below him, the wind blew sharp with the stench of rotting fish.

The man paused, and sniffed from the cold. He glanced up for a moment, and then quite suddenly knelt on the unforgiving stone. He spread out his collection of objects, then gathered each one, gently, as if folding a love letter. He straightened each item as he pressed one down upon the other.

Then he began once more to wrap his bundle.

Low clouds spat on the man's wad of brown paper, staining it and interfering with his hands. The dawn had whitened; he could hear rough voices and the sound of metal on wood.

The man pulled a length of string from the pocket of his coat and clasped it in his teeth, as he began to fold the now damp paper. He completed the wrapping and—as best he could in the spruce wind—tied his string neatly around it in an even, careful cross. He tied a knot, then a bow.

It looked like a gift.

He got to his feet and blew on his hands to warm them, listening as he did so to the rising swell, and the stuttering motor of a fishing boat.

Should he kick what he had wrapped, or hurl it into the tide? He turned again to the waves, and realized that if he loosed it here, the parcel would merely spiral in the current and catch on the rocks. What he needed, he knew now, was the deepest water he could find.

A seagull skimmed above him, its high, harsh cry sliding over the water. He watched the bird land soundlessly on a gray wooden pylon. The man shifted his eyes back to the parcel in front of him; then, with the sudden agility of the cormorant, he grasped and thrust it under his coat.

He would have to take a boat.

Part One: Allemande

(n): A German dance in 4/4 time, often the first dance in a Baroque dance suite and generally moderate in speed. The Baroque Allemande, although a dance, often favored an imitative, ornamented texture rather than strong dance rhythms.

1.

Australia

Summer, 1979

Lara was seven, the age when children look more like insects than humans, with their thin torsos and too-long arms and legs. Her dusky, tangled hair fought with ties that bundled it into loose braids, and the strap of her overalls kept slipping off one narrow shoulder. She had steady, gray eyes that often made adults feel uncomfortable. She didn't mean to, of course, but she could never help herself from studying people's faces and trying to imagine what they were really thinking. But a slight sprinkling of freckles and a smile that would suddenly dart out and warm her face offset the seriousness that sat so oddly on her young visage. Well-meaning adults termed her precocious. Other adults, not quite so kind, called her proud. Other children, more often than not, just left her alone. Most of the time.

Lara was relieved she was home-schooled now, where it no longer mattered so much what others thought of her, or did to her. She sometimes allowed herself to remember life in the first grade: the bruises and tears, the spiraling dance of jeering girls. Recess had been Lara's time to play hunted rodent to the marauding felines with their painted claws, hissing at her funny clothes and big words. With her father's research taking him for months at a time overseas, and her mother's decision to live with Lara's grandparents when he was away, it had made sense to take Lara out of school. She was so grateful, she almost didn't care that her last day had meant another ruined lunch and her ears clogged with snarled recitations of her physical faults. Her Oma and Opa never called her buck-toothed, or ugly—or any of the other 21 names on the secret list Lara carried inside her.

But now it was summer, and armed with rucksacks and gingerbread men, Lara and her younger sister Jen stepped

cautiously along the track to the gully. The long, dry grass raked at the girls' bare legs. Lara stopped to look up and squint under the shade of her hand. Jen, too busy watching for snakes as she walked, bumped straight into her.

"Watcha looking at?" Jen muttered accusingly, rubbing an imagined bruise.

"The sky."

There was a pause while Jen considered the significance of this.

"What's up there?" she asked, curious now. The bruise vanished.

"Shhh ... I'm imagining something," hissed Lara.

Jen squatted patiently on her haunches, tucking a sun-bleached strand of hair behind her ear. She didn't take offence at Lara's tone—she knew that often her older sister was involved in serious matters that demanded her full attention and Jen's patient understanding. She waited.

Lara pointed upwards. "There! There it is!" She sucked in her breath with excitement.

Jen looked up but couldn't see anything. In frustration, she dug around in her backpack with chubby five-year-old fingers, and began to eat one of her gingerbread men.

The hawk leaned into the wind and circled above their heads. Its feathers were the color of dust and stone. Lara breathed in the smooth, almost liquid movement of its body through the sky. Her heart beat faster. The hawk tilted its soft, brown head toward them. Lara raised her head further and held out her arm—could it land there? The dreaming lifted her, she no longer touched earth. The hawk soared beyond her fingers.

"*Auf Wiedersehen!*" she called to the faraway bird, as it dipped away to the south.

"What does *Auf Wiedersehen* mean?"

Lara, always ready to play the teacher with her younger sibling, picked up a stick and wrote the words in the dirt. "See how you spell it? It means 'See you again.' Opa and Oma say it."

Jen knew best how to end these sorts of lessons quickly. Hankering to go to school was one thing; bearing with the intellectual discipline of an older sister was quite another. Jen nodded sagely, appeared to think deeply for a moment, and then asked, "When did Mum say we were to be back?"

Ignoring the question, Lara threw the stick away. They proceeded to scramble their way down a steep slope, scratching themselves on the sharp points of Iron Grass. Around them the gully walls rose higher as they descended ever closer to the creek. Caves like eye sockets, hollow and sepulchral, dotted the cliffs. Opa said there were Aboriginal paintings there. He also said the caves were dangerously high, and that not until she was older would Lara be allowed to explore them.

Lara and Jen gazed up silently at the indentations in the cliff face, and shivered involuntarily. The ancient hand-prints were a reminder that the gully hadn't always been theirs. And it needed to be their place. Nobody else's presence seemed right, even if others had been there hundreds, even thousands, of years before.

