

The Making of a Man

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This paper investigates the author's writing processes during the research and creation of the fictional character of Chella Singh-Jolley. The author's novel *Provenance* is set in 1960; one of its principal characters is Chella, a Sikh biochemistry student in Australia on a Colombo Plan scholarship. The paper discusses the challenges in writing a character so ostensibly 'other' to the author, and how these dilemmas were turned to creative use. The paper outlines the history of Indian immigration to Australia, and briefly the role of the Colombo Plan for Economic Development, situating Chella within this history. An extract from Chapter One of the novel is included: the opening story of the novel's protagonist, an Italian–Australian girl, Rafaela Mollino.

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It is that a stressed and unhappy experience of our bodies makes us more aware of the world in which we live. . . . People who can acknowledge this dissonance and incoherence in themselves understand rather than dominate the world in which they live. This is the sacred promise made in our culture. (Richard Sennett)

Sennett (1995) is ostensibly writing about the artist and how suffering or 'dissonance' is used to create visual and other artistic works, but he also offers a dynamic approach to the grounding of ethnicity in fiction. Sennett's idea can be extended toward a contemporary, postcolonial novel peopled by troubled 'bodies', which offers new understandings of old themes. By allowing dissonance into one's expectations of what it is to write a character, person, place and history can be renewed. The British novelist and critic David Lodge talks about something similar, using the term *defamiliarisation* to discuss how the familiar can be made unfamiliar in fiction. This 'making strange' is the English translation of *ostranenie*, a term coined by the Russian Formalists. In a 1917 essay Victor Shklovsky argued for *ostranenie* in physical terms: 'Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. . . . art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stony stony (Lodge, 1992: 52–53).' My interest in dissonance and defamiliarisation stems from thinking about the how and why of my own fiction writing. This writing has always been about people at the periphery – of their society, in dissonance with their own body (e.g. Lena in *Night by Night*, or family (e.g. the narrator of 'Plump Girls Pinched With Butter' (Messer, 1998)). My characters are often the children of immigrants. The two young people in my current novel *Provenance* are an Italian–Australian and a Punjabi Sikh, and while they might start out together naively in 1960, their fictional history is one that can only have been written

here, in these years, with the need for defamiliarising reflections about our people and country.

'Highly flavoured bodies' are the words that were used to describe South East Asian Indian farmers and itinerant workers in north New South Wales by their white neighbours in the late 1800s. Resonant, cannibalising, unusable words suggestive of bodies uncomfortably close, of an intensely confronting physicality and difference. I stumbled across these words while researching the life of Indians in Australia for the second of the main characters in *Provenance*: I was inventing a young man by the name of Chella Singh-Jolley, who after starting his fictional life as a Sikh banana farmer was soon transmogrified into a Sikh biochemistry PhD student.

The New South Wales farmers of the 1800s went further in their reaction to the few dozens of Indians working the crops, and formed a 'North Coast Anti-Alien Society.' Though most of the Indians were not yet land-holders, the white farmers still felt there was a 'danger of letting turbaned Mohammedans to get a vital hold of the most important industry of the colony': Australian cane sugar (De Leperuanche, 1984: 85). There were also the extensive, coastal banana plantations that the Indian farmers, whose backgrounds were mostly agricultural, knew how to work, and worked hard on. This was the same region in which I was to have Chella's Uncle Ajit and cousins settle in the early 1950s, an agriculturally based, temperate area around the north coast of Coffs Harbour, Woolgoolga, and inland to Lismore.

My research trip¹ to the area was a revelation, full of defamiliarising experiences. Metres-tall sugar cane grew in vast rows for miles, the soil black as mud; in fact muddy *and* squelchy, the air thick with humidity. Hot winds blew in from unswimmable seas, and the fields of grass were absurdly green. I recognised then that I couldn't have Chella farming bananas. I couldn't see my protagonist, Rafaela Mollino, falling in love with a farmer, having run away from a family of cane cutters. Her lover had to be more *other*. There are two principle strands of Sikh immigration to Australia: in the first, men and women came here as illiterate agricultural workers, and in the second they came for tertiary study and work as professionals. I was more suited to writing Chella into the second of these: I turned him round from a farmer to a student. This other was enough for Rafi, but not too other for me to write.

