

X, the cross she's slipped beneath, given she now has fewer than ten years left, although it's far too soon for sadness, and Caroline quickly loses that letter amongst its word, 'xylophonist', and, in morning light, casts her eye over a few pages of its heavy book, *Edward Pepperwood*, then closes this for a final time and barely beats the magpies to sleep, a state she keeps throughout the sun-fall, the late morning, the early night, even as adults eventually stir at their points around the sheep-run's stout homestead, resisting treacle-coloured alcohol in climbing to commence garbled talk or songs, for it is, after all, a celebration, a combined event for both the Yuletide and the boss' charming but somewhat relentless daughter, whose death, as her relevant certificate attests, shall be near the presumed date of Jesus', at that stage of a year when the yellow grasses of Dashvale's plain begin to soften, frogs in the billabong-mud wind down their seasonal songs, horizons firm, wildflowers lift into bloom, and, in this case, 1851, the impressions of another hot summer are already fading from the minds of John Dash and his employ as they're crowing night-time carols, draining alcohol from their bodies, leaning against mud-brick walls to watch ethereal shapes of old and faraway lovers drift through the physical spaces of the rooms, as fat tears rise out of collarbone pools to climb across filthy cheeks, and separate strands of light soar towards a half-moon, coming from the eyes of the gardener, the rouseabout, the house-help, and one shepherd clutches his belly in filling it with the swollen words of *O Come All Ye Faithful*, and another – who's long been in the habit of slipping into the behaviour of his collie – sits at the narrow entryway to the house, swallowing barking sounds he manages to draw from the direction of those Wirrawung men who've camped near the rushes of the billabong, as finally Caroline wakes beneath woollen sheets and asks, sleepily,

**CAROLINE DASH**

But why does he act like a dog?

, preceding her father's advice that,

**JOHN DASH**

You mustn't laugh at him, dear.

, then she smiles, yawns, rushes towards wakefulness, and by the time of a pink sunrise and a meal of corned mutton that's eventually taken-up by Bardella, most of the guests have regained their clear heads and are soon crowding around a dining table to take gifts that are hastily wrapped by Caroline's dauntless 65-year-old hands, fulfilling the splendid tradition that, on the accepted anniversary of one's death, a person should donate a portion of their belongings to others – even if they won't be appreciated – so they might understand there is nothing we truly keep forever, even ourselves, and on

this particular anniversary Caroline gifts a broken telescope to Jameson Sharpe, an extremely inaccurate atlas to Daniel Dwyer, a massive biographical novel (*'Edward Pepperwood'*) and a slim manifesto (*'Eureka'*) to Stephen and Adelaide Howard, a shambolic self-portrait to Benson Cummins, a copper medallion of the Sacred Mother to Yabby Quinn, and, for Wilson Colbeck, two punctured dollars destined for the Sydney colony, but the gift she's most excited to be parting with is a mottled grey pony, which, at the culmination of ten years' service, has been tethered to the storage shed and is now officially put into the custody of John and Bardella, amidst grateful kisses, and after seeing this the guests tuck away their gifts and return to their own lodgings, none of them dwelling on how the melancholic colours of the twilight allude to the fact Caroline has entered her final decade of life, and indeed Bardella is more concerned with diving immediately into a review of the celebration, removing its paper decorations, extracting water from a barrel of regurgitated rum, taking flowers to the forest ground, her full task not being completed until the summer has bled into springtime and she's at the dining table to carefully erase her wobbly script from all of the invitations that have been returned, as Caroline, simultaneously, is sitting restless beneath the homestead porch, waiting for Benson Cummins to remove her supposed likeness from his canvas – its greatest mistake, the blatant whitening of her skin – and fortunately she's so busy shouting to Bardella,

**CAROLINE DASH**

*\*Will you please invite Miango? Please?\**

, that she can't hear the conversation occurring at the vegetable garden, where Yabby Quinn, on one of his last days at the run before he'll travel to Van Diemen's Land for six years detention, is saying,

**YABBY QUINN**

Howard, I never meant to insinuate that it was *bothering* me. I only wanted to get my facts straight.

**STEPHEN HOWARD**

Well, aren't you *observant*. I'd advise you to get used to it, Quinn, and not act like it's all bothering you quite so much.

**YABBY QUINN**

And so I gather the 'Della' woman is his mistress?

**STEPHEN HOWARD**

She is.

**YABBY QUINN**

So the little dark girl is Dash's daughter, am I right?