The earth flattened into uneven, tussocky mounds, then the creek abruptly presented itself. The excitement of the water, with its husky, determined gaiety, meant the caves were forgotten.

"Quick," instructed Lara, "the jars!"

Jen pulled off her rucksack, dipped her arm inside, and pulled out one glass jar at a time. Today they were going to hunt frogs.

Lara's hands trembled with excitement as she opened the screw-top lid and placed it within easy reach in her pocket. The first step was to bend close to the water without falling in and collect some water in the jars. Then it was time for action.

Intensely focused, they moved stealthily across the rocks and stepping stones. Every so often they heard a subdued

croak. The children would stop, then bend slowly and carefully toward the target—until they could see the tiny, plastic form clinging to a shelf under the water. Then they struck, child-hawks, fingers like talons.

The girls didn't always manage to hold up their jars in triumph, but they had enough success to scramble along the river's edge with an elated spring in their steps. They felt powerful and alive as they collected creatures in glass; yet with this pursuit came an unexpected tenderness. At the end of the day, the children loosened the screw-top lids and gently poured the contents back into the creek. They watched the shiny creatures plop like wet pebbles, and cause a quickly dispersed ripple. Finally, empty jars in hand and a reassuring sense of their own magnanimity in their hearts, they ate the remaining gingerbread.

As they wiped the sweet crumbs from their mouths and headed back up the hill, Lara stretched out a hand to brush the tops of the grasses and remind herself how prickly they were, trying to turn her thoughts to something other than her aching leg muscles. The shadows of the trees gave way to warm evening sun, draping like soft cloth across her shoulders.

In front of her, Jen's small legs plowed upwards. Lara could hear her own ragged breathing. She played the what-if game. What if they just kept walking on up the street and hitched a ride to some other city? What if they turned around and camped the night in the gully, catching fish from the creek, and eating the blackberries that occasionally trespassed onto the park? What if they ran away and caught a plane to somewhere else? Germany? Lara's imaginings got her up the hill and left her with an odd, curling sensation in her stomach, as if she were about to step onstage.

The road rose to meet them, flat and comforting, so they swung in beside each other. The two girls ambled toward home, chatting in the contented languor of the summer

afternoon, before finally turning into the side driveway of their grandparents' place.

Once on the grass that stretched in a tousled carpet toward the back veranda, the girls took off their shoes. Lara, wobbling on one leg and shaking road gravel from her sandal, could see the front of the house, where a heavy wooden door opened onto a slick lawn. That was the formal entrance, the trim grass spread as smoothly as their grandmother's Hungarian tablecloth, with a water fountain as its centerpiece and red geraniums embroidered around its neatly hemmed edges.

Laughter wafted across to them from an open kitchen window, and they heard the tinkling and hissing of their mother and Oma bottling hot apricots into glass jars. Occasionally a checkered tea towel waved like a flag, and the rich accent of their grandmother, and the higher melodic voice of their mother dipped and rose again like birdsong.

Lara loved this house, the old family home in which her mother had grown up. The house was the color of honey, built of golden rocks hewn from the nearby gully, and shaped lovingly into a home where their grandparents had built a life amid the dry wildness of the Australian bush. Chapped mortar gripped the stones, one upon the other, so that the windows seemed in danger of being forced outward by the walls' tight embrace. The very top windows let in the glimmering of the faraway sea, beyond a ridge of hills that kept the gully nestled within their reddened cliffs, and the city at a safe distance beyond.

Opa appeared along a narrow stone path that wound its way through a terraced garden toward the orchard. He carried a shovel, and his hands were filthy. Between his dirt-caked fingers swung a plastic bag, frothy tops of silverbeet¹ peering over its sagging edge. Lara grimaced. She hated silverbeet—especially the way Oma boiled it. Hopefully it was her mother's turn to cook tonight.

1 Chard

Opa smiled at them from under his felt Akubra hat.

“Where have you girls been?”

His voice was gritty and deep, straight from the garden. His German accent, still strong after all the years here, made him seem rougher and more brusque than he actually was.

“The gully,” they replied in cheery unison.

“Did you see any snakes?”

“No, Opa.”

“I hope you were careful. This hot weather brings them out.”

“Yes, Opa, we were careful,” they responded dutifully.

Then Jen reported, “We caught heaps of frogs.”

The old man’s back stiffened, and he moved closer to them. His eyes were stern and shadowed. His wrinkles tightened.

“Why?” It was a demand, firm and scary.

“Mum said we could. We’ve done it before.”

Lara was glad that Jen did not feel afraid to speak out. She didn’t seem to mind so much if Opa stopped smiling at them. Lara shifted uncomfortably on her bare feet.

Their grandfather bent down to them, his voice now earnest.

“You know they are endangered?”

“No.” They looked down at the grass, and Lara tried counting how many ants she could see.

“It is not right for you to catch them. It is cruel to take them out of the water. They need the water to breathe.”

“Yes, Opa.”

“If you were a frog, you would not like to be caught and put in a jar with no air, and so much afraid?”

“No, Opa!”

“Well, then ... ”

Jen shuffled around, then stuck out her chin stubbornly. “But, Opa, we let them go!”

“Yes, we only keep them for a bit,” Lara joined in. “We count how many we’ve got, and then we let them go!”

“Mum said we were allowed to. We don’t keep them in the jars for very long.”

