

## Complex Sclerophyll

*Isabelle Li*

### SEVEN MOONS

If life is a race, then time is the winner. You run as fast as you can, but she has wings, and you thrash forward only to clasp her ever lengthening shadows. Crystal shuts her notebook.

In front of her, a few passengers sit motionless, spread like a hand of cards, their true selves withheld behind the identical stoops, except for a rectangular man, chatting to the driver from the side seat, his generous eyes and lips beaming with Southern European warmth. Crystal feels an urge to commit this face to memory. Stirred by her gaze, he turns her way, but she withdraws before their eyes meet.

From beneath the broad brim of her sunhat, Crystal surveys the backstreets in the slant afternoon light. Her suburb is divided by a concourse centred on an art deco cinema. The south is adjacent to the prestigious peninsular that juts into the main harbour. She lives in the north, which she terms “the last perfumed pocket of Sydney,” enveloped by the tranquil backwaters of Middle Harbour.

With her mind’s eye she scans her list of friends, and evaluates their suitability for driving her home after the surgery. David lives closest. She sends him a text message. He responds instantly: “No problem. I’ll take the day off.” She tells him not to do that yet, because she still has the option of changing her mind.

Half way up the street, at the stop opposite the public school, she alights in front of a lilac bush with abundant flowers, their fragrance evoking acute memories of her childhood. She cuts across a laneway to her street. The air is warm without a shiver of breeze, even within view of the vitreous sea under an orange sky. Boats are moored in the bays, except for one of metallic sheen that cuts the water clean, and casts a long wake widening towards the shore. She shakes her head, trying not to think about the surgery.

It's that time of the year when she likes to drink her tea on the balcony overlooking the purple puffs of jacaranda dotting the gentle slopes of the district. The tree in front of her apartment always blooms with such intensity that it threatens to take her breath away. Spring here is hallucinogenic, she often thinks. Then one day, it'll be so windy that all the smoke is blown away and the streets are randomly clad in torn purple shawls. But soon the fearsome summer sun will win the battle, beating down on every route she can possibly take. She'll dread going out during the day because it feels too much like someone else's favourite weather. Given a choice, she'd only venture out at dusk, when the magpies start singing to each other their melodic home song. She was once easily lost along the winding streets around her block, confused by the endless retaining walls and picket fences covered in dense foliage and masses of jasmine flowers, the air laden with their sun-drenched sweetness.

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David shows up two hours later and presents her with ten peer-reviewed papers on complex sclerosing lesions. "Modern medicine is all about risk management. That's the whole point of screening. Admittedly, the stats are not specific to your age group, family history, or ethnicity. But both the UK and Ireland's national guidelines recommend excision biopsy to reduce the chances for Type II errors." His stubby finger points to the paragraphs highlighted in fluorescent yellow, eyes bright and serious, ursine girth steaming. At the first mention of dinner he remembers he has a bottle of white in the car, chilled.

Crystal turns on the ceiling fan in addition to opening all the doors and windows with screens. She decides to make fried rice with peas, eggs and anchovy—as long as there's ginger, shallots and tamari, it's always tasty. And she has jars of eggplant marinated with garlic and vinegar, and wild olives with lemon wedges and herbs.

They met at the Writers' Festival in May, where David had a hypoglycaemia incident. He's started using an insulin pump recently, which releases a steady trickle throughout the day. He shows Crystal his blood glucose monitoring kit. At a press, the lancet shoots out a needle and punctures his

fingertip, and he places a drop of blood on a test strip. Within seconds, the digital meter displays his glucose level, and he adjusts the pump for an estimated dinner dosage. "Someone in NSW Health wants to crack down on the overuse of the disposable strips, because they're subsidised."

Crystal laughs. "It's the best example of false economy. Can't they weigh up the cost of diabetic care with that of the paper strips?"

David eats quickly, voraciously.

She hears a beep from his pump. "How's Rosie?"

"She's gone cold," he says, with his mouth full.

"Were you in touch when you travelled?"

"Yes, and I bought her a set of coasters from the Art Institute of Chicago."

"Coasters?"

"Yes, of three major French impressionist paintings."

"And then?"

"I asked if she wanted to see the Biennale. She said she'd check, but she never rang."

"What does she like to do?"

"Dining out, at places too expensive for me. I don't mind eating beforehand, and keeping her company. But she doesn't like it."

"I see."

"On a more cheerful note, I bought a state of the art sound system: the integrated amplifier is a Rotel, and the speakers are Polk."