, and then Quinn returns to his brooding, occasionally squinting in the direction of the oil portrait that draws closer to disappearing as its artist – the person commissioned to *remove* – studies his subject ever more carefully, neat brown hair, gaps in her smile, dark eyes that have seen as far as the 20<sup>th</sup> century without recalling it, so that here, still, she only whirs with simple thoughts for a friend and a pony, stubborn enough figures in her mind that they give the secret content to many of the prayers she devises on those mornings John leads religious reflections at Blue Hill, and, with a wide vantage of the billabong and the ironbark forest and the grassfields at her disposal, Caroline easily imagines riding the Dashvale bounds with the boy Miango on a non-descript horse – not *exactly* the animal John has already taken to a sale-yard in Bendigo – and usually this image is exciting enough that she'll squeeze her praying hands together, forgetting John's repeated warning,

***JOHN DASH***

Be patient. He won't listen to demands.

, and indeed, during these Blue Hill excursions, John's critical gaze falls entirely upon Caroline, even though Bardella's own attention usually drifts into the treetops as he's reading favourite New Testament passages, typically involving Jesus' powers at turning people sick or miserable or insane, and once the makeshift services have ended the family rush downhill to reclaim their beds before the sunset, Bardella always moving between her uneasy place on John's mattress - where, these days, he seems to want her only for receiving the lonely arms he extends in his sleep - and the straw pailasse beside the girl's cot, from which she's best placed to whisper with Caroline, and to answer questions the girl finds when she wakes and hears noises in the night, such as,

***BARDELLA***

\*The chickens. Only chickens.\*

***CAROLINE DASH***

\*And the other one? Outside?\*

***BARDELLA***

\*My belly.\*

***CAROLINE DASH***

\*What's that noise?\*

**BARDELLA**

\*You're awake, why?\*

, and although she's there every time that Caroline wakes, and every time that John, in sleep, reaches across her body, there are hours, too, when Bardella leaves the house to wander alone across the night ground of the property, judging, through her skin, that widening boundary of where she belongs, because although in John's mind a thousand acres of cold dirt have been marked for 'Dashvale', Bardella knows best that it isn't all the same, and she feels the difference in the places, near the homestead, where the tendons of her feet might relax versus those closer to the silent billabong and the blue ironbarks where her same cords tense with guilt and fear, eventually so sore she has no option but to turn back for the house, fingering the pearls she wears around her neck to ease her anxiety, and yet, despite the pain to be had from it, she walks on most evenings, creeping into more distant territory until she reaches a further edge at which she must return, and each time that she's fallen again on the paillasse she'll continue twisting the little pieces of her necklace in the dark until she might be required to say something along the lines of,

**BARDELLA**

\*Crickets, beside the water.\*

, or

**BARDELLA**

\*One of the shepherds, crying.\*

, because she's sensed that Caroline is only moments from asking,

**CAROLINE DASH**

\*What was *that*?\*

, speaking Wirrawung language, like this, because John's breathing tells that he's asleep, and if he seems especially settled there can be long stories that attach to Bardella's own childhood, or perhaps even strands of the lore that Wirrawung people will share until the end of their time, when a great eagle shall fold the world, finally, into its wings, and occasionally within the night-time tales Caroline chooses a particular word she'd like to forget, her exchange with Bardella maybe going,

**BARDELLA**

\*'Determined'. When a person is set about one thing.\*

**CAROLINE DASH**

\*What does it mean, again, ‘determined’?\*

**BARDELLA**

\*...he carried us away from the fire, three of us at once. I’d never known a face so determined.\*

, or

**BARDELLA**

\*When your body is taken by a sickness. ‘Infected’.\*

**CAROLINE DASH**

\*‘Infected’? What’s that?\*

**BARDELLA**

\*All of the men who’d seen the ghosts and their animals were thought to have been infected.

Everyone was wary towards them.\*

, or even

**BARDELLA**

\*A woman who has magic. And of course they’re real, otherwise there couldn’t be one in this story.\*

**CAROLINE DASH**

\*What’s a sorceress? And are they real?\*

**BARDELLA**

\*She was upset that this man didn’t love her, and presumed it was because of those strange welts across her body. The sorceress turned him into a lizard, so that he’d have scales for his own skin and he couldn’t take another woman.\*

