Rush

She wakes in pain, flint-sharp against her cheek, in a darkness with more substance than night. Her thoughts are grit, a rubble of words:

What. Hard. What. Move. Black. What. What.

And then a coherent thought, a memory:

Melanie.

She forms the word in her mouth, tries to say it, but her voice is just a croak.

Stunned to find that she cannot move her head more than a few centimetres without skinning the bones of her face, she pants into solid rock and tries to think where? and how? To slow her thudding pulse. To see. By flexing the muscles of her forehead and blinking away the dust, she is able to force her eyes upwards.

Weak light filters down the shaft, picking out flecks of ironstone, a few fibrous knots of root, the remains of ancient webs swaying as though recently sundered.

She resists a shudder. Spiders are the least of her worries.

She is entombed.

On the road to Kalgoorlie

Their parents believe they are in Dunsborough, safe, seaside Dunsborough, where there are bakeries and antique shops, where A-frame family holiday homes of the 1960s are being overtaken by sprawling faux-rustic dwellings glistening with litres of Estapol and reproduction brass fittings. There are surf shacks and caravan parks, too, with shared amenities and shared odours, and if Sandra and Melanie had joined the leavers in Dunsborough, they would have chosen these less desirable places. But their parents believe there is *safety in numbers*, in spite of annual newspaper reports of young women binge drinking and dabbling in designer drugs and leaving themselves vulnerable to predators of all kinds. You have to wonder, Sandra tells Melanie, that they still find so much innocence in seaside resorts and distant memories of what it's like for *young people letting off steam*.

It goes without saying that these parents would never have consented had they known of the detour their daughters had in mind.

Sandra and Melanie drive east into the red dust, and as they watch bush turn into scrub, scrub into saltbush, it feels like they are beginning to shed their high-school skins. Melanie's car, a 1981 Torana with stone-chipped side-mirrors and a sloppy gearbox, causes their pulses to race on the odd occasion when the gears judder out of fourth and have to be crunched back in, but the nonchalance of each girl in the presence of the other will allow no more than the slight raising of an eyebrow. Equanimity, at seventeen-closer-to-eighteen, is a valued possession.

Her immediate concerns are corporeal. She becomes aware of her hands, balled and twisted, fingers pushing into flesh. One is behind her, just above waist level; the other, crossing her heart. 'Toes,' she tells herself, with the studied concentration of a yoga teacher, but this veneer of calm vanishes when there is no response. She cannot feel her toes. She cannot feel her legs.

Squinting upwards again, she experiences a flash of skewed déjà vu. This is all upside down. She remembers standing up there with the sun at her back, peering down into the gloom of this shaft and an impenetrable superstructure of web, its suspension from wall to wall silted by years of dust. It must have been torn into these shreds by her fall.

Her brain shifts suddenly with a new revelation. She knows, she remembers, that she did not fall.

(It's a blessing that she feels no pain from the waist down, for there is no balm to soothe wounds like these.

He broke her open like a wishbone.)

Old Kanowna Cemetery

The tourist signboard at Kanowna's original graveyard tells the story of the Cemetery Rush of 1897, when the Minister for Mines took his chances with the wrath of God and realigned the reserve boundary to allow prospectors to fossick among the headstones. At the drop of Sergeant Smith's dainty white handkerchief, a thousand men rushed the cemetery reserve, pegging the ground, sinking shafts, bickering over disputed boundaries that would test the mettle of the Mining Warden responsible for legalising their claims.

Men made fortunes in between the fifty-eight bodies slumbering in their sectarian strips, newly fenced off from hillocks of waste and yawning shafts. When the gold ran out,

government workers carted away the low white picket fences. But the living had left a legacy of disrespect for the dead: headstones cracked from the blows of pickaxe and shovel to the earth, wrought-iron railings buckled from collisions with barrows, and the broken bottles and broken dreams that make up the debris of an abandoned diggings.

Sandra stands reading the signboard in the shade of a spindly she-oak, fanning herself with a tourist guide. She and Melanie have just driven through the ghost town of Kanowna. They'd stared in disbelief at the disparity between that vast expanse of nothing and the Hollywood western images conjured up by the term 'ghost town'. Apart from a few timber planks the guidebook *says* were part of the platform of the railway siding, all there was to see was a neat road grid, as smart and fresh as a newly marked suburban subdivision, and a series of Heritage Trail markers outlining where the bones of the town once were: hotels, banks, churches, the Kanowna Electric Light and Power Station, the White Feather Brewing Co., Alex Cairnduff's Barber and Fancygoods, Mahony's Dining Room, the Caledonian Society. Once the auriferous quartz and the deep cement leads were exhausted, all these civic and commercial buildings had been packed up and spirited away to more prosperous places in the Eastern Goldfields or the burgeoning Wheatbelt. At the zenith of the town's existence in 1898, when it was called White Feather, Kanowna had served the needs of twelve thousand souls, eclipsing even Kalgoorlie, but it had been dismantled like a jigsaw, and even the ghosts had abandoned it now.