Indian people immigrated to Australia during three periods. In the 1800s through to the 1860s, they came principally as hired labourers, and most of these men returned to India. Some others were convict labourers, and mid-century a number were brought as servants and labourers of British residents. These groups included women and children. At one time, Tasmania was considered a desirable destination for Anglo-Indian retirees, who were hard-pressed to afford England.

In the second period, from 1860 to 1901 when immigration was effectively ended with the Immigration Restriction Act, Indian migrants included Punjabi Sikhs. From the late 1800s Indian tradesmen were prominent in furniture manufacture. Hawkers and pedlars were more common than before. A large number of Indians worked for Henry Parkes' printing firm. Despite strong opposition, some Indian men worked the gold fields. Cane cutters and banana

farmers worked in New South Wales and Queensland as itinerants, and most of these men were Sikhs

By World War II, sugar farming in Queensland and New South Wales was done almost entirely by white growers on small hectares, with the CSR company having a monopoly over the milling and refining, and thus a good deal of power in the organisation of production. During the war, when 'manpower' was in shortage, union and employer discrimination lessened and Indians were allowed to cut cane in greater numbers. (Their 'cousins' were fighting alongside the British in their own Sikh regiments during the war.)

The third, post-war period of immigration included the Indian students studying and working in Australia as part of the Colombo Plan. During this time the usually illiterate Indian cane and banana growers became landholders. In the 1950s and 60s, Chella's Uncle Ajit would have been amongst the first Sikh landowners in Woolgoolga, one of maybe half a dozen families.

The very violent and divisive Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 sent many Sikhs on the move out of India, and more Sikhs came to Australia. In 1966 the restrictive 1901 law was relaxed, facilitating the immigration of professionals such as doctors, engineers and academics (James, 1995; Jupp, 1988).

Between the war and the 1970s, cane cutting became a way for Indian landholders to supplement the less profitable but year-round banana crop income, and by dint of long hours, many local Indians were able to purchase their own land. The land around the seaside town of Woolgoolga was cheaper than farming land in Queensland, and with the mechanisation of cane cutting, many Queensland-based Sikhs moved south into New South Wales (Yeates, 1994: 208). In the 1970s, Woolgoolga's Sikh temples made it the preferred place of settlement for nonprofessional Australian Indian Sikhs (De Leperuanche, 1984: 85–100). The town is now home to the largest Sikh community in Australia, and its Sikhs and the Sikh temples there have been the subject of radio and television documentaries.

One of these documentaries is what brought me to Chella. The novel was in its early days and was evolving in an intuitive, imagistic, unplanned way. My 19-year-old Rafaela had run away from her small coastal home in north Queensland. She was on the train, and she was still within Queensland's borders. I knew that much. I was looking for a man who'd start out as a delight but then become a problem before she reached the New South Wales border. I had in mind the dissonance of personal, psychic borders being transgressed and crossed:

Rafi had not known that the continent was fractured by rail gauge widths, by planks of wood and steel at spacings that did not fit from one state to another. All the while she had seen herself standing in a gangway excitedly crossing the border into New South Wales, the train clanking past a man in a uniform standing attentively beside an official hut. She had imagined his curt wave to her, a salute to the train, an acknowledgment – surely that . . . changes *were* taking place – strangers to friends and borders soon to be crossed

I had imagined jackaroos and farmers, all sorts of blokes, but none captured the quick of my imagination. One day I was listening to a documentary on Radio National as I drove through the inner Sydney suburb of Erskineville. It was about the Woolgoolga Sikhs. I pulled the car over next to a park to listen and think. It was the idea of borders of familiarity breaking apart that attracted me. The sensual ambiguity of the Sikh turban fascinated me, and so I gave that interest to Rafi. She wants to know what his hair is like under the turban, and it's this simple erotic interest that tangles her notions of feminine and masculine sexuality and leads her off the safety of the train and into the countryside on an adventure with Chella. She's interested in Chella's cultural gestures and difference, because it *is* a different life that she is after – and men different to the men in her family and home town.

The process of writing fiction involves a good deal of wish fulfilment. Despite the waverings of confidence, I kept to the potent, very real images of Chella from these early days of the novel writing: Chella unwinding his turban; touching his bracelet, the *kara* that Sikh men wear; at work in the university science lab; later, Rafaela angrily pushing his abandoned turbans down a deep hole in the green field, pregnant and alone.

