

As the  
River Runs

Stephen  
Scourfield



First published in 2013 by  
UWA Publishing  
Crawley, Western Australia 6009  
www.uwap.uwa.edu.au

UWAP is an imprint of UWA Publishing  
a division of The University of Western Australia



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA  
*Achieve International Excellence*

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Copyright © Stephen Scourfield 2013

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

9781742584904 (pbk.)

Scourfield, Stephen.  
As the river runs / Stephen Scourfield.  
A823.4

Typeset by J & M Typesetting  
Printed by Griffin Press



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the  
Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

*In time and with water,  
everything changes.*

– Leonardo da Vinci

# One



The snake moves like mercury poured on the ferociously red gravel. It grips the back of the lizard's neck and syringes venom in calculated overdoses. Scuffed arcs either side show where the blue-tongue has put up its fight, but now it and the two-metre king brown are absorbed only by death. The lizard froths at the mouth, cells saturated by poison, but obstinate survival instincts force its tough little body and crazed mind to resist. Every now and then its tail arcs, signalling both insolence and complete hopelessness.

'She can take some poison. I'd'a been well dead by now,' breathes Vincent Yimi, hanging back, mesmerised by the spectacle. The sun is silver on its ringlet body.

'Reckon,' replies Dylan Ward.

'Don't you get too close,' says Vincent, watching uncomfortably as the young bloke crams in so that he can see the diamond in the snake's eyes.

'She's too busy to worry about me.'

Dylan had been watching, almost motionless, for minutes when Vincent noticed him and wandered up.

'I don't like them snakes. Should leave 'em well alone,' he murmurs, scuffing the red Australian dirt with his boots, adjusting the silver Elvis sunglasses he found on a street years ago and that are now his trademark. They cover yellowed eyes crusted with glaucoma. His black skin, so deep and dark that it sucks in the sunlight and leaves his face almost featureless, is glistening with an oily, nervous sweat. Uncle Vincent Yimi. 'You don't want snakes of no sorts around you.'

The lizard's stumpy legs suddenly run in the air, and the king brown's head picks up the rhythm and squirts in more lethal sap. *Pseudechis Australia* doing its thing. *Tiliqua multifasciata* – the central blue-tongued skink – finally getting the message.

'You know about us Aborigines' Dreamtime snakes?' The rainbow serpent that made the universe, and another one that made the rivers, pools and springs. Vincent changing the subject. 'Dreamtime snake is like our mother, the earth. The story of this place.'

'I could sit here all afternoon. Watch it ingest.' Dylan is still fascinated by the moment, anticipating the snake dislocating its jaw, contracting its body in waves, sucking in the corpse to fizz and dissolve inside it.

'It's givin' me the creeps.' Vincent, chilled by the macabre theatre.

'Blackfellas and snakes.'

'Bloody right,' says Vincent. 'Haven't got through 40,000 years in the bush by mucking round with them things. Anyways, better get back inside. They can't settle this without us.'

Dylan and Vincent file back into the mining company's boardroom, where their eyes had picked one another across the negotiating table.

'So we're all agreed in principle on expansion, royalty payments, local labour and conservation,' says chairman Eric Garson eventually. 'We might leave these two to work on the fine detail,' nodding towards them. The locals are a tricky bunch, Garson thinks, but Ward'll fix it up.

'Thank you, gentlemen.' They all troop out, dismissed.

Vincent and Dylan blink back out under the cerulean sky. Vincent shakes his head as he scans the mine's conveyors and passing vehicles, then he turns to Dylan. 'Got any plans?'

'Make sure everyone wins.'

'Nah,' says Vincent. 'I meant, got any plans *now*?'

'Nope.'

'Then how about a lemon squash down the pub?'

'The pub? In Carter's Ford?'

'Yeah. Bit of a drive, but I'll bring you back after.'

'Sounds like a plan to me,' says Dylan. The outback town is more than two hours' drive, off the high plateau and down into the Duncan River valley, and it's a chance to see the landscape alongside the elder. And Dylan knows that's what Vincent is really suggesting.

'Good-o.'

Vincent shambles over to an old four-wheel drive dual cab and humps his bulk in. He scoops rubbish off the passenger floor and seat and throws it back over the headrest.