"Maybe you could invite Rosie over for a jam session. You can each play your favourite music and share some takeaway."

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Crystal serves osmanthus tea and dark chocolate after dinner.

"How's your doctorate coming along?" David asks, while using a pocket scale to measure out the chocolate.

"I've always admired Marcel and have read all his published work. He wasn't supposed to take on new students because of his sabbatical in Hong Kong this year and impending retirement. But he did. I consider myself most fortunate."

"He's fortunate too." David takes another sip from the white porcelain teacup. "What about your poetry translation?"

"It's taking longer than I thought. But don't worry. I've started three pieces for your speculative fiction anthology. Do you want to hear the stories?"

"Please!" He stops munching on the chocolates.

"The first is titled 'Seven Moons.' It happens at a time when illnesses

are eradicated and crimes medicalised, from larceny to homicide; the death rate is low and the population size optimised. The Future Forum is a think tank responsible for formulating major policy, including devising a fair and transparent scheme for birth quotas. On the last night of the life of the chairman, Edgar, the committee nominates Bella as the next leader, but she declines. Unbeknown to the others, Bella's been in love with Edgar, who was fatally attacked ten years ago. The brain reconstruction to save his life followed his prior directives and overwrote interpersonal attachment as one of the inconsequential functions. As Edgar's bionic brain is reaching its expiry, the suppressions start to fail and he falls for Bella. Their romance happens under the seven moons, a satellite system for night-time illumination, one of Edgar's monumental accomplishments in energy conservation. The six artificial moons are always perfect, only the real moon waxes and wanes, like human emotions. As the chief scientist regulating the hormonal levels of the society, Bella breaks all the rules to bear Edgar's child, and escapes from earth to a new planet."

"I like it—quite philosophical, really." David nods.

"The second story is titled 'Beauty is the Night.' It starts like this: *In this day and age, to work as a model is to compete with androids.* A space garbage collector is in love with a model. He's often sent on long solitary missions, and when he's back, he is obsessed with taking photographs of her, every shot as though he's seeing her for the first time, and the last. But they have a fight when she finds out that he's had an android travelling with him as a sexual companion. When he eventually gathers enough courage to propose marriage, she's already undertaken the procedure to convert to an android, so she will never age, never die, and never have her heart broken. They part at the end. She walks away with her usual grace, to inaudible music, while he turns, stumbling into the bright night now stripped of all its beauty and hope."

"That's so sad, Crystal. But we do need melancholic stories to balance the nerdy ones."

"The third is titled 'Octopus Island.' A scientist has finally completed his lifelong endeavour, creating a fantasy island, which is a genetically modified giant octopus, floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. During the day the surface of the island absorbs solar power. At night the island self-illuminates in areas of activity and movement, because the octopus has a distributed nervous system sensitive to stimulation, and depending on its mood, the glow changes colours. The island becomes an instant success as a tourist attraction, particularly for dance performances. But an explosion staged by an extremist group sends the island into spasm, injuring many teenage children. The scientist can fix the problem and restore

the island but he's realised that whatever he does is predicated on the octopus's pain. He abandon's the project and thereby his career. At the last moment the sky is a diamond studded doona, and underneath the sea breathes rhythmically. The scientist sits in his boat, all alone. The octopus and he are finally one, as they slowly drift apart."

"Nice. You can put together your own collection."

"One day, maybe, and I'll call it *Body of Knowledge*."

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At night, inside the translucent tepee of the shower, Crystal examines herself thoroughly. Nothing sinister is visible or palpable. But the probe of the ultrasound, its potency disguised by a rubber cap, its intrusiveness lathered with warm lubricant; the film plates of the mammoth mammography machine, its cold weight crushing the most tender parts of her body; the fine needles piercing her with high pitched pain; the loaded automatic needles springing multiple shots and shaking her to the core; the stained micrographs, like ominous synoptic charts—they all conspire to imply a different story. "No doctor would let you walk away with this," the breast surgeon concluded, closing the numbered folder that had her name on it.

Later, lying in bed, with all her senses awoken and inhibitions allayed, Crystal experiences a moment of bliss. Wind rises from the water, gathering strength as it advances uphill, leafing through the coastal sclerophyll. A cool change comes through the window and fills the room, swaddling her, dark, deep, familiar, yet new. The world is no longer made up of concepts but pure, intense feelings. She tucks herself in, and decides not to be afraid.

