Birregurra, 1949: a boy of thirteen dies of tetanus after being pecked severely on the head by a magpie. Lake Boga, 1951: a local medical man nurses a magpie back to life after striking it with his car. When the bird duly recovers it returns to the bush bearing away the doctor’s lower dentures. Cohuna, 1953: Trevor Mues is coasting up his driveway in his Ford utility when a magpie enters through the driver’s side window, pecks him viciously on the ear and flies out through the window on the other side.

Kookaburras, magpies, butcherbirds, wagtails; the farm birds own the pasture and the bushes and the tree-top sky, but the parrots are supreme. The lemon-crested launch their scouts at sunrise, then the whole flock follows. In the few seconds before they rise the chiacking intensifies; as if each conversation must be shouted to conclusion before they are on the wing. Every morning the massed army of parrots – sometimes three or four hundred – fly inland to toil at the crops, every evening they return to the river to roost.

Harry watches the flock work the air as they leave. Their wing effort reduces as soon as they gain height and the sky opens up cleanly in front of them. It’s dawn again. Milking again. The miracle of water into milk via grass must be performed at the start of each new day.
COHUNA, 1953

Glenalpine Chrysanthemum, White-eye, Linga Longa Wattle Flower, Banyule Tiddlewinks, Pineapple, Enid, Fatty, Yarraview La Mode, Licker, Babs, Big Joyce, Wee Joyce, Pauline, Stumbles and the others. They gather by the gate in the half light, stamping their feet and swinging their hips into the wind. He can see the outline of their faces through the rain; their ears swivel towards him as he closes the back door. He splashes through the puddles to the dairy, his head cocked against the downpour. They watch him with the same deep attention every day. As if they have just seen a new species for the first time – a species that is not cow – and they mustn’t ever lose sight of it again. His milking clothes hang from a row of horseshoes behind the bails: matted overalls stiff with mud and faeces, a corrugated raincoat, a canvas apron florid with milk mould. Pails and buckets from the wash room, hay spread
in each feeder, leg ropes kicked back and at the ready. He stands just under cover and looks out at the morning. There is more light now; he can see further across the paddocks. The rain is pooling badly in the low spots, if it doesn’t let up soon the pasture will drown. He spits a mouthful of tobacco bile into the mud, pulls on the raincoat and goes out to fetch them. Sip is anxious to follow, but for the rain. She whimpers, hops from one front leg to the other, then slinks along the eaves, only darting out at the last minute, her ears flat against her neck.

On these wet mornings the world seems close around them – Harry and the herd. It is the same greasy rain that hits them both, that sticks to hide and skin, that gushes down their legs and gathers in their eyelashes. Harry opens the gate and pushes in among them. Their blood is hot. Each cow gives off her own great heat and takes in the heat of her sisters. They are urgent with milk and hunger, stamping and bellowing and thrusting out their necks. The damage is done here, when they are bagged-up and waiting – an udder squeezed against the fencepost, trodden on, torn or ripped. Harry flicks an old towel across their dented rumps, choosing who should go first and who should hang back. Sip lets off a few hoarse high-pitched barks from the sidelines. He has ten out now. They are docile
into the bails, quick to get their heads down to the mash. The first cow brings back the feeling in his fingers. He slides his hands up and along the warm skin between her udder and her belly, throws up a mug of wash from the pail, sluices the whole thrumming organ, feels for the cups, tests the pull of suction and threads them on. Fat udders with bud teats, small, fruity udders with long spiked teats like landmines, slack udders, tight udders. Every day, twice a day, often with the help of young Michael from next door or Mues from over the road, Harry milks his herd.

Babs snorts pollard through her nostrils and swings her wet tail from side to side. Harry rinses her teats and pulls the cups off her. The rotary chuffs and swings overhead. They are slower to back out when it rains, hanging on for a few extra licks of the empty bucket, ignoring his voice and the flick of the towel, but when the balance tips and there are more out than in they start to hurry again. They don’t fear Harry. They don’t fear any man or dog, even a proper farm dog. What they fear is being alone. Being left behind. The last cow steps back. She looks in front of her at the long stream of cows ambling back to the paddock. She turns her wooden neck and looks behind her at the holding yard – empty. Her hooves scrape on the wet bricks. She bellows. Then she diggs her back legs into
the mud and runs out into the rain, her empty udder swinging slack and crumpled between her legs.