They go through the security checks, then break free of orange overalls, hardhats with nicknames in black marker, beeping, backing vehicles and the neurotic smell of money.

Vincent glances back towards the mine's dropping boom gate and shakes his head again. 'As long as they're happy in there.'

The ute lumpily builds to ninety kilometres an hour, where the engine rattles settle down. Vincent hums a hybrid mix of tribal chant and country music. 'Funny in there,' he finally says. 'All so damned worried about making squillions. Silly bastards.' There's only a short silence before he corrects himself. 'But ours not to judge...'

'That's right,' says Dylan. 'Some of them are just doing the right thing by their families. Buying their homes, looking after their kids, paying the bills. I know some of them feel they're contributing to the greater good. Providing raw materials for the things we all want. Iron ore for our vehicles. Gas for our energy. Commercial diamonds for lots of things. And some of these guys really do just love mining. I guess there are many ways to be a servant of the landscape.'

Half an hour later, a young bloke with his back to them is playing with a dog by the roadside. Vincent stamps on the brakes, the left disc gripping harder than the right, skewing the Toyota off the edge of the bitumen and onto the dirt. Four hundred and twenty-five thousand square kilometres of the Kimberley, three times the size of England, and only about 35,000 people in the whole joint, and here, on a deserted road in the middle of nowhere, they might just hit one of them.

'Whoa there, girl,' sings Uncle Vincent, manhandling the vehicle to a slithering halt, just in time. The young bloke shambles up to Dylan's wound-down window and sticks his smiling face in. He has long, tightly curled hair with bronze tips, and a headband of bean beads strung on wool.

‘Hiya Uncle. Howzit?’ He wipes his right hand on his left shoulder then sticks it in through the window towards Dylan. ‘Henny. Henny Breeze. G’day.’ He wears a green and purple striped shirt and a muggy cloud of body odour.

Dylan takes it and shakes. ‘Dylan Ward.’

Henny scoops up the puppy and goes to jump in the back.

‘He...’ Vincent’s snarl sounds forced... ‘goes in the tray.’

‘But he’s only a little tacker. He can sit on my lap.’

‘*The tray...*’

‘But Uncle, he might fall out. You know how many dogs die every year like that? Well, I can tell you it’s a damned lot...’ Henny likes to talk.

‘Alright. Alright,’ says Uncle Vincent. ‘But, on yer lap.’

Henny coos to the pup as they pull back onto the bitumen.

Vincent looks straight ahead but talks low to Dylan. ‘He likes to come out for the ride, but the mine gives him the shivers. Reminds him of jail, he reckons. So I leave him in the bush a cupla hours.’

Carter’s Ford sits in a valley of wispy grassland so wide that the edges show the curve of the earth. Most of the year it’s gaspingly dry. Even the most timid, try-your-luck willy-willy wind can whip the red dirt upwards in a spiralling plume.

The valley is dotted with boab trees that have white tucker in olive-green nuts the size of mangoes, fizzy like sherbet. There are bloodwoods with thick, hard branches kinked right to make killer boomerangs. Their oozing ruby sap antiseptic for wounds. Red bloodwood tree boiled to use for colds and flu; bark of emu bush for sores; snake vine for headaches; a paperbark tree, cadjubar, for cooking and carrying, and white eucalypt leaves to flavour fish and meat.

Bush oranges have fruit the size of tennis balls, packed with vitamin C.

Over to the side is the wide, slivering cut of the Duncan River itself. The water from 95,000 square kilometres drains into it and wriggles five hundred kays to the coast. Despite the aquifer beneath, in the Dry season there are just a few tell-tale greening pools left in the riverbed, way below the road bridges; but every Wet season, the northern monsoon's thundering rain combines with gravity to create an awesome force. Early every year, the Duncan River briefly carries more water than India's Ganges.

Uncle Vincent stirs the gearstick and crunches down though the notches long before they pass the town's entry sign. WELCOME TO CARTER'S FORD. The engine settles to a fifty-kay whine and Vincent hooks an arm over the window sill, Henny doing the same in the back. A gaggle of youngsters waves and shouts and Henny jabbars loudly back, circling his hand like royalty. He rocks with laughter.

'Uncle, Uncle. Let me out,' he squeals, and the dual cab's almost padless brakes grind it to a slow halt on wonky discs. Henny slews his cap round backwards, drops one flip-flop and shuffles a foot in.