## FIVE FORMS OF LOSS

Crystal is thrilled by Marcel's invitation to have Christmas lunch and spend the night at their place in the Highlands. For the occasion, she wears a blue cotton dress and a silk scarf, hoping to look country but sophisticated. For gifts, she brings two jars of homemade pickles wrapped in tie-dyed cloth.

Marcel is waiting on the platform when her train arrives. He talks most of the way, his accent warm, his words wise. The region is centred on a few historical towns, and the cool temperate climate reminds him of his hometown in northern France.

After fifteen minutes they turn onto an unsealed road. Marcel exchanges friendly horns with his neighbour, a large, jovial man on an ATV.

The front lawn of Heatherbrae is impeccably mown, velvety as a putting green. Lavender and thyme line the stone paths, their purple flowers

attracting white butterflies. The blue weatherboard cottage looks spotless, its railings covered in flushes of climbing rose.

Lucy greets them at the door, wearing a red Chinese top and a pair of green silk pants, presumably to resonate with the colours of Christmas. Her sharp-featured face is powdered and rouged, and the single bud of gardenia in her bun overpowers Marcel's distinctive aftershave.

Crystal has heard anecdotally that Lucy suffered some tragic event in 1989, hence her arrival in Australia as a political refugee. They've met before and she found Lucy's highly strung personality unnerving. But she's determined to befriend her.

Lucy shows Crystal the large living space fitted with Turkish silk carpets, Indian saris, Bhutan fabrics, and Ming style furniture. The master bedroom is downstairs and the loft upstairs for guest accommodation, marked with ornate timber balustrades.

"How do you find studying with a supervisor by correspondence?" Lucy asks while ushering Crystal to the table on which a gilded dining set is already laid.

"Marcel was only three hours and an email away. I'm grateful for his patience, guiding a student with no track record in research."

"You're a practitioner, Crystal, with invaluable experience, especially for conducting practice-led research," says Marcel.

"Oh the two of you, flattering each other like Chinese." Lucy laughs and brings out a combination of Western and Chinese dishes. "Have you been back to China lately?" she asks Crystal after they are all seated.

"I took a tour to Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an."

"Xi'an's my hometown!"

"We were caught in the traffic there one day, and right next to us, a brawl broke out between a driver and a motorcyclist. People gathered, pulled the two apart and counselled them. Soon the tension dissolved. I promoted the incident as an epitome of Chinese traditional culture."

"The police are never fast enough and there are so many busybodies in Xi'an—next time you tell your tour group!" Lucy says.

"My tour group encompasses all sorts. On the last day in Beijing, a guy complained about pain in his eye. I took him to Xiehe Hospital, and invoked the possibility of acute angle closure glaucoma to jump the queue. But the doctor couldn't find anything wrong and suggested hysteria. The chap told me afterwards he was an ophthalmologist and wanted to check out the medical system in China. He was curious. I was furious!"

Lucy laughs and Marcel echoes good-heartedly, dabbing the corners of his mouth.

Crystal senses she's been accepted by the lady of the house, and the

cordial relationship has pleased her professor.

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Lucy and Marcel bought the 25 acre hobby farm ten years ago from a Scottish couple and inherited a dozen highland cattle, which they've kept as pets. After lunch Marcel walks out into the blazing sun to herd the cattle, and Crystal offers to help.

Instinctively Crystal wants to circle the herd like a terrier, but Marcel believes in passivism. From afar, she was charmed by the breed's stout stature, long horns, and girly locks shielding their faces. At close quarters, she finds it frightening to position herself within the cattle's "flight zone," while they chew their cud nonchalantly, all the while observing her out of the corners of those bovine eyes. Two chubby calves, confused, run towards her and nearly knock her over. With great reluctance, the herd makes its way into the new paddock, and Marcel shuts the gate.

"I miss the sun here." He removes his bucket hat, raising his chin towards the rays. "Unfortunately the Oriental Pearl has turned grey. Pollution is ubiquitous in China, and Hong Kong is not spared. It's good for Lucy though, to be closer to home."

"Can she go back to the Mainland yet?"

"No—I don't think she wants to either. She still has nightmares, and it's worse if she's under pressure. The GFC was too much even for a natural gambler." He leads the way further afield. "She's quite settled now—it turned out a good thing that she lost her investment banking job. But who knows when the next perfect storm will come. And you know what you Chinese people are like: stiff upper lips are not just for the English."

They cross another fence. "It's hard to step over a stile with style, isn't it?" Crystal says.

Marcel laughs. He's remarkably fit except for the worn hips from playing squash in his youth. "How's your poetry translation going?"