A whippet can’t ride pillion on a motorcycle. Many farm dogs can; not a whippet. The whippet is too leggy, has no balance, insufficient courage and not enough fur. Harry takes his bike out for a weekly spin to clear the fluids and prevent the engine from getting stale. When he changes up to third the wind pulls at Sip’s sparse coat. She leans hard against his chest for protection. She shivers violently, causing her bony bottom to lose traction with the saddle, causing her to tumble off sideways as they take the curve on Saleyards Road. Harry has never stopped faster. He nearly puts himself over the handlebars. He has to walk all of the way home with Sip hoisted over his shoulders. Mues isn’t home so he asks Betty from next door to drive him back out to the bike and guide him home because the headlamp has blown and it’s getting dark. The children want to come too, but Betty is firm with them. Michael has the dishes to dry and Little Hazel has her reader. Harry expects a bit of teasing; about the dog and the Waratah too.

‘It’s a constant labour of love,’ Harry says as he gets out of the car and runs his hand over the leather saddle.
Betty looks at the motorcycle. The spray of red flowers painted on the petrol tank reminds her of a sewing machine, and there’s Harry’s birdwatching binoculars hanging from a special bracket he’s welded onto the frame. There’s nothing particularly masculine about it.

‘It’s just a constant labour, if you ask me,’ Betty says. Then she turns the car around so he can ride in her lights on the way home.

She’s an antler covered in warm velvet. Her legs are sticks; her yolky heart hangs in its brittle cage of ribs. She can’t walk in a straight line. When Harry holds the gate open for her she slinks through it. She doesn’t stand next to him like you might see a dog in a photograph, but with her back snaked around so it touches his leg. She’s useless with the cows. She spends the winter curled up like a cat, she yelps at thunder, she’s afraid of heights, she hates the rain. There’s something obscene, dick-like, about the way her tail curves between her hind legs. She looks wounded when they go to town and he makes her jump down from the Dodge because he always lifts her when they are at home. Her whole existence, every sinewy fibre of her, is tuned to the feel of Harry’s hand across the smooth cockpit of her skull.
The beloved have many names. Harry calls her sweetie, luvvie, goose and bag-o-bones. Mues calls her a dog-shaped-object or rat-on-stilts. He says, ‘What’s it shit like, Harry? Does it shit like a pencil?’

That first day when he collected her, and in the Dodge on the way home took off his coat and tucked it around her shoulders … it went along the usual way after that. An alteration in the focal length – each fixed for the gaze of the other. The imbibing of odours. The warm soil of her head, the bread and vinegar of his crotch. A babble language followed quickly by regret for the first hard words. Physical changes. The sharing of personality and mannerisms.

All her expressions are known to him. Her squinted blink, the thwop of ropey tail against the lino, the shame-clamped jaw. Then familiarity. Indifference. Forgetfully, he sometimes runs his hand across her ribs. If it’s early on in the week, a Monday or a Tuesday, he’ll say, ‘That’s enough then. That’ll do you for the rest of the week,’ and she’ll lean into his knees, blissful at the sound of his voice.

Little Hazel walks to the Leitchville Road to catch the school bus into Cohuna. Her shoes scuff through the dirt. She carries
her metal school tin with a date scone rolling around inside it. The sun is already high and strong in the sky behind her. She turns out of the driveway and into the road. The air smells warm and wet and faintly ripe like fruit just on the turn – a mixture of sun-baked cow shit and algae ripening in the irrigation channels of the dairy farm next door. She looks warily at a row of magpies on the wire fence. They aren’t looking at her, but it is nearly swooping season so she puts her school tin on her head just in case. She can see Mr Mues leaning on his gate up ahead. Her arm is getting tired holding the tin in place so she tries to balance it for a few steps like an African, but it drops and she bends over to pick it up from the dirt.

‘Michael not going to school today?’ Mues calls out to her.

‘Nope. He’s sick.’

‘How’s he sick then?’ Mues has a pouchy face and red-rimmed eyes with too much of the inner lid, the inner workings, on display.

‘He’s got the runs.’

Mues nods sympathetically.

Little Hazel walks on and is almost out of earshot when he calls out to her again.
‘Do you want to come in for a minute and see my pony?’