Opa was quiet. He never liked them catching anything and imprisoning it. One night Lara had awoken to a thick-furred spider poised above her pillow. Her Opa had calmly maneuvered it onto a tennis racket and carried it outside. It was a sacred, unspoken rule—every creature must be allowed to live where it belonged.

“It is good if you let them go. I am only sad if you hold them in the jars so long that they die slowly from no air.” He straightened up and gave Jen the bag of leafy chard. “You take this to Oma. I think she needs it for our tea. And put your shoes on.”

He reached out a hand and ruffled Lara’s hair. Then he winked at them in a peacemaking gesture. But she knew that somehow they had wounded him, had broken the sacred rule.

2.

Lara loved to believe that she was Maria Von Trapp. She had the dress, she could sing all the songs from *The Sound of Music*, and she could twirl and not fall over as she ran across imaginary Alps on her grandparents' lawn. She could climb every mountain, ford every stream.

When Lara sang robustly about her favorite things, the bushland sang with her. She *was* Maria! One day Lara would escape to a place where she could talk with her mouth full and put her elbows on the table. She would no longer be forced to eat silverbeet, or keep her shoes on.

In different ways and for different reasons, Lara's grandparents had both come to this house from the Old World. Growing up among the first generation of her family in this new land, her grandmother had spoken German before learning English. She would have continued speaking only German, if the First World War had not interfered.

Lara's grandfather arrived later, a thin half-man on a ship that emptied its human cargo unsympathetically into a bright and bristling land. Here, not long enough after the Second World War, those who bore in their eyes another hemisphere were received with cool politeness. It was not their accents so much as their eyes—they held a silence that made others who had grown up here suddenly feel they needed to defend themselves. Tomas had discovered Lara's grandmother like a familiar face in this strange country.

After the last stone of their new home had been laid, and the last windowsill painted glossy white, the kitchen door swung open for Lara's grandfather to carry his bride across the threshold. She had then set to work filling the house with tokens of the land her husband had left behind. Tomas, the one who was truly in exile, would just smile at her, shake his head and disappear into his garden.

So it was that vases of dried flowers stood proudly on the homemade dresser, and the top of the piano. Wooden clocks ticked precisely on whitewashed walls, while alongside them hung pictures of alpine scenes and chalets with red geraniums clustered at their windows. Little wooden peasant figures formed a beautiful still life across the length of the mantle above the fireplace. Books with glowing foreign binding peered from the shelves, beckoning to Lara in a language she did not know, but from a world to which she felt irrevocably connected.

Lara was made to learn “Silent Night” in German and to sing it at Christmas time for their infirm and desperately homesick great-grandmother, who cried as Lara’s high-pitched little voice crooned the words from a long-ago childhood. *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht; Alles schläft; einsam wacht.*²

The house’s interior was presided over principally by Lara’s grandmother, her reign extending to the manicured front lawn and its obedient geraniums. Needless to say, the children preferred what lay outside the back door and across the creaking veranda, with its cobwebs and faded deck chairs. Here the rustling eucalyptus trees were stitched together with the joyous tracks of children and animals. Here, flanked proudly by a row of towering copper beeches, rambled the wild relative of their grandmother’s imposing front yard; the distant cousin that growled and stalked and romped on the other side of the house.

This was their grandfather’s garden. Secrets grew here, too, their grandfather’s secrets, with small, dark leaves like pine needles, pricking the skin if you walked too close.



With crackling steps Lara walked amidst the trees, their leaves caroling softly in the wind. She found a smooth-topped boulder, crowded by undergrowth and yet with clear spaces between the tiny branches to view the wilderness. It was her favorite place to sit in solitude and watch the birds.

Often her Opa came with her. He too loved birds. But today, Lara was alone. Her binoculars, child-size, hung heavy around her neck. Under her arm were her notebook and pencil. She also had her worn, beloved reference manual, her name inside the hardcover in large, possessive handwriting. This book, like the binoculars, was a present from her grandfather.

Lara wriggled, then rested on her stone, focusing her field-glasses on the trees ahead. She placed her reference book on her lap. Lara tried to arrange everything so that she did not have to move; this way she would not disturb the birds, or make them afraid.

Now, this was the best part—the beginning. At first the trees, even though the wind was rippling them, were unyielding. But she knew to wait, and keep waiting . . . suddenly she would witness the virescent curtains shred, and with rapture Lara would watch a myriad of tiny lives dart and perch and wing. It was as if the birds shimmered into focus, and where there had been nothing, the trees revealed vivid, vibrant life.

She always thought she would stop and write down the species she observed as she went, but Lara was fused to the binoculars, drawn on by seeing more, and yet more. She was afraid that if she dropped her gaze for even a moment, she would miss the sight of a rare finch, or a wren bluer than she had ever seen before.

2 Silent night, holy night; All is calm, all is bright.

Lara spent an hour, two hours like this before she was exhausted and had to rest her eyes. She then scribbled frantic sketches of what she had seen, strange contortions of birds rendered by her child fingers, rough notes on color and shape, to show her Opa.

“Do you know, Lara,” his soft, guttural voice like earth, “Some will live only days, perhaps weeks. Listen.”

It seemed to Lara that she strained to hear their fragile, determined warbling.

“Child,” Opa would repeat patiently, “Listen.”



Lara’s mother stood in the doorway, smiling and holding postcards.

“Guess what arrived in the mail?”