Sandra knows where they fled.

This place—the original cemetery—is a proper home for ghosts. Its silence is insistent, overpowering the click

of crickets, the snap of twigs beneath runners. It's hard to imagine the raucous chaos of a thousand hearts pounding with the smell of gold. The gold has now gone, but there are remains here—of consecration, of desecration.

The shaft begins to whisper, a voice from the rock. Not human; it is as though the rock itself speaks.

Sandra's face is alternating between pins and needles and numbness. Terrified that the numbness will become permanent, she blinks again, stretches her jawbone, winces as her lips pop like blisters.

It's dark. It could be night. Perhaps she is dreaming.

Atonal whispers rush up and down the shaft. What do you want? she thinks. The earth responds, the voices become louder, and one separates from the others. An oriental lilt. A girl's voice.

Through the confusion, a moment of sudden, reassuring clarity. She cannot be hearing a spirit voice, she must be dreaming, because in the time of the gold rush, those days of White Australia, Asians could not be buried on consecrated ground.

Old Kanowna Cemetery

Sandra and Melanie walk among the ruins, stirring the past with the soles of their shoes. They have the place to themselves. It's too early in the season for mums and dads in four-wheel-drives grizzling with kids, and too early in the day for retirees 'doing the Fields' in their deluxe campervans.

Waste dumps erupt from the scrub like oversized anthills, eroded low over time, their kaolin-white seams rusting in the sun. You can still make out the two graveyard rows—one Catholic, one Protestant—among the former workings.

There are several recognisable shrines, with stone plinths, plaques inscribed in Gothic script, and enclosures of cast-iron friezework—the remains of the fledgling town's elite. Once rising imposingly, a symbol of solid reputations and sterling deeds, they are now small beneath the salmon gums, vulnerable in their isolation.

The large marble ledger weighting the bones of John Minden Caulfield is broken, like the heart of his friend Richard Baugh, who accidentally shot him in 1896.

The tourist guide tells visitors that Apothecary Baugh had dispensed toilet requisites, disinfectants and pharmaceutical preparations. Seidlitz powder was popular on the Fields for purging sluggish bowels overburdened by a diet of bully beef. And then there was the famous Barcoolorum Ointment, *worth its weight in nuggets and proved to be the best healing ointment extant*. Sandra wonders whether Baugh believed in what he sold. His Elixir of Life had not saved Caulfield, whose body crashed into the spinifex at Lake Gwynn, the spine severed by a bullet meant for a duck.

The public library was named after Caulfield, intended as a lasting measure of respect, but this slab of stone on the lonely outskirts of a ghost town has proven more resilient, surviving the Caulfield Memorial Library and Kanowna itself.

> There is no end to the sky
> And the stars are everywhere
> And time is eternity
> And the Here is over there

Sandra reaches out to trace the inscription, but hesitates. Time has so far spared the words dedicated to Caulfield by his

friend; she does not want the secretions of her skin to hasten their demise. She takes off the bandana tied around her neck and gently brushes away the sand that has all but obscured the age-old symbols of the monumental mason: a wreath of ivy overlain by the Christian cross.

Less enduring are the graves of the poor. Now just mounds of earth, they would once have borne crosses of perishable wood. Here and there are modest stone markers, some weathered smoothly anonymous; others still staking a claim for the passage of life through this place. The headstones of Rita Ida Bohan, aged six months, and Baby Boy Chapman are heartbreakingly small.

Melanie has torn sheets of thin paper from her sketchbook and is gently tracing the letters of a headstone with a soft lead pencil.

Hardly any of them give cause of death, she remarks. *Listen to this:*

> In memory of my Dear Son,
> James Dunn,
> who died at White Feather
> January 1895,
> aged 34 years.
> By his Loving Mother.

Died of what, I wonder.

Sandra wants to clasp her hands over her ears but she is trapped. There are more voices now, angry words—a clamour of invective pouring out of the earth. James Dunn, using words that would shock

his Loving Mother. William Clarke, Beloved Husband of Marie. George G. Grieve, father of Alex, Andrew and Robert, Painters and Signwriters of Isabella Street. John Minden Caulfield.

Catholic and Protestant voices, the eminent and the lowly, united against one who does not register on any social scale.

Gradually, they merge: 'Get-out-get-out-get-out …'

Old Kanowna Cemetery

Sandra straightens up, her eye drawn to an apparition shimmering along the dirt track into the cemetery grounds. Light strikes the spokes of two wheels, sending sun-stars arcing over and over the tyre prints left by the Torana.