'Did you lose a thong?' asks Dylan.

'Nah, I found one,' grins Henny. He yells 'see-ya' to Dylan and Vincent, and greets his mates with slappy handshakes. They lurch off down the road together, arms hung around each other's shoulders, the puppy following. 'Cop-ya-later,' chirps Henny, not looking back.

Dylan feels the paradoxical comforts and nervy excitement of extended family and mobs of mates.

‘I dunno,’ says Vincent. ‘That boy’s cup is always half full. The other day him and his mate had one thong each. Henny hadn’t got any, so Cyrus shared his.’

And then, in a confiding tone, ‘Young fellas. You gotta worry about them.’

‘I do,’ says Dylan. He knows this is a hard place for young blokes to live and an easy place for them to die.

Vincent studies him and nods once.

Now that he’s back over the border, in his own country, Vincent Yimi relaxes his grip on the wheel. Carter’s Ford: love it or hate it. A few thousand people in the wide grid of streets alongside the river, galvanised to the place by histories. The natural crossing was just outside town and blackfellas used it, following songlines. Then whitefellas came for pasture and gold. But when the river was up they all just had to wait, put in their place by nature; something Aborigines already knew and Europeans still had to learn.

They built the road bridge and trucks followed. Beasts and crushed boulders going out; Fanta and fridges coming in.

Truck airbrakes suck outside as they stand in the tarted-up hotel, Uncle Vincent holding out a twenty-dollar note, waiting to be served, others in and out before him.

‘What’s yours?’ says Vincent. ‘Fraid we don’t have them fancy city boutique beers. Kangaroo’d eat the hops.’ His own joke.

‘Want to talk about the mine?’ asks Dylan.

‘Nah,’ says Vincent, moving his elbow back from the damp bar towel. ‘No need. We’ll get something out of this. You’ll help those blokes get to the right thing.’

Dylan looks quizzical. 'You know that?'

'We know you.'

'You do?'

'We know all about you,' says Vincent mischievously.  
'They hire you but they don't buy you. Us mobs talk a lot.  
Just not everyone can hear.'

## Two



The tropical north-west feels as different as its story demands. Eighteen hundred million years ago, it drifted in and welded itself onto the ancient landmass of Gondwana. Later, much of it was covered by a warm, shallow sea. A fringing coral reef hundreds of kilometres long now stands as sharp hills. Then there was ice several kilometres thick. As it thawed, it cut the Duncan River valley and gorges through the limestone ranges.

And, deep down, the geology of the place had been creating other treasures.

The land around the mine has long been crisscrossed by surveyors' lines – the welts of fiscal initiation. Geologists' plastic sample bags accrued in forgotten heaps, hardened and cracked in the sun. They left coloured plastic shards and spilt their contents back to the earth. They had an inkling that this was the top of a lava tube, spewing up diamonds from twenty kays down. Core samples on trolleys were wheeled into the

Scimitar Project's city boardroom to impress prospective investors; as wide as a thigh and their surfaces pocked with diamonds, uncut and rough like sugar cubes. Presentations and gourmet finger food, hard sell and handshakes. Eric Garson's final trick was to mix one of the uncuts into the silk bag of handmade chocolates that he sent home for wives. A seductive rough diamond.

Then the whole resources sector started to boom. Marginal projects got the green light. Iron ore was shipped to China as fast as the country could be loaded into bulk ships; liquefied natural gas went out in deals worth billions; mineral sands were scraped off the land. Uranium and diamonds became hot runners on the stock exchange and the Scimitar Project's share price rocketed.

Soon white demountable buildings stood in rows. Amber lights flashed on vehicles. Blasting crews blew the guts out of the joint. Power shovels loaded forty-five tonnes a time into haulpak trucks that carried enough rock to fill a house. It was crushed, ground and sifted, and out of it all came tiny nuggets held between tweezers under a magnifying glass.

The initial local negotiations had been tricky and Eric Garson wasn't planning on doing that again. He needed someone the traditional owners would go along with. So he'd put out the word and come up with Dylan Ward.