Fear can be part and parcel of writing. There is the fear and the being brave, and the harnessing of both. When I came to invent Chella, a task done word by word, and page by page, my curiosity about him was as tangible and equal to my fear of translating his difference into words and story. Curiosity is an energising force, yet I was to discover that fear can also be a tool, not just an inhibitor. Fear is a way to make the fiction writing attentive and not un-lazy: it's a driver to imagining many rather than only a few possibilities.

My doubt concerned my ability to invent a 1960s Sikh Indian in Australia on a Colombo Plan scholarship. Each portion that I struggled to understand – chronology, religion, education, family, country – seemed to take me further from him and not closer to him. I wasn't sure that I would be able to reimagine and write his difference to me, to make a character of him. It was not his maleness, as I had already created a number of young and old men in my fictions 'Maleness' I understood; it was more that Chella was so distant to my own cultural and religious life experience. For the fiction writer attempting to construct a physical being for her character, and a grounded *mise en scene* as well as an interior drama that has veracity, the question of cultural gestures is hugely important, and not one that is as easily researched as is broad history. At the time of the Demidenko/Darville scandal, which overlapped with the writing of *Provenance*, Fotini Epanomitis² commented on Helen Darville's Australian Ukrainian impersonations. Her assessment of Darville's wearing of Ukrainian costume (the embroidered top, the full skirt) and her performance of traditional dances, was that here was 'a shallow notion of what it is to be ethnic'³ I couldn't imagine anything worse for my novel.

From the Colombo Plan's inception in 1950 following an Australian initiative, to 1977 when its title and the original 26 participating countries changed, the Colombo Plan encouraged South and South-East Asian men (principally) to study in Australia, New Zealand, England and Canada. Most of the participants took their training in these developed countries, but a significant other percentage received theirs in the Asian countries of the

Colombo Plan The Plan was distinguished by its minimal use of central organisation. The participant nations held a common belief that the Plan should emphasise co-operative effort rather than elaborate organisation. So, apart from the administrative budget, there were no central Colombo Plan budgets. Capital project and technical assistance project aid was given by one of the member countries, as donor, to another of the member countries, as receiver. 'The entire process of exploring the possibilities, of making formal requests, and finally of receiving aid, is in each case, carried on through bilateral arrangements between the two countries.' (Council for Technical Co-operation in South and South-East Asia, 1959: 5–6).

I mention this because it indicates the degree to which colonial-style paternalism by the developed nations was not acceptable to India and other participating countries; and following India's declaration of independence was part of the reinvigorated views of India by others and Indians themselves. This was the relatively egalitarian context in which Chella's postgraduate biochemistry PhD in Melbourne was undertaken.

Gita Mehta discusses the effects of international scientific advances – of which the Colombo Plan's technical assistance projects were a part – on India's agriculture industry. It led into the start of the Green Revolution, an agricultural programme of the 1960s and 70s funded by charities and industrialised nations, which attempted to solve hunger in 'Third World' countries. The package comprised high-yielding varieties of cereal crops, combined with mechanisation, fertilisers and pesticides. Mehta writes,

Prime Minister Shastri chose a propitious moment to turn India's focus back to agriculture. It was the sixties and world scientists had achieved a breakthrough in crop production – high yielding hybrid seeds for wheat and rice, the two staple foods of Indians. Everyone said that it would take years of coaxing to make the cautious, backward, suspicious Indian farmer use them. Instead, our newspapers were soon printing stories of burly Sikh farmers breaking into Punjab research laboratories in the dead of night to steal the miracle wheat seeds and plant them before the next rains. Within a decade we were able to feed ourselves. Another decade and we were exporting cereals. Ten years after that we were exporting a quarter of our agricultural produce. The Green Revolution had changed India forever. (Mehta, 1998: 61)

Today little is known in Australia about the Colombo Plan or Australia's role in initiating the Plan.⁴ Yet when Australian-trained scientists returned to India, to universities such as the Punjabi Cultural University, they fared well professionally because they were better able to 'improvise' than the American-trained Indian scientists and engineers. The latter had come to rely on the wealth of equipment and facilities available in American universities and industrial settings. Australian-trained graduates were used to working within the constraints of small budgets and relatively little equipment.⁵

We know that poverty didn't end with the Green Revolution. Water resources remained a major problem as were small land-holdings and tenant farmers, amongst other issues (Mehta, 1998: 62–63). Punjabi Sikhs continued to leave for other nations, such as Australia. But still, Chella's work as a

student and his eventual return to India (outside the story of the novel) to undertake his Colombo Plan 'bond' in industry, or at an Indian university⁶ meant that he would be playing a part in a huge agricultural revolution.

