

JULIAN LAMB

*Down in Araluen*

Let me just come out and say it: a person's face can look like their name. I'm sure some of you have had this experience many times before. And yet, I fancy, you have never told anyone out of fear of seeming mad. To you I say, "Our secret is out! Go proclaim it from the mountain tops!" But the majority of you will likely regard my claim as a piece of nonsense. And perhaps you think it a strategic error to begin a story by asserting a truth that is only particularly acknowledged. To you I tender the following story as evidence that my claim is true. If you accuse me of attempting to prove the fanciful by a narrative which is a mere product of fancy, then perhaps the only defence would lie in my asserting a greater truth: that reality is infused with fancy, and that we can no sooner deny its influence upon us than we can deny the influence of the sun upon exposed skin.

Allow me then to restate: a person can look like their name. How can this be? I have sometimes fancied that we instinctively imagine a person say his or her name over and over, and watch attentively as those syllables etch themselves upon their skin. And perhaps, as we grow older, after a lifetime of saying our names over and over, our wrinkled faces become inscribed with the only truly phonetic language, and a word does indeed become flesh. I have sometimes wondered if the wrinkles that our names produce inflect all the wrinkles that language writes upon our faces. Perhaps every effort of speech is merely an elaborate attempt to say our name, to introduce ourselves. Fancy aside, allow me to state that the names in this story are not invented. How could they be? When I write them upon a page, they summon the angular cuneiform inscribed upon their bearer's faces. When I write the word "Russell" I cannot help but see a man whose lips pursed, and whose eyes shrank as he lingered upon his heavy "s"

sounds. And now, as I see myself cycling down the slopes of the Southern Tablelands in New South Wales, the bike follows the contour of the word which named the valley below: Araluen.

Araluen is a small gathering of rural homesteads that give the impression that they had all once perched upon the peaks of the surrounding mountains, but had since slid down into the cradle of the valley. Even before I had seen the valley, the sound of the word “Araluen” had put me in mind of a soft place, green, and heavy with moist air, as if the sharp edges of life had been smoothed off by a word without plosives. I cannot help but think that I will always perceive Araluen through the music of its name: four syllables which took the ear through mazy turns of sound, then left its speaker’s head resonating with a final nasal consonant. I can hardly imagine “Araluen” being the name of a mountain, or of a region of tundra, or less still of a desert. “Ara” is brimful with life, yet also reclusive, tucked away, and retreating to a shy life at the back of the mouth. From this obscurity, “luen” takes a trip down the tongue as if the word had slid to the front of the mouth by the force of gravity, and found itself resolved in the afterglow of its final consonant. Araluen, Araluen: as if the word kept repeating the moment when, at Majors Creek, I crested the curve of the tongue on my bicycle, and allowed gravity to bring me into a green valley. And here I was, down in Araluen, sitting in front of the Araluen Hotel, as that soft “n” sound reposed into silence.

The wind spirited dirt over the road. A single poplar in the middle of a field leaned with the wind. Behind it, the farmland rose to high escarpments. Above them, the sky was an empty blue. I allowed my eye to follow the curve of the mountain: from the road, past the poplar, curving up to the escarpments, out into the sky. Over and over. Road, poplar, escarpments, sky. Spirited – leaned – rose – empty. As if all things were slipping down – upwards – into the blue abyss. Had I been asked, I would have conceded that this was a grain of time that had fled its bank and shoal – but for the fact that the front door of the Araluen Hotel bore a sign that said it opened at 4:00. I had cycled here from Canberra on my way to Moruya, a small town on the New South Wales South Coast. I was to stay the night here before pushing on the next day. So far the ride followed back-roads and dirt tracks through national parks and past farms. Let me describe it to you.

The route initially takes you up out of Canberra through the range of hills to its east, then down into the open spaces of Captains Flat. When you emerge from the hills thick with trees, and see the flat for the first time, you realise that the landscape had been holding its breath, and was now allowed to exhale out across the bare expanse. The route crosses the flat, then takes you through Hoskinstown, an old mining community where a metal windmill ticks in the breeze, but pumps nothing. Apart from this, its two most distinctive features were the heavy lock and chain

on the door of the community hall, and an enormous Batman flag spread over the tin roof of one of the houses. (A parent had presumably put the flag there on the occasion of a child's birthday, but had forgotten to take it down, or couldn't be bothered. Or perhaps, I fancied, they wanted their child no older.)