Most mine site offices have bare walls with holes punched by fists, or girlie and fast-car posters, or the kids' drawings, but Dylan's feels like a gallery. On a shelf in one corner there's a handmade wandoo mandolin and two finely carved boab nuts. A painting by Mabel Scarletfinch hangs on one

wall; the creator spirit's big face has two dark eyes and no mouth and its round head seems to throw out light. Near it, there are two old hats with holed crowns and gnawed edges, spattered with diesel or blood. One was Mabel's, and the other was worn to death by Jimmy Skinner, who had dreams and painted them, and who taught Mabel to work in ochres, when she asked to learn. Everything in the room has meaning.

Dylan is at a silver laptop, attaching his final report and emailing it to the chairman.

Garson is impressed. Ward seems to have put together the basis of a watertight royalty agreement. He reckons the local labour clause is a load of baloney, but it's no skin off his nose. When it falls in a heap, he'll just bring in more hard-arsed Maoris. Ward has outlined a separate traineeship plan to be developed with the local community – cooked up with Yimi, no doubt. Classrooms, lecturers, broadband. Garson types hard with two fingers, 'Thanks for the email. A mutually beneficial option.'

But don't hold your breath, he thinks.

Dylan has just received Garson's reply when the phone rings.

'Vincent Yimi here.'

'Good to hear you. What's up?'

'We're going up-river,' says Uncle Vincent, straight to the point. 'You can come if you want to.'

'I'd like to. Thanks.' Knows not to over-enthus.

'Henny'll come along. Keeps him out of strife. Airplane too.'

Dylan's confused. 'By aircraft?'

There's no change in Vincent's voice. 'No,' he says. 'You go up the river in a boat. Nelson's got one. But we'll take my uncle, Airplane Cutoff. He wants to see them gorges again, and we need him with us. He's from Minjugal people.'

'Coupla days,' continues Vincent. 'Bring a swag, that's all. We'll have all the tucker an' that.'

Dylan rings and books a room at the hotel in Carter's Ford – it's only a couple of hours' drive, but he reckons he'll spend an extra night there when they come off the river.

And then he dials another number. The phone is quickly answered. 'Erindale Station. Amy speaking.'

'Hi Amy, how are you? It's Dylan Ward.'

'Dylan – how lovely to hear you.' And Amy Parkes means it. 'How have you been?'

They talk for a few minutes, ranging easily round subjects. More than the commonplace. 'Were you after Billy? He's out in the shed. I can put you through to him out there now – he's wired it all up.'

'Thanks Amy. It's been lovely catching up.'

'For me too. Any chance of you coming by this way soon?'

'I'll try.'

'Well, whenever it is, we'll be pleased to see you. Bye then.'

He waits for Billy to come to the phone, and conjures up an image of the work shed it's hanging in. Dylan remembers the story of how station boys Billy and his big brother Ace had fled a rotten father when they were young. How they'd set out to break the pattern of the men in that family, but how Ace had been dragged back into it. How he'd bitten on the barrel of a gun and pulled the trigger in a shed probably

just like the one Billy is in now. Of Billy's agony at the loss.

'G'day Dylan. How's it hangin'?'

And they chat easily, too. News and views. Life and limb. Billy tells him how things are on Erindale Station, his million-acre spread that's run smart and diversified away from just cattle, then ranges out into other issues down the east end of the Kimberley. Dylan fills in bits on the west of it. Tells him he's just off up the Duncan River with Vincent Yimi, Henny Breeze and Airplane Cutoff.

'That'll be interesting. An invitation like that's not to be sneezed at. They're the men.'

It's a hullabaloo. Nelson Milson has tied his yellow polyethylene boat to the riverbank and is stalking around it in bare feet and bright blue overalls, sleeves rolled high up his thin biceps. Wisps of hair spiral off his mottled white head. He's exasperated. He coils pieces of rope which are too short for any real purpose, shifts the red fuel tank a smidge one way, then back to the original spot, stows the boat hook – made from an old broom-handle with a bend of wire taped to it – then gets it out again. He shouts orders at Henny, who is lugging gear. Uncle Vincent tells Henny to carry the swags down the steep bank, then Nelson orders him to take them back up. 'Heavy stuff first,' he barks, turning back to his tidying. Henny lugs down the big coolbox, but then Vincent tells him to stop fussing with that and get the water jerries in pronto.

By the time Dylan arrives, it is at fever pitch.