Writing him, Chella's science was familiar to me. The cultural gestures of science weren't formidable, as I had been raised amongst scientists and environmentalists and could easily see the labs and the test tubes, and the students, the research freezers and dinner-time science talk. The academic life, I understood. I was by now awash in research about Indians in Australia, and the Sikh religion and the Colombo Plan, but didn't yet own it. As Zygmunt Bauman (1996: 19) puts it, suggesting a perpetual Australian instability, 'One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs.'

Chella was where I belonged, but I hadn't yet inhabited him. So, were Chella's cultural gestures obviously Indian and Sikh? Would he dance, hum a particular Punjabi tune, pray five times daily in an orthodox fashion, and only ever eat vegetarian food? Well, yes and no: Chella's literacy, science, sexual experience, travel, his years in London – all these life experiences complicated the veracity of the 'culturally authentic' gestures that I was meant to write.

I was lucky – I stumbled across an 'informant'.

I first heard about Dr Sidhu after telling my father about Chella, hoping he could help with a dissertation topic for Chella's PhD. It turned out that my father had known 'Sidhu' many years ago when both worked as biochemists, Dr Sidhu for the CSIRO, and my father at the University of Sydney. As young men when they had studied at different times in Melbourne, but with the same supervising professor for their PhD dissertations.⁷ To add to the coincidences, Dr Sidhu had taken out his PhD here on a Colombo Plan scholarship.

So, in early 1996 Dr Sidhu invited me to lunch with his wife at their home in North Ryde. He talked to me about the Colombo Plan and science study in the 1950s and 60s, language, Urdu poetry and Sikhism. A number of times we spoke by telephone. We discussed nitty gritty particulars, such as the appropriate colours for Chella's turbans, and how to tie them – the kind of information that no English language book contains. He mentioned that Kit, the Sikh bomb disposal officer in the film 'The English Patient'⁸ had tied his turban sloppily, but that Sikhs in the British Army had been immaculate with their appearance, including their turbans.

Postcolonial writers and theorists have long argued that the 'Third World' is a fiction of a 'First World' modernity that seeks to stand 'outside it' (Giddens, 1997). With issues such as this in mind – as well as my writerly commitment to good characterisation – I wanted to render Chella as his own subject, to not be the object of my curiosity. I didn't want to render Chella as fascinatingly exotic or Oriental through the authorial voice, though at times he was seen in these terms by other characters in the novel, including his lover Rafaela. Nor did I want him to be only the object of Rafaela's attentions and feelings. Seeing Chella through Rafaela's eyes alone constrained him, because she was limited by her life education and culture. He could not be a subject of his own making if limited to Rafaela's initially uneducated and inexperienced view of him as foreign, if exciting. In this way it came about that a number of chapters were written from his point of view. Doing this allowed me to make Chella fascinating in his own right, and to speak for himself; for instance to

have his own views on the character of the city of Melbourne in the late 1950s. His difference to the Australian 'norm' is a part of his interest-value, but I didn't want him to be an outsider in a novel that stood for First World culture.

Finally, it was the spiritual life that held on tenaciously as Chella's enigma. I hesitated between an idea of Chella as a dutiful Sikh, not orthodox, but a believer and someone who had lived immersed in his religion, and Chella as a young man capable of impulsive actions. That part of the story where Rafaela and Chella meet and then for a short time live together came to a halt for over a year: I was well and truly blocked.

Science and a notion of pluralism were the release from the impasse. Understanding Chella's commitment to science was a way in to sensing his traditional spiritual commitments. Science was a discipline that I was familiar with, but then one day (why, I can't remember) I recognised the spiritual commitment and dedication that it can engender in its practitioners. Chella's love of science was also *zealous*; for all his ambivalence about returning home, he wanted to one day play a part in India's coming Green Revolution. Sikhism as a value system privileges education and literacy, and Punjabi Sikhs are great travellers. The Sikh religion intertwines the values of egalitarianism and education, work and honour and the godliness in things. Being an agriculturally based people (the Punjab is well resourced in this way), science and religion can harmonise. This was the key to Chella's motivations.