, all the while the little girl emptying herself gradually of more language, sometimes talking with her mother for as long as it takes for the sky to brighten and for John to gently stir in his bed, and if the nights are given to forgetting what relates to the Wirrawung, then the days, by easy contrast, are for discarding Caroline’s other background, British-ness, and in this particular task she has the supervision of Adelaide Howard, their lessons typically held at an outdoor dining table, which creaks

as she presses to erase notes on the theories of Newton and Archimedes, echoes as she drums fingers whilst being led to forget capital cities, future battles of the Napoleonic wars, the proper arrangement of cutlery, each of Adelaide's long monologues giving a fresh opportunity for Caroline to unburden herself of old knowledge, so much of which she's never used in her life but had been clutching as trivia, as reassurance, and in many ways she's addicted to the lightness felt from having *less*, and becomes desperate enough for this sensation that Adelaide can't contain their lessons merely to daily meetings by the table, Caroline also appearing suddenly at the clothes-line, for instance, to forget the biography of Henry XVIII, or at the wash-house to leave behind that story of when the Israelites were lured by God into Egypt, or at the wood-shed to hear, for the last time, how James Cook will one-day bid an official farewell to the Eora, destroying a final map of the New South Wales coast-line as he sails away, and on most afternoons, during the preparations for tea, there's an hour of fleeting, random detachments at the slanted kitchen bench, Caroline hovering at the shoulders of Adelaide and Bardella, throwing away small pieces of knowledge like they're only scraps from her pockets,

***CAROLINE DASH***

Who *chose* the first princesses?

, and

***CAROLINE DASH***

Can you tell me more about the treasure chest?

, and

***CAROLINE DASH***

Would you say that parrots can *actually* talk?

, and

***CAROLINE DASH***

How many humans have there ever been?

, Adelaide stifling sighs before each of her answers, directing frustration at chopped vegetables and slabs of meat rather than at Caroline, and meanwhile Bardella only shows amusement, and the little girl flitters on the whims of her thoughts, untangling herself, getting lighter and lighter and lighter, enough to feel it's a wonder that she doesn't hover, but it's only as the weeks mature into months and new seasons that everyone appreciates how she *is*, physically, turning smaller, how she's growing

towards the ground, creeping below old notches in a door-frame, retreating into her clothes, and indeed the smaller that her body becomes the less she's concerned by its appearance, as if she's crossed a threshold and become too slight a piece of the world, now, for her pimples, her stubborn curls, and the distinction of her skin to matter, so, in turn, she fixates less on the tidiness of her ribbons and white dresses, and comes not to notice the ways in which the satellite characters of the run speak to her so *encouragingly* and are often made uncomfortable by her presence, and all of the time that she's gained in losing her old self-consciousness she spends only on launching fresh armadas of questions in the direction of Adelaide (by day) and Bardella (by night), driving both women to exhaustion until that date when John momentarily relents, suddenly allowing his daughter to spend more, then *most*, of her time with the boy Miango, a change he communicates by leaning over an empty plate at the dining table, when it's just the two of them, and saying,

### ***JOHN DASH***

If you really intend to be a smart woman, it would be best to do some more lessons. Unfortunately, you won't be able to play with Miango for a while.

, red-faced words tied to inexplicable gifts he soon receives from several Wirrawung men, namely three prime Merinos they animate themselves and deposit at the flock of Jameson Sharpe, who'll bark at first but then lose his canine tendencies for good, reaching for a shotgun as those Wirrawung men are creeping away, and in addition to sheep for John, they'll have awarded Sharpe with sanity and Caroline and Miango with the prospect of earnest friendship, meeting whenever Jackie L\*\*\*a comes to the homestead to help with un-sewing and gardening, and their greatest adventures are in wandering throughout the ironbark forest, a vast expanse of ashen pillars and knuckly terrain, and with other boys they'll look for waterholes or lizards or possums, and they'll catch heavy rocks that fly from the direction of distant kangaroos, and they'll divide to have battles with whittled branches, sealing wounds that Caroline has already explained away as incidents of falling over, and when the weather turns warm they'll choose places for swimming, Caroline taking the longest to undress beside the muddy pools, in which there's races, wrestling matches, struggles to be pressed underwater by other hands, to see the brown clouds and the downward churn of the bubbles, to hear the cracks and fuzz of liquid sound, and yet, because of a certain monster, they're never brave enough to take the convenience of swimming at that larger, closer billabong, near the house, where Caroline and Miango are instead are often shown the process of fishing by a man John calls 'Bobbie Wirrawung' – a craggy fellow, only two years old – and as they wait with short spears for offerings of bream to swim away, 'Bobbie' erases the children's impressions of that monster living in deep billabong trenches, a brooding, slippery animal with an aura that's enough to prevent any of the Wirrawung going beyond the shallows from fear of it, and often 'Bobbie' extends a finger, perhaps says,

**BOBBIE WIRRAWUNG**

\*Look *there*.\*

to the boy Miango, who's squinting, whilst Caroline nods and seems more receptive,