After Hoskinstown, the flat road begins to undulate as one approaches the Tallaganda Ranges. The road ascends through Rossi, another small town, whose quietness might be taken for desolation were it not for the distant barking of dogs, a child's bicycle propped carefully against a gate, and a little rainbow of underpants upon a clothesline joyfully exposing itself to the sun. Such signs of human domesticity disappear as the road climbs the Tallagandas, through the Lowden State Forest, to the highest point of the ride. At the cusp of a saddle in the mountains, the thick pine forest clears, and again the landscape is given the space to breath out. To the right, the mountains themselves obscure the view, but to the left they arch around and ease off into a plain of shimmering distances. I cannot help but think that even the impatient traveller would linger here, continually repeating the moment when the horizon extinguishes his eyesight, and he is subdued with the unwanted revelation that his life is finite, and that some distances will remain untraveled. In front is a valley riven with gullies and steep angles. The houses of a small farming community, Harold's Cross, have accumulated along one of those grooves, and from this height the glittering tin rooves of farmhouses seem like the beads of a rosary worn smooth by the clutch of the earth. On the other side of the valley, still in front of you, the farmland gives way to gum forest, and the hills rise again. That was my route. Wallace's Gap Road takes you to a small saddle in these hills, then gently to Major's Creek, a small town boasting both a hotel and a general store, as well as a cricket field with a pavilion in whose shade games of cricket were remembered, or imagined, or often forgotten. Wallace's Gap Road eventually takes you past the backs of houses whose lush and shaded gardens overgrew any human aesthetic. Trellises drooping with the ungainly burden of new life, soil ruptured by potatoes and carrots, passing breezes weighed down by the aroma of herb gardens, and a single audacious cabbage pushing off for a new world by growing resolutely in the middle of a lawn. The fanciful traveller may here observe that when the natural and human are left forgetfully together they rejoice with ungainly grace that the dark nutrient soil had given them the impulse to improvise. As you pass these gardens, each one its own improvisation, you do not expect to be confronted with a sign warning of a steep descent suitable only for four wheel drive vehicles. From this sign, the road eases off only gently, and gives little indication of the drop to follow. The foliage becomes denser and wilder, varieties of eucalypt arch overhead, and profusions of fern layer the damp ground. As the bike picks up speed – tires edging forcefully into corners, small rocks ricocheting off the frame –

fragments of a green valley flicker faster through gaps in the forest – as if Eden were being described by a man who stuttered, and who became more excited as details of his description flickered between his silences – wet sunlight, wisps of grass, a flurry of leaves – and the fragments of his fallen language, passing by more swiftly as he spoke, began to drive the silences out – until halfway down the road they all fuse into one unbroken piece of perfect speech. Words cannot express it. They can merely record that from Clark’s Lookout you are given a single, uninterrupted view of the place for which you have only had a single, uninterrupted sound: Araluen.

Clark’s Lookout is merely a small concrete platform with a metal fence around it. As one stands on the platform, the branch of an adjacent gum tree arches over the scene, and frames the painting. As I bring the view to mind, I am tempted to afford as much power to the framing gesture of the gum as I am to the content of its painting. In a single movement, the branch renders the valley as impossible as a piece of fiction, but as undeniable as a founding myth. And perhaps too that is why in that first moment you cast it aside as you would a cliché. But as the picture draws you further into it – literally draws you into it – you fancy that you have known the valley all this time and that – for unthinkable ages – it has known us all too.

Beneath the branch of the gum tree, one is struck by the depth of the valley, as if it had been hollowed out by a deep breath when, open-mouthed and lung-filled and grief-stricken, God had sighed another Eden into the world when the last one was lost. The steep sides of the surrounding mountains are thick with eucalypt, but these clear to green farmland and rows of orchards at the valley floor. At the far end, a wisp trees slithers along the edge of the Deua River, and disappears through the mountains. The small houses are all strung along the lowest point in the valley. Like grains of sand that will always find the deepest impression in your palm, so these homes had found the lifeline of the valley. The straight, symmetrical rows of orchards told of the industriousness of human hands. And the rocky escarpments on the mountains told of the slow industriousness of rock that had risen long ago like a cupping hand out of the flat land. Road, poplar, escarpment, sky.

As you burst out of the thick foliage at the bottom of the descent, you find yourself travelling with orchards on both sides. The dirt road becomes sealed as one passes an abrupt cluster of modern looking buildings that a sign tells you are the café and gift shop of Wisbey’s Orchard. Further ahead, the road comes to a T-junction with the Araluen Road: to the left, up the hill and out of the valley, lies Braidwood and the Southern Tablelands; to the right, the road winds through the valley, then along the Deua down to Moruya and the sea. My way lay right. A few hundred metres further down the road, the sign that asserts “Araluen” seems over-emphatic:

the empty green paddocks on either side of it are indistinguishable, and there appears little reason why one side should have a name and the other not. I give in once again to fancy: a lost settler, long ago, travelling the country with his family, looking for a home, finally stopped his wagon at this point because that was when the horse bucked the reins, and his wife pleaded for rest, and the cry of his newborn gurgled through the gumtrees. Or perhaps the sign marks the place where two songlines met: one which travelled from the coast, and sang open-mouthed of the valley's abundance; and one which had been sung from the hinterland, which had crested the mountains as I had, and had found a world which exceeded its music. And I imagined two singers both brought to silence, one because he had sung the valley, the other because he never could, meeting face to face at that point where the sign now says "Araluen."