She stops and considers. Mues’s place is a mess of rusty old machinery and kennels and laundries and packing sheds. She’s never seen a pony, but perhaps he keeps it inside, or perhaps it’s new? She hears him sniff behind her and the sound of the chain jiggling on the gatepost.

‘It’s a Shetland pony.’

She follows him into a rundown shed – dim and thick with flies. She keeps her distance from him. He’s busy with something in the corner. She thinks he is shielding the pony from her to make it more of a surprise. It must, she thinks, be very tiny, probably just a foal. She is trying to look around him, into the corner, when he turns, his trousers slide slowly down his legs, the end of his belt curves around his ankles like a tail and she sees that he is not wearing underpants. That he is holding his shirt up on purpose to reveal his dick, all raw and swollen pink. It is hoisting itself up with wobbly effort like a mechanical toy. Little Hazel frowns, tries again to look behind him for the pony, then returns her gaze to the dick. She looks at the spot on the roof that the dick is pointing to. There are a few cobwebs draped between the rafters and several small shafts of light beaming through the holes in the rusty iron. Little Hazel doesn’t scream, doesn’t feel sick, doesn’t
run away. She just feels disappointed. Hugely disappointed. She thinks that it has all been pointless – the cutting-out of pictures from magazines, the books borrowed from the library. The drawings attempted, rubbed out, attempted again in her treasured scrapbook where the Shetland’s neck was always too long or the Shetland’s legs too thin, or she’d had to use blue for the tail as the black had run out. At that moment Little Hazel understands that she will never, ever, get a Shetland pony. Her life will be no different to everybody else’s – made up of cobbling things together that are misshapen, ill-suited, imperfect. That wanting something badly is not enough to get it. And adults are part of this pretence – they hold one thing in their hand and call it another. Hazel picks up her school tin and leaves. She isn’t even late for the bus.

Betty tries not to look at her reflection in the co-op window. She glances. There’s nobody about. She stands in front of the glass, pulls her stomach in and smiles. The puffy flesh of her cheeks rises up around her eyes and she is brought up sharp by the sight of herself so doughy, so exposed, like when her hair has just been cut and set and there is too much of
herself on display. This is how she feels most of the time now; always blowzy, always overstuffed. She can’t stop touching the flesh that rolls over the waistband of her skirt, or fingering the mounds that form on either side of her bra straps. She looks at her legs as she peels off her stockings in the evenings; everything is dragging downwards – the heaviness of her thighs has settled lower around her knees and calves; the bones of her ankles are going under. She tells herself there’s nothing to worry about when she’s out in public, when she’s dressed, with lipstick. But here, standing in the main street, in front of the glass … She looks at herself side on, sees her ear and her head above it where patches of dry white scalp show through between the curls of her permanent. The curls don’t look like hair; they look like something made out of hair that has been stored in the back of a cupboard. She moves closer to the glass, examines the deep grooves in the skin around her mouth where it meets the deflated flesh of her lips. The lines around her mouth and the scored skin between her eyes – a fork mark – make her look angry and tired; tired in a way that sleep can’t fix. Her finger is on her lip, in that private place underneath the nostrils.

‘Morning.’

Betty reaches out and steadies herself against the glass.
‘You right there?’

She turns around. Harry removes the pipe from his mouth with one hand and puts it back again with the other.

‘Trying to remember my list, and that.’

He nods, takes a few puffs on his unlit pipe and stands awkwardly. Betty looks down at his boots. Harry kicks up one leg and knocks his pipe out against the raised heel. They both look up again. Harry coughs.

‘Been hot.’

‘Hotter last week though.’

‘True.’

Betty lifts her hand and pats a curl against her neck. Harry looks off down the street, looks back at her, coughs again.

‘I’ve mice in the shed – can you get Michael to bring Louie over?’

Betty nods and smiles. Harry touches his hat and walks away. She parts the fly strips at the co-op door and takes a basket from the stack.

For God’s sake, she says to herself, for God’s sake, woman, who do you think you are?