**CAROLINE DASH**

\*I have, already.\*

**BOBBIE WIRRAWUNG**

\*Don't look so hard. And you both might spot her.\*

**MIANGO**

\*This is ridiculous. You're only making it up.\*

**BOBBIE WIRRAWUNG**

\*She's a girl-monster. And I saw her just now. Her head peeking up from the water.\*

**MIANGO**

\*So when did you last see him?\*

, and Caroline, herself, can't judge whether she's only *deciding* her sight of the creature, painting it onto her view, because whenever they're without Bobbie and she calls Miango to the billabong, somehow knowing a true sign's about to appear, it's only after the boy has laughed and drifted away again that the monster is finally discernible, as a dark cloud beneath the water, as tufts of brown hair grazing the surface, or the curl of a tail, and it's only in her watery dreams – turned so deep now from her tiredness at the days of playing – that she can see it properly, sunning itself in a glade made by the rushes at the water's edge, unthreatening aside from its size, its mournful calls borrowed from the shouts that shepherds are making in the real-world, above the clouds, where Caroline's only a sleeping face, where Bardella walks across Dashvale in the night, now getting close enough to the Wirrawung camps that she's crossing men and women to speak with in the dark,

**BARDELLA**

\*I can't do that. They're not my sheep. He won't understand.\*

, and

**BARDELLA**



\*He's a kind man. Also, I really couldn't leave Caroline.\*

, and when she returns Caroline will still be asleep, talking to people in her dreams or to an animal that still nobody else can manage to see, though it seems right in front of her eyes, and Bardella will take to John's bed, so that it often becomes the two of *them*, now, listening for those sounds of another person across the room, John pausing awkward rhythms to re-check, and Bardella lying naked underneath, trying to catch his eyes in the dark, which often lose her body to fantasies of a large family, false pasts, and sometimes, as he begins in her, he'll press hard enough to make her believe she's feeling a key through the straw mattress, and then there's a rush towards the moment they're clothed and dry and she releases his soft penis from her hands, flooding him, cruelly, with determined thoughts of market schedules, weather, little details of the run, his every endeavour put towards continuing the attractively diminishing returns, finding ways in which he might be able to turn two-thousand head of sheep into twelve-hundred or fewer, his lofty goal to wind down his whole operation, yet to keep his land until that time he has only the most meagre influence upon it and may pack-up entirely, moving away on the thrust of an appetite for *less*, which he shares with all people, fellow colonists especially, and to this end his tireless modifications of the property are ever making things humbler, removing, for instance, the perimeter fence at the homestead, converting the wash-house to a single trough, decreasing the toilet pan, culling several rows of the vegetable garden, making imperceptible holes in thatched roofs through which the rain might rise, adjusting the legs of furniture pieces until they wobble, dismantling the dining-table altogether so that meals and gatherings are then held around the enormous surface of a padlocked sea-chest, and soon, with less sheep present on the run as projected, Jameson Sharpe, the young shepherd, famous once for barking like the collie he'd kept, comes to the main-house while John's in the process of ripping-up floorboards, and he says, abruptly,

***JAMESON SHARPE***

I certainly am.

***JOHN DASH***

Then you're a man of strong mental fibre? Because I've found this is no place for otherwise.

***JAMESON SHARPE***

I've heard that there might be some jobs going at this estate, Mr Dash. I don't mean to impose, but I've been a shepherd before, and I like the work.

, and once he's given his entire piece he's turning away from the property for good, walking without a horse over the hill and into the distance, heading back to the city to forget Dashvale and even the wide