'Sorry I'm late. Flat tyre,' he explains. The mine vehicle's right rear gave out halfway into town and he eventually found the jack jammed under the back seat.

‘No worries,’ says Vincent. ‘We’re still getting organised.’  
‘Come back tomorrow,’ chimes Henny cheerily, ‘and you won’t have missed much...’

‘Less of the cheek, you,’ shouts Uncle Vincent, feigning annoyance. ‘You lot just stop ginning around and get that esky into the boat.’

‘Let me give you a hand,’ says Dylan, darting forward to grab one handle of the big plastic coolbox.

‘Cheers,’ says Henny. ‘Nice to have someone who’s not giving orders. Got enough of them.’

‘Cheeky young bugger,’ chips Uncle Vincent.

‘Lost control of that boy,’ says Nelson, bending to shift the fuel tank back to position B.

‘Never had it,’ says Henny. Water off a duck’s back.

‘You could use a little respect, my lad,’ says Nelson.

‘I could use a drink,’ says Henny. ‘And a pretty girlfriend along, instead of you old fellas.’ He swallows down great gobs of air as he laughs. *Old fellas*. ‘And you blokes could do with pretty girlfriends along too, I reckon.’

‘When you get to my age,’ says Uncle Vincent, ‘you’re happier with half an ounce of tobacco. Anyway, what could be more perfect?’

‘If the river was made out of nice, cold beer,’ says Henny.

‘Nah – that’d be no good.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘You’d have to piss in the boat.’

‘Dylan Ward.’ Dylan introduces himself to Nelson as he slithers down alongside the gunwale. ‘I’d shake, but...’ He hangs on to the esky.

‘Better off doing a deal of work with a hand than poncing around,’ says Nelson, now with too much of a head of steam for niceties.

‘You’ll come to love him.’ Henny stage whispers to Dylan. ‘He’s really as sweet as pie.’

‘Don’t push your luck, you...’ says Nelson furiously, clenching his right hand into a fist and wheeling it back over his left shoulder, ready to strike, pointing a thin, bony elbow threateningly at Henny. ‘Or you’ll get what-for.’

Dylan expects another smart-arse answer from Henny, but that’s where it stops. ‘Yes sir,’ he says, signalling to Dylan with raised eyebrows.

‘C’mon you blokes. Stop arsing about,’ says Uncle Vincent, ‘or it’ll be dark before we get away.’

They one-two-three lift the esky over the side of the boat and, oddly, within minutes everything is loaded and they are all but ready to go. Dylan clips his car keys onto the karabiner inside his daypack as he heads back down to the boat, carrying a small black case with him.

‘You gonna bury the cat down there?’ asks Henny.

‘Mandolin,’ says Dylan.

‘Yay,’ sings Henny.

‘Better get Uncle. Bring him down,’ says Vincent to Henny. ‘An’ we’ll be off.’

Airplane Cutoff sits in the passenger seat of Vincent’s four-wheel drive, calmly staring ahead. Unbearded but unevenly shaved, his dark chin is spiked with stray whiskers. Black hair flour-dusted with grey starts from high up on his forehead and cascades backwards and well below his shoulders. Surf-style

sunglasses with shiny maroon frames are pushed up on his head, held by the neoprene band that is tight around the back. His loose white T-shirt, with THE BIG KAHUNA written across in yellow spangles, has been worn to a soft thinness. He could be an old forty-eight or a young eighty-four.

Henny talks gently to the elder, telling him they are ready, and the old man snaps out of his trance. He swings his left leg out of the door; a thin calf and bony ankle jutting from his baggy pants. When Airplane stands, Dylan senses a tribal body under the western clothes, not only in the shape, but in the stance – the slightly bowed legs, pelvis tilted forward, elbows hooked out but arms held long.

Henny walks a little behind Airplane as he heads towards them with high and slightly unsure steps.

Vincent introduces Dylan and the old man nods without looking at the newcomer. Then Henny takes Airplane by one arm and gently helps him into the boat. ‘There, Uncle,’ he says, leading him to the pile of swags. ‘You sit there, comfortable-like.’

Henny jumps back out of the boat, shapes the thumb and third finger of his right hand like a crescent moon and sticks them between his teeth. He whistles a long, shrill note. ‘Ready to cast off, Admiral Nelson,’ he says in best Pommy.

Nelson Milson splutters, ‘Just let go that line.’

