

Luke Stegemann

THE GARDEN OF MORVEN

In the shadow of her illness, and in defiance of it, young Happilene had been hitchhiking coast to coast. The continent, as it will, had had the better of her. On maps the lines to take had looked straight enough; once on the ground roads veered, tracks petered into mazy byways and rounded gullies, paths led to shapeless flatlands. Like so many before, she had become lost in endless grasses. Quickly enough she no longer knew where she was: perhaps the land was changing, moving underneath her even as she walked? She stood at odd angles of rural crossroads, hypotenuse choices all leading out to horizons under torn reaches of blue-white sky. The geometry of distances had thrown her altogether; she half suspected the low percussion detected somewhere in the air was the sound of plates stirring, the land itself complaining of this latest skinshift, a creaking metamorphosis as the country shrugged off one appearance and took on another, gullies and tree clusters rearranging, fences realigning, rivers slyly turning their headwaters to confound her in her journey. Highways, under such circumstances, meant next to nothing, and she might have wandered always blind, had it not been for the encounter with Bells.

The day before, Happilene had jumped off a ute tray and into tall scrub by the creek beyond Mungalalla. With a couple of words the driver had disappeared around a long bitumen curve; exhausted, Happilene had slept off the afternoon at the base of a tree, waking to find the evening stretched in long orange across the sky. She drank water, ate mandarins, and waited. As no-one came, she rose later under a moon and stumbled unobserved across a cattle grid. "Tregole National Park" claimed a gunshot sign, under which an unknown hand had scratched into the paint: The Garden of Morven.

Night grew. A scrap of blanket went onto a flattened section of earth; Happilene lay dreamless and content under the shining leaves of the ooline trees, staring into the black fruit of the sky, stardrunk, her body on the border between the brigalow and mulga lands, unbothered by the prospect of ants or night spiders. She realised she was absolutely and purely lost; no co-ordinates or battered signs could help her. Yet anxieties fell away into the midnight dew and the night passed, dense with ancient caw and yawp. She lay entranced, succoured by the belly of the sky. The landscape was both mighty cloak and wall, making her invisible, keeping the world of illness at bay, unable to penetrate the present mythology of ooline and the primordial muttering of fauna. Happilene was soothed, caressed, made infinitely welcome by the harping dark.

At dawn she awoke, and had never been calmer. The night's chatter and gurgle gave way to birdsong and gently spreading blue wings of sky. Her head began to drift into wider spaces, amongst trees dotted in a slow hillside rash. Drinking great draughts of morning air she shuffled off along a walking track, up and down with the semi-arid dips and rises of the mulga ridges. She was acutely aware of the tang of lime bush; ooline black orchids sprang like furious clumps of hair from the trunks of certain trees. She stared into the wild and furry mouths of calyx and sepal, acknowledged the moist nodding of orchids. In this random, lost tract of the continent was an intimation of perfection. If only she could get something to eat she would settle right here, amongst these silver trees. Her eyes were full of light.

Then there was Bells, propped up against an old Falcon, cursing birds.

At first Happilene suspected an apparition had risen from the morning vapours. Where the end of the track widened out into a species of clearing stood an unusual, bulky shape, neither wild boar, nor kangaroo, nor mailbox: a human figure, clutching the side of a clapped-out car. A bearded creature stood in roasting stillness, huge, bound in dirty leather skin and sealed in dust; sun-hammered, his feet were planted firmly in the orange earth. He was willing her towards him: his presence and the manner in which his limbs grew out of the burning ground demanded it.

Happilene stepped forward, spellbound, closer, it was now apparent, to his great ugliness. The figure was a twisted mass of lumpy skin and oddly angled bones; he was patchy, and scratched, and poorly panel-beaten into clothes of a coarse material the colour of rain-starved gum leaves. He gave every appearance of being an escapee from some incarceration, or perhaps a sun-maddened botanist.

The man-creature reached out to open a car door as if in invitation to a guest; sentry-posted Major Mitchell cockatoos began shrieking. Happilene felt not the slightest danger. Quite the contrary, it was as if this man-creature had come specifically to pick her up.