Lara’s father was in Germany this time, which meant exciting, colorful mail now and chocolates when he returned. Lara looked at hers. It had a cart and draft horses. The cart was filled with bright flowers and driven by a weather-beaten man wearing lederhosen.

Oma stood next to her. “Market day?” she wondered aloud.

The children would not show Opa—he possessed a keen distaste for postcards. He would growl and throw them down, then retreat to his workshop like a disgruntled fox.

The girls moved on and ran upstairs, tearing along the hall until they fell into their bedroom. Second-hand beds were covered with feather-stuffed quilts and toys; an odd assortment of chests, and a large antique wardrobe created a crowded, energetic atmosphere. The windows commanded a view of the extensive back garden and the small paddock beyond where sheep grazed and chickens scratched at the stubble.

On the wall above Lara’s bed hung a wooden shadow box. In each delicate compartment sat an ornament, and

Lara contemplated them each night before she fell asleep: the tiny doll in German national dress, the miniature cowbell, the little wooden angels with their exquisitely carved wings no larger than Lara’s fingernail. And then there were the ones she could not understand: a polished black stone, the mahogany violin peg, and a broken compass—and her favorite, the feather.

The girls quickly swapped postcards and laughed because a similar message was written on each one. Their father had signed the cards with a tiny scrawled picture, rather than his name. Each one was different—he had a repertoire—and they wanted to see who had got the crocodile.

“It’s on mine!” Jen squealed.

Their mother called from the kitchen. Lara and Jen washed their hands for dinner, then hurried downstairs to the huge wooden table, where they waited for Opa to come in from the shed.



Lara sat at the table with her sister, mother, and grandparents. A bowl of oranges served as a bright centerpiece. Opa muttered a perfunctory grace, then they ate from plates piled with slivers of corned beef, shriveled green blobs of home-grown silverbeet, and mashed potato.

“Must I eat the silverbeet?” Lara asked plaintively.

“Yes, Lara, you must,” replied her mother, unfolding a cloth napkin and laying it across her lap.

“Why?”

“Because.” She turned to Lara’s grandmother to begin another conversation.

“Because why?” Lara insisted, and her mother sighed and glared at her.

“Don’t be rude. Your grandmother has cooked this especially for you.”

“No, she hasn’t. She’s cooked it for everyone.”

The others were eating; their silverware sounded like little clipped bells.

“Opa grew this silverbeet in his own vegetable patch,” Lara’s mother responded, putting some on her fork as a deliberate demonstration. “You must be grateful to your grandfather for growing the silverbeet, and your grandmother for cooking it. And besides, there will be no dessert until you eat it.”

As a child, Lara had both a respect for, and a fear of the vegetable patch. She much preferred the orchard, where in summer the trees burst with plums and apricots, and she could lie underneath them and eat until her stomach ached and cramped.

Sometimes she would sit in the warm, fragrant grass and watch her grandfather at work. He was always bent over, digging. He never looked up. He leaned toward the earth when he carried plants, moved his wheelbarrow, or hoed the ground. He was always bent, so he never saw her watching. If she wanted attention, she had to call out to him in her high, clear voice. He would look up, half-smile, and then bend again.

Lara sometimes wondered whether he was afraid of the sky—that postcard blue, an enormous postcard you could never tear up or throw to the floor; a relentless blue light that forced her grandfather to bow toward the earth, and tend those whispers that refused to give up their roots and die.

3.

There are said to be two sides to everything; yet two elements eternally joined are often in complete opposition. Lara had noticed this on many occasions: two disparate worlds, two places, two realities, coalescing to make a crazy third entity. Dawn intrigued her for this very reason, as did twilight. And then, of course, there was her grandfather.

“Opa, where are you going?” Lara looked up from her reading as he walked purposefully across the back lawn.

He paused and turned his head. “Rabbits,” he muttered in disgust. “They are eating everything!”

Lara covered her smile with the motion of suddenly putting her bookmark in its place. *The Secret Garden* could wait, especially as this was her third reading of it. Opa seemed to make an exception to his principles when it came to rabbits. “They are not natives, they do not belong here! They are outlaws!” He would make such pronouncements while fingering the remnants of his lettuce plants, the glare in his otherwise steady eyes forbidding any argument. Lara would ponder his words, and wonder. Because Opa, she knew, was also from another place.

She looked up at him now, shading her eyes in the strong afternoon sun. “Can I come?”

Lara hopped up and followed him to the shed. She saw him carefully take the slender rifle down from its high, high hooks. She watched him slowly choose bullets from a small drawer much, much higher than any child’s hand could reach. He was quiet, preparing to kill. Opa glowered and flexed his hands. Lara knew how much he detested the rabbits, the destroyers of his precious garden.

She followed him as he left the shed. Jen called out from a distance and hurtled down the path to fall in step with them. The three crossed the paddock and made their way to the large vegetable plot at the bottom of the orchard. Opa stopped, and motioned the children to do likewise. Then he turned to them.

“I will show you. This once. And,” he added wryly, “perhaps do not tell your father when he returns.” He raised one eyebrow at them and grimaced.

Later Lara remembered how strange it felt to not only hold a gun for the first time, but also to feel her Opa’s hands, like thick leather gloves, coating her fingers. He explained what to do, then did it with her. For her. Before she realized what had happened, there was an explosion. She jerked backwards, and several meters away a rabbit dropped, now motionless, another shade of the grass. Lara trembled and clasped her hands together.