They'd passed the lone cyclist hours ago, just out of Kal, before the Kanowna turnoff: a threshing of sweat and limbs and gravel-dust, one arm saluting in acknowledgment of some early-morning road-user fellowship. Melanie had raised a cynical eyebrow and muttered something about *no-sense-no-feeling.*

Sandra resents the intrusion of this stranger, sensing an end to her peaceful communing with the dead. But as the man strides over towards the signboard, filling the space between her and the car, her skin begins to cool and prickle. She shrugs it off and moves out of the shade, tipping her face to the warmth. When she opens her eyes and glances back, the man is no longer by the signboard. She can't see where he has gone. She walks across to Melanie, who is writing notes on her tracings, and kneels beside her.

Can we go now? she says quietly.

Why? I want to do a few more, work out what some of the symbols mean.

This place is creeping me out.

But Melanie's only response is a withering eye-roll. Sandra sits back on her heels, thinking longingly of morning tea, somewhere else.

Neither girl hears the rubber soles from behind.

Melanie's head lurches forward, her mouth rounding in surprise as blood stencils the sheet of paper in her hands.

The melodic voice rises above the chanting.

'I do not belong here,' a girl says, 'but they had to put my body somewhere. So I am here, see?, with my betters, these pillars of the community, whose families wrote letters to newspaper. Yum Yum of Yokohama, they called us. Vile almond-eyed harpies. Not ornamental on the streets of Kanowna. I know what they think I am. But I know what respectable men are. They come to Japanese quarter at night, lay on cigar divans, drink and smoke. When they are liquored up, they speak sugar-words but their eyes are dead and we see reflections of animals in them—ourselves, like beasts. It was hushed up, see?, when that pack of boys—sons of these men—broke in. Our house. Our end of Isabella Street. The sergeant, he took notes. No harm done. Just young men letting off steam. You know, yes? As for us, what else could we expect? That policeman, he wrinkled his nose, he nudged broken glass with toe of his boot. "Young hoodlums" is what he said. Smiling. Like it was nothing. He asked Osugo about the blood, but she pointed at broken window, her bandaged hand, said nothing about what they had done to me. I hid in bough shed, hid myself away, but I knew they would come back for me. Disposable, see? Not found in town census, not part of St Saviour congregation. Not seen in queues at bakery, at grocery store.

'I fought when they pushed my head into the flour sack, but too much blood lost, not enough air. I woke face down, slung across the

back of a horse. I knew that tall boy, the one who whistled "Sunshine and Rain"—they say his father used to work the old cemetery—and when they pitched me down into earth I knew it was here they had brought me. Pauper's grave, new tenant in hallowed ground, neighbour of those who despised me. What lack of respect these boys showed their elders.

'And now you, with your bleeding lips and your broken body. Where do you belong? You hear what they are saying. What manner of girl are you who would come to this place? Who knows you are here? What did you expect?'

Sandra tries to move her lips. She wants to protest: Why shouldn't I come here?

The world is skewed …

This is all upside down …

She knows her mother has a secret wish—the guilty, unspoken dream of all Loving Mothers—to wrap her up in cottonwool and keep her safe forever. 'Don't be in such a rush to grow up.' He is out there, feeding these fears, and he has turned her into nothing more than a warning to every little girl who colours outside the lines.

Her anger cracks open like a melon.

(Who knows she is here?

No-one.)

Old Kanowna Cemetery

She is pulled to consciousness slowly as the sun forces its way beneath closed lids. Her eyes water and she would give anything for her sunglasses, which are close by, somewhere, broken.

Raising her head a little, she sees the boot of the Torana fly up. He is heaving something into it. His bicycle, perhaps. A thud. Too heavy, too densely unmetallic, for a bicycle.

He is striding back.

Tears scald her face and the sun blackens.

He is dragging her body through the litter of eucalypt leaves, towards the shaft, past the sign warning tourists about depth and danger.

He is breathing savagely.

He has not said a single word.

Her body is exhausted, like this claim, by the violence it has seen. Fatigue is setting her body into a mould of ironstone. All she can do is listen, though she does not want to listen, or to think, any more. But the girl has been silent for too many years, erased from history. There is no Japanese quarter on the Heritage Trail. There is no inscription to mark her grave. Her singsong voice rises above the refrain of get-out-get-out echoing in the rush of white noise that is, perhaps, death.

Sandra begins to seal. 'Melanie,' she murmurs.

And she feels herself falling.

And the stars are everywhere.

And time is eternity.

Snapping suddenly alert, she strains to hear beyond the confusion of voices from the rock, because now there is another sound.

Footsteps. A crunching of baked earth and dry leaves. Coming towards the shaft.

If it is him, what will he do if he knows she is still alive?

If it is not him … She dares not complete that thought, but a bubble of hope fizzes through her.

The footsteps cease. She holds her breath. Someone is standing at the mouth of the shaft.

She waits.