Who does she think she is? Betty Reynolds is a woman of forty-five, is the mother of Little Hazel and Michael, is an aide at
the Acacia Court Home for the Aged. She rents a small house on the outskirts of Cohuna next to a dairy farm. She drives a Vauxhall. She came here pregnant with Little Hazel, Michael still in short pants by her side. The people of Cohuna assume that she must have had, at some stage, a husband – perhaps killed in the war? Apart from her work and her children Betty keeps to herself. She wears no rings. She doesn’t correct people when they call her Mrs Reynolds, but she refers to herself as just Betty or, where possible, Michael and Hazel’s mum. And there are times when this seems remarkable to her – that she is so convincingly in the present – that she carries no mark, or gives off no hint, of the difficulties of her past.

The people of Cohuna have not seen Betty Reynolds hopeful as she dabs on her lipstick in the morning and then resigned as she wipes it off at night. They have not seen the pile of lipstick-stained tissues that grows day after day in the cheap cane rubbish bin under her dresser to be emptied on Saturday and used to light the fire. They have not seen her undressing in front of the wardrobe mirror, slowly removing her slip, cupping her large, pale breasts in her hands, plucking the hairs that have started to grow around the nipples. They have not seen her grimacing at the exquisite sting of the tweezers, then having to soothe the skin with cold cream and
finding herself overcome. Finding herself standing in front of the mirror scolding and hating herself and wondering who she is hurting herself for, and why her body is turning into something else before she has had a chance to discover what it was before. And then getting into bed with scenes replaying in her head from so long ago she is no longer sure if they are memory or fantasy. She cries often, in her bed, and when the tears subside begins to feel the heat and weight of herself keenly against the mattress. She rolls onto her back and wipes her hands across her breasts. She brings her palms to her face and breathes in the mix of sweat and glycerin. Her fingers separate the sticky curls of her bush. It is never the same. Some nights it is all she can do to stroke herself slowly up and over the wave. Other nights she thrashes, climbs steeply, stops, spits on her fingers, starts again and has to beg someone – someone who isn’t there – before she can reach release.

By daybreak her bladder is aching and she gets up to piss. Around four each morning she pads down the path to the outhouse and takes the temperature of the day ahead. Sometimes the winking owl is perched on the post of the washing line. Its bulging eyes and flattened face seem mongoloid – both innocent and evil. The beak is worn; stained
and twisted like the dew claw on an old dog. They look at each other seriously. The owl is gone when she returns. She never sees it on the wing.

And then, just after dawn, nobody sees Betty Reynolds as she dresses and sets the fire and makes the tea. As she calls out for Michael and Little Hazel and stands at the window pulling her cardigan tight, looking out at the frost on the pasture and getting on with the day for there is nothing else to be done with it.

Betty can hardly remember back to the time when Harry was a stranger to them. But he rarely came to the house when they first arrived. It was more usual for them to meet in town. Harry offered to hold baby Hazel while Betty got a prescription filled at the chemist. When she returned they sat together on the bench outside the post office. A crow called lazily from the top of the water tower. It was warming up and still early in the day. Betty remembers the condensed blue of the sky – she wasn’t used to it then, the tinted Cohuna sky.

‘Are you going to give her back then?’

Harry looked down at the sleeping baby. A circle of milk-flecked saliva cooled on the inside of his arm. ‘Yes, of course.’ He handed her back to Betty. ‘Very nice, babies – aren’t they?’
‘Much like adults really, only smaller.’

‘That’s right.’ Harry perked up. ‘Much like regular folk, only a different shape. It’s the shape that confuses – and there’s so much wrapping you never know which end you’re talking to.’

Betty cuffed him across the shoulder and stood up to leave. She smiled. He smiled back.

Even after that Harry was hesitant about coming inside Betty’s house. He’d hold the fly-wire door open and stand stiffly in the doorframe – a portrait of a man unsure of his welcome. Or he’d stay out on the verandah.

Michael reads to Betty as she peels potatoes in the sink. The white flesh turns around and around under the knife in her hand. Michael rocks on his chair at the kitchen table, shadowing the lines in Science for Young Australians with his finger. Harry listens from the verandah.

‘The Laughing Kookaburra, or Laughing Jack, or Alarmbird, or Breakfastbird, or Shepherd’s Clock, or Woop Woop Pigeon is a boisterous bird of the Australian bush known for its raucous laugh.’ Michael stumbles on ‘raucous’. Betty corrects him.