‘Aye, aye, Cap’n Blackbeard, ye old pirate,’ drawls Henny. And then he adds, ‘Hey Cap’n – you know how to make a pirate irate?’

Nelson gives him a withering look.

‘Take the pee out of him,’ continues Henny, unabashed.

‘Get it? The ‘P’? Pirate? Irate? Learnt that one in spelling class.’

‘All the money the taxpayers spent on yer education, and that’s it?’ growls Nelson.

‘Yep,’ grins Henny proudly. ‘I guess it is.’

‘Whatta circus,’ mutters Vincent.

Airplane sits silently in the bow and looks ahead.

Some parts of the river are edged by tall melaleucas, the paper-like bark hanging off like sheets of sunburnt skin. Wild pear, corkwood and coolamon – *Gyrocarpus*, which kids throw high in handfuls, to watch them propeller against the blazing sky. Black flying foxes hang by the hundred in the eucalypts, one or two letting go, circling on membranous wings and reattaching further along. Three Johnson crocodiles sun themselves on rocks, like plastic toys, their cold-blooded lives revolving around temperature as they have done for 150 million years. Using the high sun now, the shade later, and the cooler water.

The river flows serpentine through lower country and then into gorges, where red rock walls rise either side until the boat is dwarfed. Two short-eared rock wallabies scamper ledge to ledge for cover.

Nelson, sitting at the stern, twists off the throttle grip and the Yamaha outboard idles. The monumental walls are fractured, a few big fig trees rooted in the smallest crevices. The eternal optimism of *Ficus*.

There are four distinct colours: rock already reddening with the falling sun, the lush green edging, the dark blue of the water, and the white wake streaming out in smooth arcs behind the boat.

‘Good country,’ Dylan shouts to Vincent, over engine noise.

Vincent nods without taking his gaze off the river ahead. The place holds hearts and beliefs.

In a big Wet season, the Duncan River’s catchment might get 1600 millimetres of rain, and more than a million litres of water a second come down the river, but now it is calm and the late sun paints it an oily gold.

‘This is it,’ Uncle Vincent shouts to Nelson over the Yamaha outboard. ‘We’ll camp here.’ He points to his right, on the outside of a bend, where the vegetation gives way to a sandy beach. Two hundred metres back, through *Pandanus* and *Livistona* palms, the sandstone rises in a sheer face with a deep vertical crack. In there, the vegetation looks even lusher.

‘Tie us off,’ Nelson shouts to Henny as they bump the bank, and Henny leaps into ankle-deep, gravelly sand.

Airplane Cutover bends for a smooth, washed-up stick, clacks it on a flat rock to test its stoutness, and sets off cautiously towards the rock face behind.

Henny and Dylan are lifting gear out of the boat, while Nelson is stringing out ropes to trees and burying the anchor in the sand. ‘Henny,’ Uncle Vincent calls. ‘You can leave that. Go with him now.’

‘Yes, Uncle,’ he says, compliant, and jogs up the sand to follow just behind the old man.

‘I’ll give you a hand.’ Vincent nods to Dylan. ‘They got business up there.’

‘You got a woman?’ Vincent is pottering at the river’s edge.

‘Not at the moment,’ Dylan answers, caught off-guard by the blunt question.

‘I thought there was something wrong. Good-looking young bloke like you should have a woman.’

‘What do you mean “something wrong”?’

‘Something not settled in here,’ the older man bangs a fist on his own heart. ‘Ever been someone special?’

‘There was once, but it didn’t work out. Perhaps it wasn’t the right time.’

‘Well, even a broken clock has the right time twice a day,’ says Vincent.

‘Maybe it wasn’t that it was the wrong time, then, or even the wrong thing,’ Dylan says. He pauses. ‘I just *did* the wrong thing.’

‘We can all let ourselves down sometimes.’

‘Yeah, well I really did. Let myself down – more, importantly, I let her, Jules, down. We were young and really caught up in environmental stuff. I met her through the forest protests down south...’

‘Old-growth stuff. I heard about that,’ says Vincent.

‘It got nasty – the police and government departments in there burning our camps, protesters living on platforms up trees, chaining ourselves in the way of bulldozers. And then there were the dragons.’

The last word is almost drowned by river-sound.

‘Dragons?’