“My turn!” cried Jen, and when Opa ignored her, she darted in front of him and called again.

Opa froze. He drew himself up to his full and intimidating height. His eyes blazed at her like cold blue fires, and his voice was a cannon roaring.

“Don’t you ever, EVER, stand in front of a gun!”

Jen crumpled like the rabbit.

“You foolish girl! Both of you, *go home now!*”

He was a giant framed in apple trees. Invincible, terrifying.

Jen picked herself up, and without a word grabbed Lara’s hand. Together they ran, panting like pursued animals, back towards the house.

They heard two more shots, then silence.



It was autumn, and the evening air was cold. The house felt lonely and strange with only Jen and her mother for company. Lara’s grandparents were out on a rare foray to visit an ill relative, and the place seemed hollow without them.

Through the window Lara watched a full moon rise and fan the trees and buffalo lawn with white. She listened to

the purr and thump of a possum as it jumped from the roof to the top of the water tank. She heard the clinking of the last cleaned plates being put away in the kitchen, and then the television being switched on in an adjoining room. Her mother called up the stairs to Jen to turn off the light and go to sleep, then Lara listened to her getting comfortable in an armchair in front of the TV. Tonight Lara had been allowed the special treat of staying up that bit longer.

Orchestral music finally drew her from the window and into the lounge room doorway to stare at the screen. Her mother didn’t hear her. She moved closer. And every night after that, Lara wished that she had stayed at her window watching the moon.

Because it was like this. On the TV screen in her grandparents’ lounge room, a bulldozer methodically pushed emaciated people into a huge pit, like so many hundreds of sheaves of wheat that had become untied, and then fallen into and away from each other.

Lara wanted to be sick. They were real, and they were dead. They had eyes, breasts, arms. Lara felt herself dilate, then retract, as if her whole self was being sucked deep inside a tiny cave. She was seven years old and suddenly unable to move, to breathe, to think. Never in any book she had read, picture she had seen, story she had heard, had she absorbed anything that could prepare her for this. She was witnessing something that she could not bear.

And yet she could not close her eyes. It was like watching the birds. She could not close her eyes. Who were those people? Who was the man driving the bulldozer, and who were those men wearing uniforms, holding guns that never fired? Why didn’t anyone stop them?

And the voice speaking over the images in strongly accented English, explaining why he was only following orders—
“Mum, is that Opa?”

Her mother’s back shot up and her hand quickly

grabbed the remote control, which then clattered to the floor. Lara watched the panicked fingers fumble at the buttons, and suddenly she was viewing a toothpaste commercial.

“Oh Lara, are you still awake?”

It was an accusation. Lara started to cry. Her mother reached for her, but Lara pulled away.

“Who was that? Was that Opa?”

“No, no, darling.”

“But it sounded like him!”

“That’s just because he was German.”

“Opa’s not German!”

“Yes, darling, he is.”

“But he can’t be! He’s here!”

“Yes, he came here a long time ago.”

“When?”

“A long time ago. That was not Opa talking.”

“What was he doing?”

“Opa?”

“Yes. No. That man.”

“He was explaining what happened.”

“What was it?”

Her mother said nothing, just pulled her daughter close.

“Were they—dead?” Lara’s voice sounded shrill. Her throat felt like a splinter.

“Yes. A terrible man called Hitler killed them all. In a war that happened a long time ago.”

“Why?”

“Because he hated them.”

“Even the ladies? Were they ladies?”

“Come to bed, darling.”

“Was Opa one of those men who made them fall in the hole?”

“No, darling.” Her mother’s voice choked slightly. “Oh Lara, you should not have seen that.”

“Where was Opa?”

Her mother was silent. “I don’t know. But he never did anything like that. I promise.”

“But—”

“Lara, bed.” Her mother took her hand and led her up the stairs, away from Hitler, away from the hole, and away from the man who sounded like Opa but wasn’t.

“Can I ask him tomorrow?”

“Who?”

“Opa.”

Her mother grasped Lara’s shoulders, too hard.

“Never. You must never ask him.”

Lara saw a face she did not know.

“Why?” It was a whisper. “You said he wasn’t there?”

“Opa lost people he loved in the war. We must not make him sad.”

“Why were you watching?”

“We need to know.”

“Then why can’t I ask him?”

“Because he wasn’t there.”

“Is that why he came here?”

“He came to meet Oma.”

She was trembling. Then, quietly, “I am so sorry you saw that, darling. One day you will learn how brave Opa was. He is a good man.”

“I know.”

“And he needs us to love him.”

“I do love him.”

“I know. Now let’s decide not to bother him with any questions.”

“Yes.”

“I love you.”

“Yes.”

Her mother held her for a moment, then tucked her into bed, and closed the door.

In Lara's dream it was night. And this became for her the recurring dream, the nightmare refrain that snarled from then on through her childhood. And beyond. It was the quiet, profound invasion.

In this dream, the darkness flared with torches, and harsh voices punctured the silence. Lara watched herself awaken. She saw herself panic, then calm, as if her mother's hand had slid across her face. She woke the rest of the family.

In her dream there was a trapdoor. They slipped through it, and then on into the dark trees enfolding the house. Following a narrow wallaby track, they descended into the gully that wound like a breath among cliffs steep with eucalypti and red earth.

In the dream they moved smoothly, like water. Their enemies were close behind them. Lara sensed the presence of the caves above, their walls traced with ocher hands. She began to climb, maneuvering around boulders and stubborn trees that grew almost at right angles to the ground.