‘Raw-cous,’ he says. ‘Laughing Jack spends his days hunting throughout this territory and comes home of an evening to lead
the family chor-us. These birds, from the kingfisher family, have an unusual family structure. Groups of adult males and females live in celibacy with one central couple and assist them in hunting and raising their young.’ Michael’s finger has halted under ‘celibacy’ – he looks up at his mother.

‘Go on, Michael, love,’ Betty says, her voice high and formal. She turns back to the sink, her curls joggle against her neck as she reaches for another potato.

Harry knows all this, of course; he knows everything about birds.

After a few years they have the impression that Harry is always there, but in fact he is only ever there in small snatches – a meal, the delivery of a particular item, collecting Michael to help with the cows. The operations of the family are attractive to him, but also unsettling. When he’s invited to tea he leaves immediately the meal is finished, as if unsure of what happens next.

The year that Little Hazel turns eight Harry helps her make a present for her mother – a pokerwork sign for the house. They work in the dairy. The girl’s hands wrapped in rags to protect them from the hot poker; Harry taking over when she loses interest and finishing it off with a chisel to give it
a decorative edge. Harry says it is all her work, although she knows it isn’t.

On Christmas Day Little Hazel goes to collect Harry. She wears a green skating dress with ten large white buttons down the front. It looks odd; like a uniform. She saw the pattern in *Woman’s Day* and wouldn’t let up until Betty made it for her. She has her scuffed leather school shoes on and no socks. Harry wears a cream shirt, braces and his good trousers. His beard is freshly trimmed. Harry notices that the girl is walking strangely. At each step she kicks her knees up and watches as the green skirt flicks around her legs. It’s a worrying age for a girl child, Harry thinks. An age when they can start to impersonate themselves.

After the Christmas dinner shared with Sip and the Christmas pudding with a saucer of cream for Louie, Harry mounts the sign on the weatherboards next to the front door. It’s twilight, the air is full of summer insects. They stand back to admire the sign. Little Hazel gives it a once-over with the hem of her dress. REYNOLDS it says, not quite centred on a slab of red gum. The sound of the cicadas is amplified as the light fades. Betty turns around. Harry has gone. She can see a dark shape moving behind the sugar gums and just in front of it the orange glow of his pipe that looks to be leading him away.
The pull between the boy and the man is much like that between the man and the dog. Soon Michael is at Harry’s most afternoons after school, and on the weekends they go fishing together or rabbiting. Betty walks out of the kitchen, a basin on her hip, to see them sitting on the step together with one of Harry’s bird books and the binoculars. She overhears Harry’s directions to Michael; gentle, low-voiced, almost swallowed in his beard. ‘Fantail at four o’clock.’ There’s a way they have of half turning their faces towards each other. Betty is tipping the sink water on the tomatoes when Michael calls out to her for assistance. He’s trying to tie a handkerchief over Harry’s eyes so he can record how many birds Harry can identify in five minutes by call alone.

Betty kneels down and pulls the material taut across Harry’s thinning hair. Then she holds his head in her hands and turns it from side to side to check his ears aren’t impeded.

‘Can I start now?’ Harry asks Michael.

Michael checks Harry’s wristwatch.

‘Ten seconds.’ Michael counts the seconds down by tapping his finger on his leg. Betty notices the length of Michael’s
thighs; how quickly he is growing. She stands up and smooths
down her skirt.

‘Directly behind us, Michael,’ Harry says. ‘Number one: a
Mother Bird.’

One evening, Harry edges carefully up the track and parks at
the edge of the channel. He rubs his palms on the steering
wheel. ‘We can walk along here a bit. I need to check the
water, see how she’s flowing.’

Betty looks across at him and smiles. She likes to sit in
Harry’s Dodge. The seat is low and sleek like an upholstered
banquette at a fancy restaurant and it smells of hay and
boot polish. She looks out of the windscreen at the scene
framed in front of her. The channel has an oasis quality.
Water seeps through the channel banks to the weeds and
wildflowers, marking out a strip of bright green from the
grey of the paddocks. At either side of the car large river
red gums are anchored to the bank just as a painter would
place them at the outer edges of a canvas for balance and
perspective. Harry takes his foot off the brake and the car settles
under them.

‘Alright then?’

Betty nods. ‘Alright then.’