When it really was time to get on with the story, I returned to my contact Dr Sidhu. In his 70s, more than once married, a widower, a grandfather, highly respected for his scientific work – a man of the world – I asked Dr Sidhu, 'Might it be possible that Chella would endanger his studies and risk offending his family, by having an illicit affair with an Australian girl?' It was a question about my right to use material so apparently foreign to my experience, that is, my 'authority' to write. He answered, 'Men and women have behaved thus the world over, for eons. Go for it.'

To be a *person* Chella needed to feel regret, make mistakes, temper his confusion, come to decisions, be thoughtful, and so on. He had to be his own man. Inevitably writers measure their experience against their characters, and I was finding ways to salvage my own fragments and connect them to Chella. People of all cultures share similar human needs and impulses – curiosity, the desire to travel (there isn't a village in the Punjab without someone away travelling), sexual desire and so on.

And, in discovering how to write Chella I utilised parts of my own experience of once having been at the margins of society. As a child, well up to the age of 15 or so, I'd been identified as Jewish and my family had travelled a great deal. I too had dealt with isolation and racism, of being the odd one out, with the wrong voice, and incompatible habits and values, and I was able to turn all this to good use in my work of empathising with Chella.

An important aspect of formal research and fiction writing is that finally, most of it has to remain unsaid on the page. Chella is embedded in his history within the pages of *Provenance*; most of the research is invisible. Ernest Hemingway used the analogy of the iceberg to explain his research

and writing method – the research should remain submerged, with only the tip visible in the final story. I came across a little book about the Colombo Plan in the New South Wales State Library in which there was a photo of a Sikh chemistry student, and another of a Sri Lankan biochemistry student. These two blurred, black and white photos did a great deal to ‘ground’ Chella. He really existed, here were photos of him. On going to visit the Melbourne City Baths (built in 1860), I found it had 85 private bathrooms in addition to the two swimming pools. Post-war it had been a ‘mecca’ for ‘new Australians’ – and well used before then too.⁹ As Sikhs practise ritual bathing each day before prayer (at the very least the washing of hands), I imagined Chella going in with his concession book of eight tickets for £1 (including towel hire), to take a hot bath. Imagining his person doing this was important, though the character of Chella in the novel doesn’t take the bath.

* * *

Gita Mehta’s metaphor for her country is the Indian game of *Snakes and Ladders*. The game is played by rolling dice to determine how many of the one hundred squares, and in which direction, a player can move along. Danger and reward are governed by chance:

India first gained self-government in 1947. Living through our first half-century of nationhood has been a roller-coaster ride, the highs so sudden we have become lightheaded. the lows too deep. as if the game of *Snakes and Ladders* had been invented to illustrate our attempts to move an ancient land towards modern enlightenment without jettisoning from our past that which is valuable or unique. (Mehta, 1998: viii)¹⁰

Mehta’s words describe both the world that Chella grew up in and his fictional identity. He is committed to both himself and his country embracing the modern and what is valuable about the past. While he has a ‘natural’ interest in the sexual–social ‘revolution’ that was beginning in London before he leaves for Australia and meets and loves Rafaela, he also feels spiritual and familial hesitations about his interest.

Chella embodies the pluralism that Mehta discusses and which has a strong presence in contemporary Indian fiction set in post-Independence India.¹¹ Chella, similarly to his country during this post-Partition period, is in flux and open to change. Rafaela, as a young woman raising a child on her own until she and Chella meet up again, learns how to negotiate the society around her, first by lying but then by coming to terms with her past, and the uncertainty of her and her young daughter’s future. Chella comes to demand more of himself than he was capable of at the outset of his story: he recognises that he has strayed far from home, from India, and finds concrete ways to resolve his cultural ambivalences. Both Chella and Rafaela have to negotiate their way through a great deal of difficult life experience, and they do this without coming to hate the dissonance of their own and others’ bodies and histories, but continue forward willingly and with curiosity.