"Are you here for me?" she asked, preferring to be direct.

There was a faint nod. "So what have you seen in The Garden of Morven?" he asked, or demanded, looking at her from large green eyes.

"Is that where I am? Not much," Happilene replied lazily, ignoring the blissful morning walk she had just enjoyed. "I'm just passing through. I'm only here by accident."

"Not much? You didn't see much?" The voice became agitated, great limbs slowly wheeling into motion.

"Well, no, not much. Orchids. Sand. What else is there?"

"*Not much* you say? The Garden of Morven is bloody full of magic. And you missed it."

"It's a peaceful place."

"Bugger the peace. This whole zone, this land," — he was moving away from the car, signalling with a brutal arm — "has everything." He tried, unsuccessfully, to trap a string of spit back into his mouth and ended up biting on air. It seemed to irritate him. "You've got your pilliga; you've got the mulga business for miles on end. You've got your brigalow, your river systems. You've got the wildlife all the way to the Birdsville track, and then some. You've got the barking owl," he barked himself, sweat streaming down his irregular face, "the turquoise parrot, bush stone curlew, black-striped wallaby, the lot." He was counting them off, these strange presences, on badly deformed fingers. "The wild orange, the oolines, the black orchids, the rosewood, the sandalwood, the bluebush, the bitterbark, the gargaloo, the cockatoos, the inland taipan," he was singing, "...this is where the channels start, young lady. This is where it all goes infinite. Here we are on the edge of the most wonderful site on earth. *Not much?*" He snorted. "Paradise not good enough for you? Eh? Well I'll tell you what, it's good enough for me. It is me. This is my home! I *am* the landscape."

The last few words went reverberating around the clearing. Tree-like, massy, the giant was claiming: "Not in it, but of it. Not a spectator, but a being. I *am*," he once more stated his bold claim, "the landscape."

The cockatoos, either in agreement or anger, were tearing the air with screams. Too stunned to speak, Happilene was simply wondering if, in the midst of his beloved landscape, he might find her some food.

"The gidgee woodland, the canegrass, the emu apple; the ironwood, red ash, wilga, the samphire plants, the mulga parrot, the orange chat, fantails, egrets, spoonbills, terns," — he had long run out of fingers but was doubling, even tripling up, and using other odd protuberances from his burnt skin as if they too were past or future limbs — "apostlebirds, burrowing frogs, dunnarts, planigales, shingleback lizards, box-patterned geckos, skinks, kites, hawks, wedge-tailed eagles... what do you reckon? Should I go on?"

Her silence suggested he might, and that she would consent, for she was beginning to lose herself in the heady taxonomy. The man-creature's beard was dripping with a strange fatty substance.

"Bastard cockatoos," he returned abruptly to the immediate and shrieking present. "As if they weren't enough, a bush chook stole my bread last night."

Happilene, in her hunger, was truly sympathetic.

"Christ, I'd just walked a few yards away to take a piss and there it was, jerking along, ripping off half my bloody dinner." He jerked his own body, scowling.

"And breakfast?" Happilene thought to suggest.

There was no response to that, other than warm air from the bellows of his chest. Then he added: "You don't know The Garden of Morven?"

All was space and heat.

"Nuh. No."

They began to walk slowly along a bush track, away from the nest of grumpy cockatoos. The ground spread out to bright red soil and smudged vegetation on either side of them — ghost sticks rising from sandy blood, battalions of skinny, bark-quilted arms reaching up from the underworld to grasp at light. The man, or eucalyptus trunk, trailed with him a smell of burning branches. His skin, where it showed through the rags, was smoked and mottled. Happilene was staring at him, gently. She couldn't, she wouldn't, take her eyes off him.

"Bells," he offered, finally, into the silence of the growing morning around them.

"G'day." Happilene smiled; few expressions in any language can say so much so briefly. Her eyes seemed to light up like purple, spinning stars.