plain on which, in a shepherd's hut, he found sanity, turned one afternoon from a dog sniffing shit on the ground, barking at the donation of three sheep, into a nervous man with a shotgun, and indeed there are others who've made drastic improvements in their time at Dashvale, like Benson Cummins slipping the hold of what had seemed an interminable sadness, and Daniel Dwyer overcoming a plague of strange nightmares that had speculated on all the horrific ways he may have been born, however Stephen Howard manages to avoid any such violent shepherding transformation, most likely from his advantage of Adelaide's prayers and twice-weekly visits, where she'll ride out to meet and lie with him, and to turn him filthy in a copper bathtub as she listens to his rancid thoughts, and yet, aside from these special evenings, he's mired in the same loneliness as the others, entertained only by the sad sheep, the drifting Wirrawung men, and by his piles of brown newspapers, small towers of events that pertain to the distant future, their faint print foretelling births of immediate politicians, for instance, and the beginnings of wars that are too far away, by geography and date, to really matter, and yet Stephen sits and re-reads each edition until he's forgotten its thin prophecies, an achievement he'll always manage to synchronise with the rare passing of hawkers, men keen to trade coppers for any unwanted newspapers, adding these to wagons otherwise full of such miscellaneous shit as broken clocks, eyeglasses, old books, cooking pans, and despite their smells and general unpleasantness these lonely vendors ambling through the landscape perhaps represent Dashvale's surest connection with the old world, indeed the fact the news they lug away is always so ahead of happening perhaps gives the district much of its sense of detachment, and on the ninth anniversary of Caroline's death it's to one of these hawker carts that she donates toy animals and a pair of boots she no longer fills, for she's ever turning smaller and skinnier, occasionally now confronting bloody milk teeth in her food or beside her pillow, which she must twist into waiting gaps in her gums, and on her eighth anniversary she gives a music-box, a jar of marbles, and a bag of toffees directly to John, and on the seventh she surreptitiously passes a possum-skin cloak she's never worn in her life to 'Bobbie Wirrawung', these gifts all being annual reminders that soon she'll have nothing, soon she'll slip away from herself, and the adults of Dashvale, as her juniors, far away from their own expiries, pretend not to feel the passing of the years so keenly and, furthermore, make efforts to ignore the significance of their milestones, to evade even the happy custom of gift-giving, with Bardella, for example, blind to the enormity of putting her pearl necklace into John's hands on the assumed date of her 30<sup>th</sup> death anniversary, and John nonchalant in giving a crisp cabbage-tree hat to Stephen Howard on the date of his 35<sup>th</sup>, meanwhile Stephen's reticent to concede a package of underwear to Adelaide for his same death-day, and Adelaide demonstrably angry as she lifts flowers and a card professing secret love from a rubbish heap, presenting these to Daniel Dwyer on the morning of her 24<sup>th</sup>, and Daniel not finding the tenderness laying behind the moment, on his 22<sup>nd</sup>, he awards a delicate portrait of himself to Benson Cummins, the picture showing an impossibly taut physique, muscles pressing into a clean shirt, fine cheekbones, full lips, a wistful expression, the entire representation so wildly inaccurate that Cummins can't even be granted any of the eternal excuse of how it's impossible to fully *capture a*

body by a painting, because an artist's assessing a different figure each time they look up from their easel, every subject growing away from how they were viewed at last glance, so that, at best, a painting's only a patchwork of accurate parts, none belonging to the same instant, and yet if thoughts such as these are over-wrung it might also be possible to doubt what's consistent in *people*, John knowing, for example, that Caroline is shorter each time he merely glances to her – so perhaps his least painful route is to never look at her again – and that Bardella, in his midnight arms, is never the very same woman, a fact that would only be remarkable if he, on any two occasions, was surely the same man, and thus, despite eager shows of faithfulness, they're really making love to different people all of the time, although if the intervals are short then the marks of their disguises are as good as invisible, their respective visions too blurry and lustful to find the callouses, disappeared sunspots, smoothing brows that might prove the other person as an impostor, as a new partner, and yet if there's a long hiatus, from John's travel, for instance, or Bardella periodically prioritising her night-time walking, then there'll be greater risk in presenting oneself, naked, for inspection, in being frisked and probed, each heart pounding more nervous in its cage, each pair of hands rushing to tantalise and distract, concealing disguise upon disguise upon disguise, while searching for changes in the other, such as loosening scars and rising thighs and buttocks, such as the rescindment of an entire grey swipe in John's hair, his body drastically improving as he's more taken by thoughts of having another child, as he gets further away from an old concession of having turned infertile, of a large Christian family being beyond him, and yet once several more years recede without a baby, both John and Bardella perhaps sense, after all, a ruse to their bond, and begin treating each other in bed with greater suspicion, so that soon whenever eyes meet in the throes there are brilliant sparks of unfamiliarity and occasional lurches as a circle of skin decides it's never met these fingers, this tongue, in this way, and in their own depths they'd admit to finding something intoxicating about the way that John now slides off Bardella's dresses, exposing her, and rushes to lock these clothes inside an old sea-chest like they were never hers to be wearing, the course of their shared lust heightening yet meandering towards its end, drifting closer to the night when Bardella's final gasp comes especially sharp, pressing her eyes shut, and she touches John very gently, considerately, whilst they work together at clothing him again, not careful enough, however, to prevent his tears drifting off the dirt-floor, and so for a while she comforts him, their shadows merging amidst the candle-light, but it's only when he's finally alone, halved, that he takes a single page from the padlocked sea-chest and removes the words it had borne, crying louder now, though he manages not to disturb the sleeping Caroline, who dreams at the other end of the house of a billabong creature that's shifting too, like everything else in the world, lying calmer on its mythic shore, body also smaller, and thin limbs now apparent beneath long and unruly fur, its plaintive gaze never falling on Caroline as it readies to slip towards the billabong again, this steady dream, of a monster in a glade, continuing well beyond even the last time Caroline hears a vague murmur of the legend, when she has only three years left, and

she's at the very end of her Christianity and much of her comprehension, her hair extremely wet as John carries her into the billabong, wading to the level of his shins as Bardella's calling out,

### **BARDELLA**

It's not smart. The creature's *real*, you know.