"Fine," she says, squinting from under her canvas hat. The sky is a merciless blue and the reflected light dazzling. The glistening paddocks, dotted by grazing livestock, stretch over the rolling hills into the horizon. The afternoon seems vast, sturdy and inscrutable. "I plan to translate three collections of Walter's work to correspond with my three research topics."

"What are they again?"

"The first topic, 'Desire as the Mode of Translation,' studies the relationship between the translator and the poetry."

"That's a charming title—I've always been interested in critical writing that embodies feelings."

"My ideas at this stage are still more intuitive than scholarly. I liken the

translator to the wedding dressmaker, tasked with presenting the bride's poetic essence in his target tongue. The bride is always dressed, even in her own national costume, but her beauty, the poetic essence, is translatable."

"Your view is in line with the hermeneutic concept of language, which privileges the creative values of interpretation. But what is the desire?"

'I'm still trying to work it out – I guess it's primarily the desire to understand.'

Marcel has led Crystal to the edge of a lake, where the shushing she-oaks hold back tufts of sunlight, giving her momentary reprieve. The ground is littered with cones and cushioned with needles that have turned brown.

Crystal gathers her strength. "My second topic, 'The Aesthetics of the Diver,' is based on Victor Segalen's concept of diversity. The idea is that a work of translation is not meant to be read as if it's written in the target tongue. The very foreignness is part of the aesthetic, like the ocean's impenetrable otherness to the diver."

"I'm glad—Segalen is very much overlooked. In translation theory the notion is termed 'foreignising': the translator brings the translated text closer to the foreign one by transforming the translating language."

"Yes, for instance, Walter's poems are written in long sentences with complex syntax. I strive to preserve his style, even though long sentences are harder to compose in Chinese. I trust the reader will delight in the artful undulations and meanders." Crystal's face is flushed and she takes a deep breath.

Marcel sits down on a boulder to straighten his legs.

"My third topic, 'Five Forms of Loss,' evaluates poetry translation standards. Dao An, a Buddhist scholar from the Eastern Jin Dynasty devised Five Forms of Loss in translation, which have since become outdated. I've borrowed his title and identified five new forms of loss: loss of fidelity, meaning, beauty, complexity, and poetic essence."

"What is loss of complexity?"

"I meant the loss of historical or etymological value of words and expressions. Poor translation can overgeneralise and devalue the specificities of words."

"This is why Ezra Pound was seeking 'a verbal weight about equal to that of the original.'"

"My five losses will resist the widespread misconception that translation is a training ground for writers and poets rather than an art in itself, which has resulted in a myriad of practices with a multitude of ulterior motives. The art of translation is lost in translation!"

"I see—you are getting into the politics."



“In a workshop organised by the publisher, I sought to understand a simple line from Walter. The publisher said I should just translate literally. I was overtaken by rage. How can one translate ‘*To be or not to be*’ literally? I couldn’t help but point out that the book of translation he edited was of atrocious quality! It was unwise of me, but it’s infuriating when the post-modern enthusiasts mutilate beautiful bodies, throw the broken limbs on the ground, sweep them into a heap, and call that art.”

Marcel takes off his hat, looking weary, the prominent joints and pigmented spots on his hands showing his age. “I can see you are harnessing your energy very well. Sometimes you just have to trust the inherent strength of good work, believing that it will find its way.”

This must be how he often consoles Lucy, Crystal thinks, and feels a little ashamed. “When I work on poetry translation, I become a child again, back in the house where I grew up, with the gate bolted from the inside and the outside, and fortified with a wooden pole. All the rooms are open to me where I play the game, the rules of which only I know.”

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Crystal sleeps on a firm mattress in the loft. The countryside is so quiet that she can hear the blood pulsing in her eardrums. Through the cathedral tops of the uncurtained windows, she looks out to shadowy paddocks, histopathology clouds, and a red moon swollen with pain.

What can she afford to lose before she’s no longer herself? Her flesh, her organs, her limbs, her senses, her intelligence . . . She counts the forms of loss, then falls into a fitful dream in which she becomes a fragmented poem, her body broken apart and falling away, as the residue of her poetic essence drifts higher and lighter into space.

### ELEVEN GRAMS OF ONESELF

On the third day of February Crystal checks out from her two-week residency at the Writers’ Centre in the Blue Mountains. She waits on a garden bench covered with lichen in the blue shade of an atlas cedar, a miniature figurine among the giant conifers. The air is clear and bright, with the burgeoning promise of another hot day. At ten, she hears wheels on the gravel. Walter hops out of his car, looking tanned and rustic.