Eventually, Araluen begins to accumulate on either side of the road. Some houses had clearly been built to resemble an ideal: the front yard bordered by a wooden fence, a small wooden gate beneath a metal arbour on which vines were encouraged to grow. But others seem to repose into a new kind of pastoral in which the human and the natural lead parallel lives, as if cohabiting in different rooms. In the front yards of these houses are a number of disused vehicles, some of them mere husks, missing a wheel or two, with raised bonnets revealing gaps where engines once were. Around the wheels, or the bricks that were piled in place of them – where the sun could induce growth, but the lawn mower could not reach – the grass had grown uncontrollably, and now splashed upon the sides of the chassis as if these vehicles were making a final voyage over a green sea.

There was a house whose front gate clung precariously to its hinges not (as I hypothesised) through neglect, but because excited children had made of it the gate of a great castle, and had flung it open or slammed it shut whether friend or foe requested entry. A small abandoned bicycle (loyal steed), a few well chosen sticks (mighty sabres), and a trail of toy armour leading up to the front door of the house gave the impression that the game had been played with great realism, but had been abandoned without hesitation at the call to dinner. On the verandah of another house was a row of armchairs, many with holes where springs had burst out, sitting alongside small tables of empty beer bottles and ashtrays. I allow my fancy now to see the wind flurry the ash into brief spirals, and to hear the bottles pipe the empty blues of evenings lost. But the fancy cannot cheat so well. Even here, at the base of the valley, in the middle of a scene that from Clark's Lookout I had deemed a fiction, the fancy cannot cheat so well as to make life out of nothing. For it is not merely in the mind that objects retain the movement that brought them to stillness. Whether flung on a lawn, or forgotten on a table, or flicked from the end of a cigarette, they take on the life of the people who had given them fleeting movement. As

I cycled through Araluen, I tried to image what that life must be, and realised how much I would struggle to live it. And so, as I pulled up in front of the Araluen Hotel, leant my bike against the wall, and sat upon a chair, I assumed what I felt was an imposter's place within this vast still life. For I knew that the life which had flung me to this seat could not be reconciled with those lives which had set the bodies of cars adrift upon their green lawns.

The Araluen Hotel lay at the eastern extremity of the town. It is what you would expect of an Australian country hotel: a pub with rooms out the back with beds in them. It fronted onto the main road where weather-beaten flags advertised Cornetto ice cream. To the right hand side of the building was a courtyard of tables and chairs: sun-bleached, cigarette-stubbed. The table-tops bore the hundreds of perfect circles made by beer glasses. The corrugated tin roof cracked under the sun. And a windmill metronomed what remained of the silence. I had arrived early. After filling up my water, I sat on one of the chairs at the front of the hotel, and looked out. Road, polar, escarpment, sky. I was on the verge of fully animating the world in a hopeless fall upwards when a car pulled up, its door opened, and I met a man whose name was Russell.

We all come into the world as babies, but our names precede us, and are already fully formed. Of all names, "Russell" is one you have to grow into. I can hardly imagine a baby called "Russell," except with explicit irony. Thankfully, the figure who stepped out of the car was a man of around sixty, of thinning but very tidy ginger hair that gave the impression of having been recently combed. A navy blue woollen jumper played host to a piece of hay. From the top of his jumper, around his neck, emerged the collar of a checked shirt. His appearance gave the strong impression that efforts had been made to achieve a standard of civil decency. Over the hour or so I spent talking to Russell, he came to resemble his name with such easy precision that I couldn't help but think that all Russells secretly aspired to be him.

I have never been good with talking to people from the country. Their easeful, non-nonsense eloquence exposes the effort I expend on my over-complicated sentences. Normally, I instinctively broaden my Australian vowels, perform actions like squint knowingly into the distance, ask relevant questions like, "Any rain lately?" and (most of all) try to talk about the country not in aesthetic terms, but simply as a place where things grew, or were reared, or where life simply was.

"G'day," he said, as he approached.

"G'day there," I replied, already chastising myself that "there" was an unnecessary embellishment.

"Hotel not open?" he asked, sitting down two chairs away from me.

“Seems not.” Another unnecessary syllable. Should have just said “no.” I tried to rescue the situation: “Sign says they’ll open at 4.”