, yet beside her Stephen and Adelaide don't add to the protests, are quietly engrossed by this homespun bush sacrament, and John wastes no time in tossing water across Caroline's face, drying her, snatching a few pivotal words from the air, and thus frees the girl of her religion, so that there might be no pretensions as to where she'll go when she dies, and even as Caroline maybe hears Bardella's pleas, about a monster, she's calm to be within the grasp of the billabong like this, and silent as its traces wash across her forehead, and when John returns them to the dry-land, he sees how there are Wirrawung spectators standing at the opposite shore, watching quietly, perhaps hoping for a grisly end to the sheep run, recent attempts at giving John several tomahawks to encourage his leaving having failed, and so these items will be kept for another 8 years, after which time they'll be more graciously accepted by surveyors, the last white stragglers who'll ever travel through former Dashvale, but even in *this* year, 1844, there's steady progress across the full country towards a departure of the Europeans, the number of pastoral runs shrinking as many squatters straighten legs and track to more compact lives in the cities, and although the landmass of Dashvale is yet to diminish, there's now only four hundred sheep and, with Daniel Dwyer and Benson Cummins having left, a massive decline in the white population, which only turns more serious as Adelaide begins work on her own departure, dismantling her mudbrick dwelling with Stephen's help, scraping off layers from the walls with a trowel, removing the few pieces of furniture, carrying timber rafters back into the forest and piecing them into the shape of a tree, and they kiss furtively, briefly clutching each other with intimacy as they labour, and John, watching from behind his windows, is jealous until that couple eventually travels to Melbourne on a single horse, and two weeks later is excited to find that Stephen returns as a bachelor, although, with Adelaide's absence, John must take most responsibility for Caroline's education, and he's the one to help her forgetting of such basic things as the process of toileting, the tastes of certain foods, the art for making oneself grimy in the copper bucket at the back of the house, and, perhaps most significantly, the skill of reading, which she loses through first forgetting the ability to track short sentences, then conceding the meanings of simple words, many pertaining to things she can't ever remember seeing – 'fox', 'ham', 'cat', 'ball' – and although it's a longer process for each alphabet piece to turn unremarkable, she achieves this in time, driven forward by her father's insistence that she can't expect to lose *everything* unless she does away with her capacity to read and erase, and indeed, when she achieves it, only a few months before Bardella manages the same, so much of Caroline's world turns wonderfully inaccessible, there suddenly being many things she can't be expected to worry about, John doing all of the reading and erasing for three

of them, and Caroline hardly thinking to envy this responsibility when she finds him sometimes crying as he erases a sheet he's taken from the sea-chest, and yet there's still the problem of language itself, words burning as images in her mind, even without the tinder of letter-shapes, and very often there'll be a coincidence of English and Wirrawung, two words applying to the same picture, a mangy collie evoking sounds of 'dog' and '\*dog\*', an eruption in the sky making 'thunder' and '\*thunder\*', her father's expression as he pines at windows both 'sad' and '\*sad\*', those two languages existing side by side in Caroline but rarely intertwining, because even at this age she understands their permitted contexts, English with John, the Wirrawung tongue with Bardella, and so the race to see which she'll lose first doubles as a game of which parental relationship might be drained quickest, John taking an easy lead by filling daytime conversation with enormous amounts of English to be blithely forgotten, Bardella, in the nights, going slower, and yet it's hardly acknowledged that Caroline hosts one of the last minds in which Wirrawung and English will ever drift in such close consort, attaching to so many of the same ideas, so that, with her gone, the best substitute is a secret book, a leather-bound dictionary of sorts, hiding beneath moaning love letters in John's impenetrable sea-chest, the florid handwriting of this book's pages comparing vast quantities of the two languages, making an exhaustive compendium of all words noble, abrupt, anatomical, sensuous, explicit, the linguist having been attentive enough to find even those cases where a single word in one tongue translates a clumsy phrase in the other, giving the tome much of its heft, turning it into one of the weightiest things in the house, although Caroline's never seen it, never will, and wouldn't care for it much by now, anyway, when she's so close to losing all speech, her last word coming on a particularly sweltering morning, and Bardella anticipates it, sitting beside Caroline with a pannikin of water until the girl says, triumphantly, maybe knowing it's the end herself,