An envelope of stained flesh was presented as a hand, sticky with gum sap. "I'm warning you, I've got a bad head. Probably from those bloody birds in me ear all morning." With which, he tilted his head back, a great living organ, gross and ponderous, held aloft by thick ropes of neck muscle. "Anyway, this is where I belong." Bells was claiming the scene like a nineteenth-century surveyor, but rather than commercial possession he seemed more intent on eternal vows. All around were muted colours: the cinnamon browns, the washed-out clays, the dishwater green of native briery; the intricacy of thorn and taper, the splendid curve of grass; the wooded ridges leaning away into the distance, thick with

Pleistocene anomalies. "I've walked it, believe me. I've slept it, worked it. I've gone down on my knees and begged it, kissed it, cursed it. I *am* the landscape."

Happilene wondered if she had not actually noticed his car stuck there, on an embankment of sand, the night before.

"How, exactly... are you the landscape?"

"The flora, mate. The fauna. The sky and the rivers. The patterns. The whole bloody skin. It keeps me company, always. And to be honest, it's all I've got."

"Doesn't make it... *you* though, does it?" Happilene made a leap: "Maybe you just mean you're in love?"

"What, with the bloody land?" He seemed suddenly scornful.

"You've kissed it, you've begged it. That's love."

Bells twitched. "Don't get me wrong," — he fixed her with a belligerent green gaze — "if I need a pay cheque and the only job going's driving a bulldozer through all this lot, I'm the man. I'll do it." He swept his arm out, laying waste with his imaginary sickle. "Flatten the fuckin' lot of it if worst came to worst. I'll get on the dozer all right and drag a chain through it all." He paused, somewhat out of breath. "You know what I mean?" He was pointing urgently, not at something, but at everything, at every intricacy of nest and web.

"No," said Happilene. "I can't believe you. But I am hungry."

"The whole... *land*," the word was out, wholesome yet spiny, "*belongs* to me. It's in here, beating." He gestured towards his chest. "But if I have to fucking kill it, I will."

A monumental head jogged back and forth. No clew of angry worms could ever form so confusingly a textured surface as that of Bells's face. He seemed wracked by both ugliness and distress, as if ashamed to be caught so blatantly wishing to murder his one true love.

A silence ensued, broken only by their tread on quilted sand. Happilene wondered if he would say any more. When he did not, she thought to ask, innocently enough, "So where did you come from? How did you get here?"

"Where did I come from?" They had curved around a stand of oolines and were headed back to the park entrance. "From down south." Breathing in. "Left my

last job a month ago at Gocup and walked over the mountain to Killimicat. Followed the rivers by Tarrabandra, Wagragobilly, Darbalara; backblocks of Bundarbo. Across the Murrumbidgee south of Jugiong, tracked back west and over the ridge at Muttama, Bongalong, came overland to Bongongalong." The morning through which they walked was large enough for any narrative. "There the sky turned dark fast, and bent, and the storm that hit was all Hell gathered in one. Kept west to Cooba and Eurongilly. It all starts to flatten out as you slip past the rise north of Bethungra, onto the yellow quilts up to Stockinbingal; zigzagged my way for days and days over the square paddocks of Yannawah and Tubbul. Weedalion. In Thuddungra there was every chance of a fight but we both just stared and cursed instead. Stupid prick. I wandered sort of uselessly back to Bribbaree, back to a vague northerly direction, spent a night parched at Quandialla — had a mate in Third St. years ago but he went under a tractor the afternoon before his wedding day — a night bedded down by the railway tracks in the forest at Little Caragabal. Days after that the sky caught fire and I kept on to Pullabooka, Wirrinya, Weelong, by Jemalong Ridge and all that lacing and curling of water, all those birds and fish. Went under Gibringambil Peak, across to Bedgerebong; north-west again, the land emptier, the sky building, swelling with birds through Mulguthrie, Yarrabandai, west again to Ootha, Berewombenia, Derriwong, straight north by Ghost Hill, Buddabaddah, Creeper Gate, Honeybugle. Try chanting the word 'scrub' to yourself all day as you tramp through fifty clicks of it. Tears your arms up. Try thinking up recipes for dry grass. Try naming a million bloody farm animals. Try identifying every sculpturing of farm machinery as they emerge from the ground in front of you. Try talking to the birds." Happilene noticed galahs overhead. "Then the squares disappear, like melting into the earth, like the whole rural fiction won't hold up? You lose your faith in geometry, in freeholdings and boundaries. You realise the whole thing has opened out, see, the great bowl is open before you. It echoes, throws its heat and drought into your face. Each place name stays with you as a holy text, written out across the swamp and forest, the grazed yards, the mountains and the flatlands. It becomes a part of you when you walk it, inch by green-grey inch."