‘Car bodies. We got car bodies and cut a hole in the bottom just big enough to put a hand through. Then dug a pit underneath and concreted in a cylinder as long as your arm. Fixed a dog collar in the bottom so that you could clip

it round your wrist. Then we concreted the cylinder – and the whole car – in the ground. You laid in the car, pushed your arm through and “locked on”. It was all made so you couldn’t get your arm out.’

‘Scary.’

‘Yeah, it was scary alright, but we were so caught up in the thing. We believed we were doing it for future generations; that we could change the world. We just wanted the place protected – turned into a national park. Lots of us wanted to do a dragon.’

‘You did it?’

‘Yes, I did.’

‘They got you out, though. I can see that.’

‘Yeah, they got me out. The others ran off and it took the police and emergency guys nearly a day to cut and dig me out. Compressors running big angle grinders and jackhammers to break up the concrete. And I got frightened.’

‘I’d-a been bloody frightened, too.’

‘Not really scared of being hurt or anything. I just got terrified of the repercussions. The guys were talking to me about it. I panicked about getting a criminal record – it suddenly became real. Not a game. A lot of the protesters had records. They were put on a good behaviour bond first time, then sent to jail the second time. I was studying, had a future. I worried about what it would do to mum and dad.’

‘So?’

‘So I did a deal.’

‘I see.’

‘I got off. The others didn’t. Jules got the worst of it. She was already on a bond and ended up in a women’s prison for six months.’

They sit in silence.

‘I kidded myself it was the right thing because I’d be of more use if I didn’t have a police record. But that wasn’t the truth of it. I just bailed on her.’

Vincent turns quietly to him. ‘Well, you wouldn’t have been doing this negotiation for the mine if you’d been in that sort of trouble. You’ve helped us mob and others before us.’

Dylan doesn’t answer.

Henny stumbles back into camp with an armful of firewood and Dylan moves to help him unload.

Then Henny holds out his fingers and Dylan sees a stodge of green ants. ‘Here, try these. Old Uncle just showed me.’ He looks thrilled. ‘They taste like honey. Learnin’ cultural stuff here.’

‘Never had them before?’

‘Must be kiddin’. More of a burger man, me.’

‘How’s this?’ Nelson appears from behind rocks, holding up a barramundi almost the length of his arm.

‘Good going,’ Vincent says.

‘Too easy,’ Nelson replies. He cleans the fish downstream, watched by a white-breasted sea eagle which eventually swoops in to hook up the guts as they float away. Nelson lays the silver fish out on the sand near the fire, goes to the boat and sprays his finger with water-dispersant oil. Dylan’s look questions it.

‘Catfish barb,’ says Nelson. ‘Caught one before this and he got me. Best thing for it, CRC.’

‘Anyway,’ he says. ‘Someone better cook this lot up. I could eat the crutch out of a low-flying duck.’

The fish has been grilled over coals and they have eaten the two hard, slightly black-cruled homemade loaves from a cardboard box. The billy can has been boiled twice and the meal washed down with strong black tea.

In mellow mood, they lie back on their swags as the rising moon picks out the bends of the river in silver. The water has a constant song.

‘When the earth was just born, the great Dreamtime snake came here,’ Airplane says suddenly in a strong voice. He looks from Henny to Dylan and back again. ‘He moved through this country, making this river. That’s the story here. This snake, he’s the big creator. Big boss spirits helped him bring laws and kinship.’ Then the old uncle seems to vanish again back into the dark.

There is silence for a long time, then Henny murmurs a country song and Dylan starts to strum a soft accompaniment on his mandolin. Henny smiles appreciatively and sings a little louder. When the remembered words have petered out, he hums a bit, then lies back and listens to the mandolin’s sweet chords and the sound of the contented elder breathing heavily as he drifts into sleep.

‘The old man’s comfortable in this place,’ Vincent tells Dylan under his breath. ‘No-one above him here – only the spirits themselves. He’s an important man in this country, and the place knows him. Feels at ease too.’ His eyes are amber in the firelight, and he fixes them on Dylan. ‘And he likes you.’

‘He does?’

‘Oh yes, he likes you.’

‘How would you know if he didn’t?’

‘He wouldn’t be like this.’