### **CAROLINE DASH**

**\*Drink\*!**

, and from here, *all* of the pictures in her mind might float alone, unexplained, turning her dreams chaotic, because she lacks words to deter the characters in her nightmares or to call out to that swamp creature who occasionally still lurks in the distance, and if this is the emptiness she's always been looking for, then it's not as blissful as she'd hoped, because although she's lost the congestion of knowledge and trivia, she's left to *feel* more than she has in years, hot and uncomfortable feelings that she no longer has the words to explain, and so her only option can be to burst into passionate crying, the wildest she's ever managed in her life, so that suddenly a scratch on a finger or a piece of bread too high on a shelf should be grounds for her distress, and she becomes so demanding that Bardella hardly has opportunities to go walking in the night, and so feeble that she doesn't find it patronising to be taken into another's arms and carried, especially given her kneecaps have fallen away, leaving only strands of cartilage and making it difficult for her to walk, not to mention how distances have been

enlarged by the shrinking of her legs, which means that now her time with the boy Miango is spent playing with white-skinned dolls in cordoned sections of the house, veritable old people's enclosures, Caroline, larger and stronger in old age, occasionally pulling Miango off the floor, perhaps wanting to upset him so she can see she's not the only one resorting to those vile screams, and sometimes, for the sake of their supervision, their playing is in the vicinity of the vegetable patch, as their mothers work alongside Wirrawung men and women who've traded damper and alcohol for the chance at contributing to the slow demise of the station, and whenever these workers plead that Bardella leave the property, run away, taking Caroline with her, she'll say,

### **BARDELLA**

\*I couldn't. He wants too much to be the father\*...

, which is somewhat true, but it's now Caroline's final year and her relationship with John is especially small – she's forgotten a great deal about him – and he spends as much time *praying* for her as he does cooing and smiling beside her cot, otherwise devoting himself to the maintenance of sheep, or to gazing out of the windows, intensely, hardly noticing the cries Caroline makes because she's fallen, because she wants food, because her skull is cracking and the pieces drift apart like continental plates, because she's woken one morning and her hands are separate animals, floating in front of her, she forgets the things she might control, she's still *feeling* more than she ever has, barely able to contain an emotion, and oddly enough John might be experiencing something similar, his restlessness suddenly brewing into a tempest, to the extent that he can't spend an idle moment in a chair unless he's dragged it to that window, and soon he begins to spend long days away, on horseback, searching for an answer, weary in the night-times because he's about to travel to nearby stations and inns and towns, asking his question, growling it even to Wirrawung men he meets on the path, and when he returns, in the mornings, Bardella will see how his agitation has only grown across the many hours that she's sat alone with the tiny girl in an overheating house, the building having almost reached its humblest extent, now, with the walls creaking from brief surges of the wind, and even the brick fireplace in a state of deconstruction, a pile of its old pieces paused in the yard, and although it's only her and Caroline in the days, Bardella can hear presages of John's monologues throughout the house, can see trails of his upcoming anxiety as footprints on the matted earth floor, and she gets so afraid of him, by this time, that she won't even sleep beside the baby, even though it needs her, even though it now only contributes food to her breasts, and instead she spends the evenings in Wirrawung camps, returning by the daylight before John's made his departures, yet there comes a morning when she's very late, she's rushing towards the house, not judging his silent presence, and as she quickly lifts Caroline from her basket, cradles her, he's shouting,

### **JOHN DASH**

\*Stop\*! What are you doing? Put her down!