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Notes

- 1 This trip to Queensland and mid-north New South Wales was undertaken with the assistance of a grant from the Australia Council for the Arts, 1997. Other parts of the writing of *Provenance* were assisted with an Australia Council grant, 1999
- 2 Epanomitis won the Vogel Australian Literary Award in the early 1990s with her novel *The Mule's Foal*, a narrative set in Greece.
- 3 Source mislaid
- 4 Conversation with Dr Sidhu 18 4 2000
5. Conversation with Dr Sidhu 18.4.2000.
6. Conversation with Dr Sidhu, 18 4.2000
- 7 In Woolgoolga I also spoke to a number of Sikh men and women, in particular Mr Teja Singh and Ms Rashmere Bhatti. In Sydney I spoke to Dr Davinder Singh-Grewel. A number of scientists assisted me, including my father Dr Messer and others of his colleagues including his PhD Supervisor, Professor Hurd and Dr Max Margenson.
8. A Merchant Ivory film based on the Michael Ondaatje book of the same name, Bloomsbury, Great Britain, 1992
9. Booklet, 'Melbourne City Baths – A History' (no publication details given).
10. However, Chella avoids prejudicial stances; there is none of the fanaticism that created the extreme violence of Partition, and having experienced Partition as a boy, in which millions of Sikhs and Muslims died, he abhors violence.
11. See for instance, Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy*; Arundati Roy, *The God of Small Things*; Pankaj Mishra, *The Romantics*; Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*; and the documentary film *My Mother India* written and directed by Sabina Uberoi

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The Opening of Chapter 1 of *Provenance*

Personally, I have always been attracted by the wrong roads (I mean literally rather than morally) and have wandered off down one whenever I could

Charmian Cliff, "Taking the Wrong Road", 1965

How extraordinary it was that no one had seen her leave. Not one neighbour had spied Rafaela hiking along with her bags, and wandered down to the gate to ask where she was headed. When she tried to find a word for the feeling her escape gave her — and there were fat whole minutes when she could not stop smiling — the word for it was *elation*. The feeling embraced her; as if bidding its time all these years it had been waiting for her to welcome it in. Rafi wanted to share this elation with someone, but with whom? Not until she was well away would there be anyone whom she could safely tell this to.

Rafaela Ellen Mollino — born south of Townsville, now aged nineteen, and Carlo and Norma's only girl — Rafi sat on her duffel bag, hidden behind an old wooden barrel at the end of the train platform. She went over everything that could go wrong, and how to set it right. She snapped a geranium from the tub and plucked decisively at the tiny petals, which fell in red sprinkles onto the wide folds of her skirt. She was wearing her best skirt: tightly belted to hold her nervous stomach flat then falling wide with folds of a heavy cotton printed in creamy dots the size of pennies on a milk-chocolate background. Colour — be it the colour of earth or her skirt — was always important.

Alongside the train station ran a web of sugar cane rail-truck tracks. Beyond the station lay yet more fields of cane. The station was quiet. Empty benches ran along three walls of the waiting room. A kerosene heater sat in a corner, ready for winter. Outside the main building a timetable and framed map of Australia were bolted to the wall. Because the station was so quiet, Rafi got up to examine the map. She dragged her finger down the eastern coastline, making her way through the dust on the glass, following the crosshatched train track from where she stood in Mimosa all the way to Melbourne. She rubbed her forefinger and thumb together, releasing the last of the dust from the map of Australia.

Melbourne was where she was going to learn to paint. The ticket she had bought for Brisbane was as an act of subterfuge. Her family would look for her, she guessed. If they asked the ticket-seller where she was headed — would he even remember her? — her brothers would throw their gear into the truck and head off for Brisbane. Knowing she could outwit them, she felt their vulnerability, saw how Rickie's skin above the rolls of his shirt sleeves was softer and whiter than the skin below, the kind of thing sisters knew long before other women. There wasn't an ounce of remorse in her, yet — let them think she was drowned as they scoured the parks, having a drink at the pubs across the way. Paolo and Chris in the front cabin, Luca and Rickie in the back, driving recklessly from town to town. They should thank her for the adventure, though they were going to fail. For she'd not get off in Brisbane, but roll on further south.

Sydney was not far enough away for her, and so it was to Melbourne she was headed, plunging more than halfway down the continent and the Pacific Ocean's long eastern lip to reach it. Melbourne was world famous; four years

earlier an Olympic city; an international city said the newsreels and magazines — and home to artists. She had read news of Arthur Boyd's *Half Caste* exhibition, liking him unseen though he was criticised; in an art almanac she found at the library she had read of Charles Blackman and John Perceval and Clifton Pugh. Soon she would be seeing their paintings for herself.