Happilene had fallen into the spell of his recitative; now his love was beyond doubt. "Canbelego followed, and from there on things got tough; Booramugga, Wallanburra and Gundabooka National Park, where I came across an outing of wheelchaired children, sweating terribly amongst all that space and confinement. Wild pigs were about, digging at the sandy earth, old creekbeds were cracked apart. From Bourke I went back underground, or overground, leastways beyond traffic. You never can trust a road, a highway. Too impermanent. Then my boots had had it, worn down by sand and hot earth. A night on the Warrego at Mungunyah Crossing — look down from the sky there and see the rivers running like fanned veins under the skin, that pale beige of

crust and multiple channeling. Glorious. A drop of rain fell there on my plastic shelter, and shooters were out too — mad bastards. Then Enngonia, and finally across the border past Barringun. Grey egrets pecking at the Mitchell grasses, everything seemingly set to burst. That's what water brings. Since then it's dried up again, and I've been alone: Widgeegoara, Nebine, hard slog to Bindebango, from Bargunyah across to Boatman and then tracks up to Morven."

Happilene was altogether lost in the swirling mess of vocabulary and landscape.

"What do you reckon? A bloody pilgrimage, that is. That's me, tracking across myself, measuring, feeling, being. And learning all the weak points."

"Your love's not a weak point."

Bells was not listening. He was on adrenalin now, all the hours of frontal emptiness arising in him: "New words grow out of that country: birdswerve, foxcry, gullytrap, ridgeburn, scrubscratch, tickswell, dingoscowl, roofeint, emustrut, snakebite, rivermesh, cloudnet, dawnscint, dusklove, skyglass... Yeah, the sky everywhere like bright blue glass."

"You wouldn't ever *kill* it though, would you? Not after making up all those beautiful words?"

Bells refused to face either possibility. "Bordering, challenging the bright void, tempting it, skirting back and forth around the edges. Never quite committing to the depths, not the truly limitless depths. For that there's a ways to go yet. That's next."

"I'm starving."

Bells spat. "Then let's get some breakfast at the roadhouse."

Amazingly, the car started up first go.

"I thought you just said you walked here?"

"Got here a week ago. I'm resting up. The car's not mine."

Over breakfast Bells, the potential Great Destroyer, told how he had walked one winter down the chimera that is Cooper's Creek, along the stony channels between the waterholes, catching bream and yellowbelly when he was lucky, trapping the odd rabbit, until the shifty channels disappeared out by Nappa Merrie. He had stood in one spot, as if rooted to the sand, and stared ahead, waiting for the changeling waterway to show him the way forward, and it would

not. It offered only a quiz of straggling bush and sand carpet hammered by the sun, and said no more. So he turned, and waited instead for darkness to begin his tramp back to Noccundra, across the nightplain.

"Anyway, here I am."

Full of toast and bacon.

"Where's next?"

"In the car with you. A couple of days. I'll take you around."

"I've been around. I need straight lines, not arounds."

Straight lines or no, she did get in the car after breakfast, and they drove.

"Shouldn't you be walking this?" she suggested, as they left the roadhouse behind in dustcloud and shimmer.

"That's alone. You don't walk in company. Messes up the union."