, like only now, after all those years of disguises, he's realised that she's someone he doesn't know, like it's suddenly clear to him that this woman is only trying to replace another he's left ahead, and yet after those shouts, Bardella puts the extremely elderly child to a breast, becomes lost in contemplation of the tiny body, its vulnerability, its little brown toes and fingers, the fissures in its skin, and she's so absorbed by this sight she doesn't notice John relenting, doesn't hear his steps or the dreadful thunder of the hooves, moving away, doesn't hear the breeze or the women calling or the birdsongs, because she's looking down at the girl, and her body's murmuring with sad memories, very recent, of another child that had merely lived in her womb, and she remembers those kicks of its brief quickening, proofs of life that she's yet to even *feel*, but anticipates, and the only way to connect with her broken future, she knows, is to put this baby, the one in her hands, the one that's begun to cry a little, back into the wicker basket, very tentatively, and to creep away from this corner of the room, this house entirely, to pick-up the armful of food that's been waiting at the door, to walk across the cleared ground of the homestead even as that child's cries are getting louder, so piercing now that even currawong seem to crane at the situation, and so pitiful that Bardella must eventually pause at the cusp of the forest, peering down at the wattle-and-daub building she's left behind for good, the child's crying magnified by the little cavern it's pitched inside, with no other person seeming to respond to the abandonment, the only one who *might*, who's capable of help, being this woman whose eyes appraise the scene, and yet she turns away, walking with her bundle through the forest and through the morning, and it's almost the time of year when wildflowers lift and the plains soften, and Caroline lies alone until John finally returns, dismounts his horse as a picture of agitation, having spent the morning calling a name, chasing poor Wirrawung men to ask his question, and now he's searching all of the nooks that might be found close to the house – though there aren't many, by this time – and checking on the girl occasionally, unable to prevent the crying, thinking only to tuck her against his body, which has thick sweat rising all over it, and when he puts her down he's searching again, standing beneath the awning of the house, scanning the property as best he can, calling that name, wishing for eyes that might survey all of the world in a glance, or at least *guidance* from that one being with such a view, and there's only so long that John can continue like this, he's exhausting himself, and once he strays too close to his bed he collapses and falls asleep, Caroline soon going quiet in the basket, as well, and it's that near-Christmas stage for red suns, clean horizons, frogs in the mud, and in the dark a stillness presses onto the land – there's not even a breeze – and it would seem as though time itself takes a pause, a minute holding fast to its ledge in a pocket-watch, no souls awake to say that this shouldn't be possible, and in a way it might be kinder for us to pretend that it really *is*, to stop our hurtling through a relentless moment, to decide this as the end of Dashvale – even though the name remains stuck on the land like a tar – and to press hard, now, against the future to prevent it spilling into view, but of course we can't, it creeps forward, we think we're holding it back

but it wins as an ant scuttling across the cool ground, as a leaf twitching slowly, as a single bubble forming on the surface of a moonlit billabong and falling into the dark, so we must concede, and one bubble turns to two turns to a million, all of them rushing into the depths, quietly, as a figure's coming to the top, long brown hair like seaweed tendrils drying as it breaks the surface, the eyes closed, arms flailing enough to push the pale body back towards the bank, and soon the feet graze mud and they lift away from the lake-bed, drying the chest and shoulders, and when the woman opens her eyes she sees her whole impending life before she even notices the moon and how it makes a path across the water, leading her back through the trees and to the huts and the pile of bricks and the house, as if they're features she doesn't already know, and when she's properly clear of the billabong, for the first time, a nightdress unglues itself from a swollen belly, and she moves slowly via the bricks to that house where she's about to spend two years, where now the baby and John remain asleep – he's a heavy sleeper, she knows – and he doesn't move as she lies across the bed beside him, very calmly, staring-up at the makeshift ceiling and then turning towards him precisely as his arms are opening to catch her, and now she's so close to his body that she can't even see it, and she feels the change in those arms holding her, for the first time, his grip tightening, becoming more desperate as he gets closer to waking, and when he does he's kissing her, for the first time, kissing her lips and the space between her brows, and there are love-words lingering around her ears that he catches and reels,

***JOHN DASH***

You can't say that, anymore. We'll be okay. I treasure you, and that's enough.

***SARAH DASH***

John, I'm sorry.

, and although she's arrived as an amateur linguist – a very dedicated one – she can't better convey herself, and she feels, as well, tears trembling inside her ducts that won't ever break, and then John's arms go tighter still, trapping his wife, until it does seem a great deal of time has passed and he heads over to his sea-chest, upon whose lid an old certificate waits, whilst the little girl sleeps in the basket nearby, indiscernible, so that John can't see the rheum around her eyes and the freshness of her shrivelled night-time skin, her shrivelled skin, her skin, but he listens to her small breathing, distinguishing it from Sarah's heavier sounds, as with each slice of a quill he erases more from the words *Caroline Rae Dash* at the top of the certificate sheet, thinking of descendants, unnamng the girl as a mark of her final week, collecting all of the ink and stirring it back into its well, and then, with barely a pause, he moves to the line below and takes *Dashvale* away as the birthplace, and *this*, finally, is when the enormous letters rise from the land, emerging from the grasses and soils and streams in which they'd always lingered amongst other titles, imperceptibly, E-L-A-V-H-S-A-D,



those pieces shrink enough to gather in his mind, and soon they'll leave, remarkably, for that place where old thoughts go,