They reached a cave, its entrance hidden by prickling Kangaroo Thorn. They crawled through into the shadows, and Lara pressed herself against the earth; her heart was burning. The cave's mouth seemed to have torn the sky; its edges were jagged, and the bright, staring stars hung at odd angles.

Lara woke at this moment—she always woke at this moment, as their enemy scaled the cliff, while she and her family had nothing but damp earth to protect them. The stars would betray them; she knew their distant, cool voices would whisper to the soldiers—but she always woke before they did.

She forced herself to sit up. Her eyes grasped the raft of morning light, and she watched dust motes tangling with the wan rays. As Lara's gaze traveled the lines of her sister's bed,

the window, and the ornaments framed above her, the dream lingered only a thin veil away; so near that a hand could easily pull her back through its folds. Sternly Lara reminded herself that they were safe, that armies would not invade Australia.

But the shadow endured. She was no longer Maria von Trapp. She was no longer the Brave Catcher of Frogs, Discoverer of Birds. She was only Lara, and she was hunted.

4.

Jen tumbled into the room to see if Lara was awake. Her sister was a quietly breathing mound, a swathe of sunlight had cut across her face and turned her hair red. Outside, the mid-summer day already shimmered with cicadas' song.

"Lara! Come on!"

Lara mumbled and turned over. Jen, now all of seven years old and no longer nervous of her sister's wrath, leapt nimbly onto the bedspread. She deftly squeezed a cold, wet washcloth over Lara's sleeping face. The effect was instant, and—for Jen—gratifying. Lara bolted upright, blinking the water out of her eyes, and gasped. Jen squealed with delight and jumped backwards to the door, just in case.

"Oma's made gingerbread and she's icing it now," she called across the room. "We can choose three pieces to take to the gully!"

Lara glowered and shook her head. "I'm all wet!"

Jen giggled and waved the washcloth like a flag. "Your fault for sleeping in and wasting the day!"

"You sound like Opa," Lara growled.

"So do you."

"Whose idea was the washcloth?"

"Mum's."

"What?!"

"Well, not exactly hers. Remember how she told us what she used to do to the other kids at school camps, when they had bunks?"

Lara sighed and pushed back the covers. She was too tired to fight back. She didn't want to talk about school, any school. She still felt worried that Mum and Dad might send both of them back there one day. She changed the subject.

"How many gingerbreads?"

"Three. Hurry, or she'll change her mind."

They could hear their mother and Oma chatting, and

Lara thought again how lucky they were to be able to stay here in the stone house. "I'm glad Dad works overseas."

"Don't you miss him?"

"Sure. Heaps. But I like being here."

Lara rummaged around for some socks her size, while Jen crossed the room to bounce up and down on her bed.

"You act like a four year old sometimes, look at you!"

Jen poked out her tongue, but settled cross-legged on the quilt. "How long do you think we'll stay this time?"

"Two months, I think."

"I heard Mum saying to Opa that it was six."

"Dad won't want to be away from us that long."

"That's what I said."

The two girls raced each other down the stairs, their hands sliding along the glossy banister. Lara marveled that her Opa had carved and planed it so smooth. It seemed to her that there was nothing Opa couldn't do.



The gully opened to them as their feet found the path that lead them across the spur. The Spear Grass scratched, a magpie chortled from a drooping Sheoak, and faint clouds streaked the pale blue sky. Lara was just thinking again of the luxury of three pieces of gingerbread, when she heard a shout, and immediately turned around.

"It's Opa!" Jen tugged Lara in surprise. Lara narrowed her eyes in concern, but then realized that her grandfather was not waving with any urgency. The girls stopped, and waited for Opa to join them. They surveyed him curiously. He carried a rucksack, gripped a hiking stick and wore his thickest boots. He grinned from under his hat, and they returned the smile.

"Are you coming with us?" Lara asked hopefully.

In answer, he reached out to reposition the overall strap that had fallen off her shoulder. He ruffled Jen's hair.

"Did you fill your water bottles to the top?"

They nodded, then he led off. They followed him a little way across the brow of the hill.

The girls expected Opa to leave the path, and dip down towards the creek their usual way, but to their surprise he broke off through an opening between white-flowering Christmas Bush. They scrambled after him across some boulders, and on the other side lay a track they had never seen: it carved a tiny ditch through blue-green tussocks of Scented Iron Grass, and wound through Acacia trees, until it arrived at the base of the surrounding cliffs. There, it seemed to vanish.

Lara craned her neck to scan the rocky wall towering above them, and then wheeled around in excitement as it dawned on her where they were headed.

Opa met her eyes. "Yes, Lara," he replied to her unspoken question. "You are old enough. Today, we visit the caves."

He straightened up and rubbed the back of his neck as he, too, gazed up at the cliff face. "Good thing we don't have to climb that."

"How can we get up there?"

"You'll see. But before we do anything more ..."

He paused and swung his pack to the ground, and widened his shoulders in a stretch. Lara and Jen glanced up expectantly. He took a swig of water, and they followed suit. Then he squinted over their heads at the bright sky before finishing his thought.

"There were people here before we came. They lived here for many thousands of years.

"What happened to them?" asked Jen.

"Gone." He threw the word to the ground, and the girls did not press him. The silence held something ominous. He waited. A shadow passed over their feet, and Lara looked up to see a hawk gliding way above them.