When the Sunlander arrived, on time and with more than a dozen carriages, Rafi ran down the cars to hers. She found her place in the half-empty carriage, and slung her bags up into the metal basket above. From her window seat she watched the station's entry-way through which a few latecomers hurried. A station hand helped an elderly woman up into the train. Leaning over to look along the aisle she noticed that the passengers who had been travelling awhile had made themselves comfortable. Bags, shoes and toys spilt into the aisle. Seats were flipped to allow companionable foursomes for cards and talk. Passengers came and went, their jackets and books and overnight bags strewn about. Across from her a slight man who might have been forty, but whose eager features gave him a younger look, sat with a sleeping terrier on his lap. His blond hair was dry and fluffy, and when he tried to catch her eye she turned back to the window. The train was not yet due to leave. She had to satisfy herself with that fact. She craned her head to see who else was coming on board: she hoped there would be no one that she knew, none of her mother's friends; she didn't want this precious elation to end.

With calm authority a husband and wife, he in a sports jacket and she with blue-grey hair, passed Rafi on their way to their seats. Rafi thought she should try to appear nonchalant and less agitated. When had she last been on a train? For outings to Townsville, out-of-town dances, and the rare fishing trip they had driven in her father's truck. The fact was, she had rarely gone anywhere unescorted by her brothers or parents. Really, she was very inexperienced. She ought to search out everything discreetly for herself. If her questions were rudimentary she would stand out, and the train staff would easily remember her.

With a blast of its horn the Sunlander started up. They passed the station-master with his shrill whistle and flag. The platform ended perfunctorily with a sudden drop to gravel and weeds. What relief to be going; to think she would be crossing over the Queensland border in only a couple of days.

Leaving had been as unstoppable as her tumbling sprints down the dunes onto the beach when Rafi could not stand to be in the house one minute longer. Leaving Petal Bay she'd had no inkling of the gossip and story she was to gather to herself. Tumbling down those dunes she had simply roared with frustration at her small town.

In the evening at a glance Petal Bay was a pretty town, when the hot light was fading and the torn skirt of bush and the pinks and greens of the weatherboards danced softly worn. But it was a hard place to live in, and Rafaela had longed for the ineffable to be said — if only just one other person would try — for smoky conversation and the babble of crowds and mountainous peaks instead of the flat, tilled plains of sugar cane. No one in the town of Petal Bay, or the town after that or the next one again, gave a fig about the dozens of pictures she had painted, or the dozens more she planned to paint.

What was it about the town that leached her of ingenuity? The wind whistling through emptied her out. The sandy, loose soil stole her sense of urgency. For the

past three years since finishing school all she had managed was to irritate her parents and help pay her way with her part-time work as a grocer's girl.

Rafi had just turned nineteen. New Year 1960 was a sullen time for her parents with their only daughter recalcitrant, and Carlo's trucking work not bringing in enough because he was sixty and tired and could not make it pay as well as it once had, and Norma half-mad with compulsion for her bridge games and the struggle to keep Carlo's new temper in check, and the other equally pressing fight to stay the salt and sand from their fruit and vegetable garden. Years earlier when Carlo Mollino had sailed to Western Australia he had carried in his trunk the plan of his own mother's kitchen garden. He and Norma toiled for twenty years to replicate it. Unwilling to be outdone by the mother-in-law she had never met, Norma learnt to cook and garden at least as well as the distant matriarch.

Their marriage had been an arrangement of sorts. He had driven in to Fremantle port to collect the fiancée his family had sent along, but the only marriageable girl to disembark was Norma, an English girl whose family of employment had rescinded on the arrangement and not turned up to collect her. As each paced the boards alone, the wharf emptied of people and the pelicans wheeled in from their ocean flights and settled on the posts behind. Sea gulls gathered, waiting for the crews to unload. Norma and Carlo stood looking artlessly about for their assignations, until with some embarrassment he sidled up to ask in his gallant, hesitant English, whom was she expecting?

The town fringed a long beach, the houses and shop pinched between vast sugar cane plantations to the inland and the sea to the east. The sea was too rough for swimming, unless like Rafi you knew where the rips weren't twining the currents. The wind came in fiercely off the breakers, whipping up through the banks of casuarinas that crested the dunes. A couple of hundred houses dotted the streets which wandered in crooked lines. Behind the streets ran back paths littered with broken glass and furnishings and tall asparagus weed.

The urgency she had felt about becoming an artist was worn thin by the sheer loneliness of living in a town that was a shadow of what a town should be.