Under the great sweep of stars set in velvet, Dylan dreams he is meandering. He can't separate his mind and body. There is just this more abstract sense of him – the concept of his whole self – being gently sucked along an arcing path by a silvery gravity. He is not scared and not resistant. Just enticed by the feeling of being guided. He glides through his colubrine unconsciousness.

Dylan wakes in the dark with the feeling still in his head.

'Been dreamin'?' Vincent is almost invisible in the night, sitting near coals that are now only the faintest red.

'Yes,' says Dylan.

'Good dream?'

'I think so. I don't often dream – or, at least, I don't remember my dreams – but when I do, they're usually bad.'

'About the girl?'

'I suppose so. Guilt.'

'Every right-thinking man has it, I reckon. I read stuff from the suicide psychologists saying guilt's a useless emotion, but I don't reckon so. I reckon you get guilt from conscience, and if you haven't got one of *them* you're not the full ticket.' Vincent pokes the red cinder bed. 'Mind you, you'd probably sleep better without one, and be less likely to hang up your boots and take an early shower. The bead grows brighter. 'What now for you?'

'Home for a bit,' replies Dylan. 'Time with mum and dad. Give them a hand around the place. See what happens. Look out for another contract.'

'The city? Good luck,' grins Vincent. 'That place is no good for anyone. There's too much trouble down there.'

'You think so?'

‘Yeah. It’s just gravity, I reckon. The sludge gathers at the bottom.’

‘The city?’

‘Yeah,’ Vincent says, meeting Dylan with a steady gaze. ‘Too much bad stuff. Too many people burgling, stealing to swap for drugs, running in mobs, stealing cars, hurting folk. You know it, I know it.’ Then he smiles, like sun breaking through dark cloud. ‘Besides, there’s a lot of this country in you now. You’ll miss this place more-n-more.’

‘You can take the boy from the country but you can’t take the country from the boy?’

‘Something like that.’

Something more than that. Country. A word. A place. But the Kimberley has become more than either of these things to Dylan. It is a learnt place for him, but has such substance that it has become a complete entity. This country permeates, percolates, diffuses through him. He has absorbed it and they have become fused. It subsumes him.

This country is not just a place. Not just geography or geology, but an amalgamation of landscape and sentiment. He is steeped in the country. It is that simple; that complex.

When Dylan walks into the hotel’s reception, there’s a folded sheet of paper waiting for him. The receptionist slides it over and he opens it. ‘I’m in town. If you have time, give me a call. Maybe we can catch up. If not, no hassles – maybe next time you’re here or I’m there.’ There’s a mobile phone number, and Billy Parkes’s name across the bottom.

Dylan immediately presses in the number and Billy answers.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘After we talked the other day, I thought I’d come down, just on the off-chance. In case you had a bit of time on your hands. Used it as an excuse to pick up some gear in Kununda, too.’ In fact, Billy has driven seven hours down a corrugated dirt road awash with gravel to the town of Kununda, fuelled up, and then another six hundred kilometres on the bitumen. Billy knows how to value friendship, and the importance of connection.

‘Well, I really appreciate it,’ says Dylan. Not shy to fix him eye to eye. ‘I really like our friendship.’

Billy and Dylan look a little alike. Though Billy is a few years older, in his mid-thirties, he’s on the same wavelength, and for Dylan he’s been a personal conduit into the northern landscape.

‘I love the place and I might know a bit about it, but I’m not really from here. I’ve never lived here,’ Dylan had once told him. ‘I’m not local. I’ve never really lived here for a long period.’

‘I don’t see how any of that matters,’ said Billy. ‘You get the place.’

‘Yes, but you know it in a different way. An everyday way. And you’ve seen the use of the landscape change – you’ve been part of it, instrumental in it.’

There’s a trigger in the sentence that fires off memories for Billy. When he and his brother Ace were boys, many of the stations were overgrazed dustbowls, but Billy could see the possibilities of diversity. And here it is – more careful grazing, tourism, conservation. ‘You know, when I was a kid, you could drive from one side of the Kimberley to the other

and only see three or four vehicles on the way. People would stop in the middle of the road to chat.

‘Now you’d get mown over. There are hundreds. Thousands. It’s a huge shift.’

It was a shift that Ace couldn’t make, that tore them apart, and which led to Ace’s violent end. A wound that Billy still carries, but which friends like Dylan help to heal.