“Today we will see where they lived. We will see their hand-prints on the cave wall. Perhaps you can still see where they had their fires.” He looked pensively at Lara, then at Jen, before strapping his water bottle onto his belt. “Do not touch anything. These caves were sacred. We will not speak when we arrive. I will show you, and then we can go. You can eat when we come back down here.”

Lara and Jen dutifully copied Opa in lifting up their day-packs to begin the next part of their trek.

The path was steep, and in places Lara had to pull herself up by holding onto exposed tree roots. She was panting, her skin heavy with sweat. She turned to heave Jen up to the very last rocky shelf.

They found themselves on a natural balcony of pressed red earth. Far below, on a railway line that snaked between the hills, a train whistle seared the hot, still afternoon. When Lara turned her eyes north, she could pick out the roof of the stone house. With delight she observed the postal van appear, a flash of white and red, and she wished for two postcards to arrive. Lara was beginning to be worried her father might have forgotten them.

Opa touched their shoulders. Behind them yawned the cave, its rough opening rimmed with thorns. Opa approached the entrance, turned once to gesture for the girls to drop their packs, and disappeared. He soon poked his head out and beckoned for Lara to join him. She burrowed inside, and took the flashlight Opa handed her.

At first she could see nothing. She was engulfed in an enormous shadow that she could feel on her face. It was hard to breathe; the cave was filled with damp, close air. In the flashlight’s beam Lara picked out the cave walls, scalloped and intricate, as if someone had been moving slowly around the edge of the space with scissors.

She felt Opa’s hand hold hers, and point the light towards the ground, several feet away. Lara noticed a small

mound. She inched across the dirt floor and bent to examine the charred remains of wood and blackened stones. The fire pit looked more recent than several thousand years ago, and she turned to ask Opa, but he had rejoined Jen for a moment at the cave’s entrance—she could see the brim of his hat shaped against the sky outside, and hear Jen’s muffled protests. Lara knew her sister would be terrified of coming in here.

Lara swung the flashlight across the interior of the cave, and noticed the crushed shine of an empty beer can. Her breath rose angrily on seeing the trash, and she stooped to pick it up. At least she could remove it and leave this place—and its ancient people—some small token of respect.

Opa returned. “Jen is staying outside.”

Lara held out the can to him. She sensed him recoil.

“It’s terrible,” she whispered, “I’m taking it with us.”

He didn’t reply, but lifted her hand again with the flashlight, this time training it on the wall ahead.

“Listen.”

She knew he meant to say “look,” but she did not correct him; it reminded her of the two of them watching birds. Lara peered where he indicated and noticed the faint hand-prints. They had been placed neatly together, fingers fanned out, their edges blurred with white. It seemed to Lara that whoever made the markings had tried to push through the cave wall to the other side. What had they tried to reach?

The two open palms were an invitation; she moved forward. To Lara, the shapes glowed rust-red, mystical portals to another time. Haltingly, she extended her own hand, to press it lightly against the outline. The fit was perfect—the prints could have been her own.

“Lara.”

She stepped back.

“Do not touch them. Come back, now.”

The sharp command in her Opa’s voice startled her. In the split second of blackness as she switched off her

flashlight, she was disoriented enough to wonder how long it would take before the invading soldiers of her nightmare discovered her here.

In the next few seconds she emerged into the sunlight, blinking as she had when Jen had splattered her face with water that morning. There were no soldiers, no stars—only the constant, parched sky.

Jen was sitting on the ground, drawing sulkily with a stick that kept breaking into smaller pieces. It cracked once more, and she threw it away.

“Can we go now?”

She really did sound four, Lara thought again. She looked at Opa. He did not seem cross at her for touching the painting.

“Have some water and then we will climb down another way, not so steep.”

He waited while they drank. Lara glanced at his face. Her urge to touch the hand-prints had been overwhelming—she was unsure of how to share it with him, but he needed to know she had meant no disrespect. How could she explain the feeling that her skin on the painted stone might dissolve the wall?

Opa didn't look angry, just thoughtful.

They picked up their packs, and turned to go. Opa briefly locked eyes with Lara, and smiled gently. She moved shyly to his side, reached out and took his fingers in hers, as they retraced their footprints across the dust.

He understood, she was sure.



Back at the stone house they hugged Opa briefly and watched him withdraw into the shed. Lara and Jen loosened their packs

and clomped across the back veranda. After a quick glance at each other, they raced to be first to touch the screen door—but as Lara's fingers reached it, the girls hesitated. They could hear someone crying.

“Stay here.” Lara made Jen stand in the shadows while she crept forward. Leaning her face into the wire mesh, she could just barely see into the kitchen. Her mother stood in silhouette, against a rectangle of daylight in the doorway. Her shoulders were moving as if someone invisible were standing behind and shaking her, over and over. But there was nobody there.

Lara motioned to Jen, and they very quietly opened the screen door and slid through, remembering for the first and only time not to let it slam. The silhouette went quiet and shifted out of sight.

They stood there awkwardly, not sure what to do next.

“Let's go to her,” whispered Jen.

“No.”

“Why?”

Lara just shook her head and took Jen's hand. “Let's go outside.”

“Do you think Dad's lost his job?”

“Maybe.”

“And we won't have any money?”

“That won't matter.”

“But we can't buy food then!” Jen began to cry.

“Opa grows most of our food, and we have chickens.

Don't be silly.”

“But you said—”

“I never said anything.”

The two girls stared at each other, their faces sullen.

“I'm going in to ask her,” Jen announced.

“No. Stay here.”