“Sorry I’m late. The twins have started school this year. It takes so long to get them ready.” His lips touch her cheeks like a dragonfly skipping water. He takes over her recalcitrant suitcase, closes a loose zip and lifts it into the car boot. “Do you want a coffee? We can go to Memento, my favourite café.”

“I like the sound of it.”

“I know you do.” He smiles, opening the passenger door for her.

Walter lives in a bohemian town further up the ridge near the highest point of the Mountains. “Strictly speaking, this region is a dissected plateau carved in sandstone bedrock. We moved up here for cheap real estate, but ended up with million-dollar views down the road. On average there are two snowfalls each year, and then the ever-changing mists, fogs, frosts, gale winds, thunderstorms, hailstorms, torrential rains. And we’ve just had the hottest summer.”

The café’s interior is bluish green like a Regency film set. They sit down in front of a sash window propped open by a short plank of wood. “Do you know what this is? It’s a carpenter’s level.” Walter points to the tube in the middle and the bubble inside the spirit.

It’s quiet on a Monday, except for the cuckoo clocks, a group of demented grandfathers, ticking away at different times of the day. Also on display are a local artist’s paintings with whimsical titles in reference to songs and poems. The owner, a bald-headed man with a German name keeps touching Walter’s arm as they speak, but extends his affection towards Crystal after she’s been introduced. A lean waitress with spiky hair dyed completely white takes the order. “She makes a mean cappuccino,” Walter tells Crystal.

Having corresponded for six months, they now meet to finalise the translation. Crystal is happy with the labour of her love, each word carefully chosen, each line meticulously crafted. Once they’ve combed through the last few little knots, the manuscript will be ready for submission.

For the expression *trobar clus*, *closed song* for the troubadour, he means it playfully, not too literally. For the word *fury*, yes, he’s alluding to the Greek / Roman mythology. They agree on the sexes of the personified birds and trees because in Chinese the third person plural pronoun for people is gender specific.

“These may all sound trivial, but it’s important to get them right so that nothing gets in the way of understanding,” Crystal says.

“Most definitely—I remember someone once said that to be understood is to be loved.”

She asks about the word *beloved*.

“I use the Beloved, as the Persian poets did, to mean not just, sometimes not even, the woman one loves or who loves one, but as a metaphor for that which is divine and loving in the world, and which is divine and lovely and loved in one’s self.”

“Do you feel loved?”

“Almost always. And loving,” he says without hesitation. “Raymond

Carver said all poems are love poems, and every poem is an act of love. Every act of love is unique; every act of love is also like every other.”

Clouds move by the window and the room dims, as if they are on a gondola gliding under a bridge. She looks up and is struck by his face which has taken on an owl’s wisdom and age. She’s drawn through the layers of cornea, iris, retina, and deeper, into a time older than this epoch. She sees it again, what she’s always known: his devotion, not to anyone, but to every moment.

A cuckoo chimes. The light and shadow have finished their interplay. He strokes back a strand of hair that’s fallen on her face.

She checks her wristwatch. “When’s the next train?”

“You can’t go yet.” He gives her a mysterious wink. “Not until I’ve shown you my secret hideout.”

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Thirty degrees, the air-conditioning makes much noise at its highest notch. Crystal feels the radiant heat through the shrivelling shell of the car, the roof melting down, and the panels closing in.

Walter steers onto an unsealed road, red, dry and dusty. “There’s been a bushfire but the sclerophyll forest has started to regenerate.”

She has nowhere to hide her bare arms which are sizzling under the sun, each pore about to bubble up and blister.

“You’re not used to this, are you? I know what it’s like. We went to Europe on our honeymoon and spent Christmas at Innsbruck in Austria. I’d always wanted to have a white Christmas. But guess what, I missed Australia, quite badly! I realised my best Christmas is simply BBQ lunch with a lot of uninteresting people amidst the cicadas’ deafening chorus in the scorching heat.”

They stop at the end of the cul-de-sac. The signpost points to a look-out 150 metres away. Walter puts on a waist belt, and fills two bottles of water from a four-litre carton. Crystal notices a collection of bushwalking gear scattered in the car. With her sports sandals on she’s confident in her agility and endurance to cope with any walk he might propose.

They walk through the picnic ground, a graveyard of blackened trees shooting green growth, with babbling banksias recounting their searing stories. Dried leaves and branches crackle under their feet.