They spent two days sleeping and pretending to fish by a dying river before turning south onto dirt roads and red-black soils; at the end of a week together they slept a night huddled in the remnants of a homestead on the Culgoa floodplain. As day succeeded day they circled, talking very little, never mentioning anything as specific as a destination. At times they left the car and walked, deep into green paddocks or across clay pans, scattering lizards and butterflies. The two of them wandered the gasping riverbeds, kicking copper rocks and blood-red stones into the canegrass. Back in the car, they went through border crossings, circled around great sags of yellow grass, slept late afternoons in bright pastures with the close bellow of cattle, watching the moving image of the sky. For days on end nothing happened, beyond their journeying. They stopped, mainly for fuel and milk, climbed back into the car, and drove away from petrol bowsers and their patina of silence. They slept some nights in rutted tracks that ran off side roads, or in caravans. They managed to squeeze under Bells's tarpaulin, a scratchy khaki thing he had appeared with one morning after a visit to a garage. They barrelled around the gut of the continent, tracked by birds wheeling against the white glare of sky.

Back at the Garden of Morven some two or three weeks later, they were once more in the clearing where he had first appeared, the old Falcon resting on the blood-orange sand. Bells turned that green gaze once again upon Happilene.

"I have a walk to do."

"I'll walk with you. In your shadow."

He was adamant. "Things to investigate out beyond... Thargomindah."

"No!" She would have offered herself up to his bulldozer, and thus left the landscape to simply be.

"I have to leave you here."

Happilene could not reply from a mouth gone papery. "Bells!" she wanted to call out. "Why do you have to leave me? Why?" Bells was half out of the car, extracting his great frame into an expanse of red air. Sweating and enormous, in the combination of farewell and melting heat he became a glutinous figure. A hand came out towards Happilene, a lumpish and uncertain mitt, but just as quickly disappeared.

"You can have the car," he conceded, turning to go. "It's not stolen."

"What about...?" Happilene's voice was lost, even ridiculous. The Garden of Morven had no use for any sound or gesture she might offer. She called Bells's name from the bottom of the dry well in her throat, but the ugly creature was already behind the car, adrift from the taillights, contemplating the yards laid out before him. Walking away, he became smaller, a floating and receding image seen through blistered trees; his bush of hair another distant growth blurring into the flat beyond; he became a shimmering, intangible miracle; he was, finally, heated out of sight and gone.

Happilene did not look back. Bells, she suspected, would become no more than dry bones and hair, fed into the landscape. He and the earth would occupy each other, penetrating into their uniting selves.

But before that came to pass, Bells had some more of his lovely destruction to get out of the way. He had to hack out a clearing and dig his own grave.

Now, as her illness came to claim her (far too soon: her neck resting on pillows, her gaze watery and slightly anguished) it was the Garden of Morven that blossomed in Happilene's mind. Slipping away from life, she returned to the mysterious Bells: lover, destroyer, cripple; to the punished reds and browns of his ugly body, the thirsty chroma, to the scratch and slither of the terrain they

had shared, the wire and sky, the sand, the grass, the rhythm and the intaglio of ghost creeks upon the floodplain. She returned to rest her head upon the boiling skin of landscape, or upon his toad-like chest; to listen to the beating of the subterranean watercourse so far below the wind and soil; to Bells's gruff kindnesses; to his abandonment. Her face upon the smooth stone of her pillow, her own dry grave awaiting, she called out: "Come back, and walk with me! Bells! Let's walk infinity together!" her lips scarcely vibrating, her tongue clicking like a sick cockatoo. The illness had left her still-young frame smooth and light as paperbark. "We'll trace the lovely channels, Bells. We'll trace the sandlines and the cattletacks... Ah, bring me some breakfast!" she stammered, or begged.



michelle dicinoski

INLAND SEA

You've drawn a whaleboat through desert
for years in search of an inland sea.
A fever of faith kept you moving towards
the centre towards your elusive truth.

The return would be triumphant:
a voyage from heart to fringe
imagining sea names, headlines, fame.
But even the top of that boat stayed dry.

You drank from meagre pools.
Your tongue turned to thistle and your
skin dropped like bark.
When you dreamed, you dreamed of water.

At last you've found the centre holds
nothing for you.
The heart is barren.
Return by foot and horseback

and do not speak of shame.
You will find abundance here, at
these margins of uncommon wealth.