“Why do we have to stay outside?”

There was a pause. Then Lara grabbed Jen and raced to

their tree swing that Opa had made. "You can go first," she offered, and Jen clambered up, still sniffing. "Push me really high, so I can see the gully," she ordered.

Lara obligingly pulled the large knot that Jen clung to, high over her head, before she let go with a roar of effort. Jen swung out and over the terraced herb garden, and sang as she could see the tops of the gully cliffs, then, "The sea!" she called happily.

Lara breathed hard, pushing all the anxiety out of her body. After ten swings Lara dropped her arms, exhausted.

She noticed Opa appear on the periphery of the garden. His shoulders were squared, as always, and his felt hat shaded his face. He stood still, observing them. Lara waved. She watched him walk towards them, and noticed that he looked at her and Jen with a gruff tenderness she did not often see in his face.

"You are getting stronger, Lara. Jen went high today,"

Jen grinned at him from the rope swing as she allowed the cord to slow. Then she remembered the silhouette in the kitchen. "What's Mum upset about?"

The rope slackened and she slithered onto the grass. Lara stood with her arms crossed in front of her. She noticed Opa was standing the same way. He reached out a hand and touched Jen's head.

"Oma is with her," he said softly. "It is best to leave them be." He held the gaze of each child, one at a time, before he continued. "Your mother is a brave and good woman. You are fortunate children."

He paused.

"Do you want me to swing you?"

"Yes!" Jen quickly scaled the rope and ensconced herself on the swing. Opa tilted Lara's chin with his finger. She noticed that black earth lined all the grooves, making his skin a contour map. "You first."

He turned to Jen. "Get down, little monkey, and let your big sister have a turn!"

Jen jumped down, and scurried to sit on a nearby rock.

Lara closed her eyes as her grandfather pushed her up and away, up to the trees, across the sky, over the caves. She felt like a hawk soaring. When her turn finally ended, she climbed down sadly to let Jen back onto the rope.

Opa did not seem to tire; he swung them until the sky turned the color of bottled apricots, and a cool wind caressed them from the gully. Only when they could no longer see their fingers curled on the rope, did they finally go inside.



At the evening meal, they sat mute. Lara ate her silverbeet without complaint, frightened by her mother's face. Mum had always been a private person, but now she seemed closed, as if she could only see inwards. Oma bustled, sniffled and occasionally slammed plates of food down in front of them. There were gingerbread men for dessert, and Oma didn't even notice that the children took three and shoved more into their laps, for later. Even stranger, was that Opa pretended not to notice. Mum continued to stare into herself.

"Is Dad gone two months or six?"

Jen's question was a switch that immediately turned her mother's head, lit up her eyes, and caused her voice to emerge strained. "Jen, it seems as if he is not coming back at all."

Oma stood up and quickly put an arm around Mum's shoulders, while her daughter's face collapsed into her hands.

"Shhh," soothed Oma, as if Mum had fallen and grazed her knee, "Shhh."

"What do you mean?" Jen shrieked.

Lara's face went cold, and the tips of her fingers tingled. Could you get hypothermia from news like this? Did something like this make you so cold you could die?

“Did he write?” Lara asked in a small voice.

Oma nodded at her, while her mother’s shoulders shook.

Oma glanced at her husband and gestured with her head. It meant “take these girls out, and leave me with mine.”

Opa pushed back his chair and stood, motioning to the girls to join him.

“Come,” he ordered, not unkindly.

The girls followed him, and together they went outside. The sky was soft and dark, the stars glistened. Around them the eucalyptus trees crackled their long curved leaves in the night wind. Opa took his grand-daughters’ hands into his own, and stepped off the veranda.

“I can smell the moon,” Jen breathed.

Opa squeezed her fingers, and Lara’s too. Together they walked soundlessly across the grass, past the swing, past the herb garden. The moonlight made it easy to find the rock that Jen had perched on earlier, while Lara had swung out across the sky.

“Here.” Opa lifted them up one at a time, so that they both faced him, at near his height. He remained on the ground.

Jen whimpered and rubbed her eyes. “Why isn’t Dad coming back?”

Lara could still not do what she needed, to make her voice come out. Her neck and face were stone.

Opa reached out to stroke Lara’s hair, as if he understood. In response, her eyes warmed and swelled, before tears slid down her cheeks.

“He was offered a good job there, the University is famous. It has made it very hard for him to say no.”

But that wasn’t the reason, Lara knew. The last postcards had not been signed with an animal. Something had happened to make him forget them.

Opa sighed and then leaned closer. Whether he was angry, they could not see in the dark, but there was a fierceness in his silence.

“He has decided to leave your mother. He has, it seems, met another lady. He wrote that he is in love with her, and will be staying now in England.”

“Does he want a new family?” Lara asked faintly.

“I don’t know. I don’t understand how he could do this. But he has made up his mind. That is clear.”

There was a pause, before he added softly. “But you girls and your mother will stay here while she works out what to do. We will look after you.”

Jen slid down off the rock and ran back into the house, sobbing. The screen door slammed and from the garden they heard the frantic thumping of her feet on the stairs. Lara buried her head in her arms, and cried. Opa’s arms landed on her shoulders with weight and warmth, as they pulled her tight to him. She shook under his embrace; he said nothing. When the sobs tapered off into erratic breaths, he held her tighter still.

“You will not be alone,” he whispered. “Your father has left, but I will stay. I will do this for you and Jen. I am your Opa.”