The lookout affords a commanding view of the creeks and valleys, and hilltops in the shapes of tajine earthenware lids. He tells her the names of the Heads and Walls. But her attention is attracted by a bird high up, motionless like a kite. “It’s a wedge-tailed eagle, Crystal, the largest bird of prey in Australia. Their wing span is up to two metres. It can soar up to six

thousand feet riding on hot air currents and stay up without a wingbeat.”

Next to the lookout, the entrance gate is heavily chained. A faded notice says the track is closed due to the recent bushfire and will reopen after risk assessments are conducted and required work completed.

“Fuck!” Walter kicks the signboard. “Excuse me. But the fire was two months ago.”

Crystal has stepped over the barrier, her pink pantaloons standing out against the grey green scrub.

He follows her, his lean body bristling with energy.

The track winds down, switchbacks under small sandstone cliffs, and then falls away into a steep descent. They have to squat and hold on to rocks for balance. She doesn't mind the eccentric contraction of her quadriceps, but the heat annoys her as the slope is mostly exposed to the sun that slow-burns and pricks her skin exposed outside her two singlets. They come across an uprooted tree, but Walter manages to locate a braiding of the track to circumvent.

After thirty minutes of zigzagging, they are deep down the scarp. The air cools, the trees thicken, their canopies filter sunlight soft and green, and the sound of rushing water rises with soothing moisture. The trail is occasionally obscured by the bracken ferns brushing their legs with ancient fronds, beckoning them to slow. Dragonflies hover in mid-air with quivering electric wings, then hawk away abruptly in odd diagonal directions.

After the last tumble the path joins a creek with large boulders and round river stones. The upstream opens out to a set of tall and wide silver falls cascading against black rock faces into a dark pool.

“I used to come here often in summer, especially when I wanted to clear my head. This is a good spot for a quick swim. There's rarely anyone else,” Walter says, standing behind Crystal.

“I'm afraid of leeches. Once I trekked in the rainforest in Malaysia and had them all over me.”

“Lecherous leeches! The water here is crystal clear, like you.” He squats down and dips a hand in.

She does the same and feels the warmth of the shallow and the coolness of the deep.

“You have a pianist's fingers, Crystal. I hear music notes when I see them ripple.”

But her distorted reflection is a reminder. She agitates the water and straightens up.

“What is it?” He wipes his hand on his jeans. “Please tell me. If you're just a little bit sad, it makes me very sad, you know.”

Crystal bites her lip. “I went for screening.”

“And?”

“I had to do an excision biopsy.”

“Did they find something?”

“It was nothing.”

“So you don’t have cancer?”

“No. But I lost eleven grams of tissue.”

“I’m really sorry about the loss. But that doesn’t make you any less lovable.”

“I’m not so worried about that. Not that I don’t care, but I don’t think it’s relevant. It’s about my own loss. I have never wanted any embellishment or augmentation, not even ear piercing. I just want to be left the way I am. But I am no longer. Eleven grams of me have been irreversibly lost because I didn’t listen to my body. I’ve let it down.”

“What have you let down?”

“I just said: my body!” She drops down and folds herself into a small ball, forehead on her knees, her sobbing muffled.

Walter waits for a while, and then sits by her side in the dappled light.

She cries a little more, then rests her head on his shoulder, her face still wet.

“Do you want to show me?”

She thinks for a moment, and removes the first singlet. The conical shapes emerge. She removes the second one and turns towards him. She looks trim with bare top in her pantaloons.

He takes off his glasses to look closely at her breasts. “They’re fine, really, not bad at all.” He runs his finger along the white scar on the edge of her areola. “It’s so faint, I wouldn’t have noticed had you not told me. Don’t worry about the body so much, Crystal. It’s your being that’s perfect.” He reaches forward, holding on to her slender hips.

“No. Not yet.”

“Okay I won’t. I’ll just have a listen.” He puts his ear to her breast, one at a time.

She leans back slightly, feeling his stubble on her chest, the cool contour of his ear on her breasts, and wonders what her nipples might be murmuring between her heart’s violent beats.

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They lie with their heads whisper close, bodies perpendicular to each other, like two buttresses of an old tree. Along the gorges, a gentle breeze sweeps through the wilderness and calms the rustling sclerophyll. High above the plateau, the wedge-tailed eagle holds still, branding the moment with his own coat of arms. Against the blue dream of the sky, the half-moon

presses her silver ear, listening in with timeless patience, to Crystal and Walter breathing, softly, tenderly, as a butterfly kissing a flower.

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