“Oh yes,” he said, turning to the hills, squinting at their distance. “Steve is always on time.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, squinting in the direction he was squinting at, without knowing what either of us were squinting at. Many moments passed.

The squinting was like a blackout between scenes in a play. All the stagehands were now invisibly preparing the set for the next act. But these stagehands took their time. The blackout was just as much a part of the show as the rest of it. The mountains rose in front of us. The windmill ticked through moments of time like a dealer slowly thumbing through a deck of cards. After the stagehands slowly reassembled the world, and the lights faded back up, the play continued.

“I’m Russell,” he said, reaching his hand over the two seats that divided us.

“Julian,” I said, shaking his hand. Next to “Russell,” “Julian” sounded over-complicated. The dogged honesty of “Russell” exposed something disingenuous in the aquiline nobility of “Julian.” Until now, it had never bothered me that I shared my name with Roman emperors. Russell then reiterated the information he had previously shared, but because we were now introduced, it took on the status of an oath between friends.

“Steve should be back soon. He’s normally on time.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes.” Russell lingered upon the final “s” of all his “yeses” as if these affirmations were the result of earnest consideration. In fact, the more we spoke, the more I realised that Russell’s “s” sounds were the source of all his sincerity. That same sound was at the very centre of his name, swinging one syllable around the other like a heel-pivot in a dance. A sound that pursed his lips, shrunk his eyes as if in thought, bowed his head in agreement, and bodied forth the name upon his face. The windmill ticked. The moments passed. The metal roof cracked. Each crack took the mind to a crack in a brittle, eviscerate landscape wincing open in the heat, as if the sun were forcing the reticent earth to say its name, but the earth refused, and broke under the pressure, and the name now split open upon its face. But the compliant poplar leant in the wind. And the hills before us told of a supple earth, malleable, compliant with a will to ooze upwards in one unbroken gesture of time and tectonics.

“Where’ve you ridden from?” asked Russell, pointing at my bike propped against the hotel.

“From Canberra.”

“Oh yes.” A slight raise of eyebrows. “Through Captain’s Flat?”

“Yeah.” I felt the time ripe to reveal my knowledge of the country I had just ridden through: “Over Captain’s Flat, up through Rossi, along Harold’s Cross Road, Major’s Creek, down the drop, and here.”

“Oh yes. About a hundred ks?”

“Yeah. About that.”

“We used to get a lot of bike traffic through here.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Not as much now though.”

“No?”

“No.” Then Russell returned to the hills as if engaging them in silent conversation about what Araluen once was. I could never know what was said. When the conversation ended, Russell looked down at the ground, and then eventually at my bike again. It is an unusual looking bike since it only has one front fork. This is said to improve balance and manoeuvrability.

“Never seen a bike like that before,” he said.

“It’s a bit different. She goes pretty fast.” I had never gendered my bike before. It felt awful.

“It’s only got one fork.”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know they made bikes like that these days,” he said, as if inferring that the modern world moved so quickly, and that this development had passed him by.

“Not all of them are like this.”

“Oh yes.” Russell returned to the hills, and resumed conversation with them. Perhaps they secretly scoffed at this latest ridiculous development in bike technology. Not only that, but as Russell’s gaze returned to the hills, mine returned to myself, and I realised that my attempts to appear at ease in this rural setting were being made in cycling clothing which most in these parts would have considered ill-fitting. I suspect that a farmer would sooner put a cow in black lycra than himself. And the bright yellow of my jersey, a colour not common to Australian landscapes, seemed now to recall the colour of St John’s Wort, a species which had been introduced as a garden plant in the nineteenth century, but which now spread lasciviously over the country, and had been classified as a noxious weed. I began to feel a strange affinity for it. What wrong had it done? Was it not compelled into life by the laws of physics and photosynthesis? As Russell serenely contemplated the hills, my own distempered thoughts had turned to the question of which St John the plant was named after, and whether I was in danger of losing my head. There

I was, a foreign yellow infestation waiting immobile for Salome to sway her hips. But what Russell said next reassured me that he was beholden to no temptress.

“Steve should be back soon. He’s normally on time.”

“Oh yeah.” Apparently, not even luminous yellow could shake Russell’s fidelity to this one truth. His repetition of it was acknowledgement that all living creatures should share in the knowledge that Steve, who was normally on time, would soon return. And from this repeated truth, as from the brown soil, even an introduced species could be allowed to grow. I was reassured. I became conscious once again of the energetic beat of the windmill, and the impression that its beats were measuring something that they would not disclose. Or perhaps – and here another image sprung up before me - perhaps their quick beats perforated the silence as if into small segments of blank paper with space enough only for a word or two: a quip, a dry mock, a simple yes or no, a sigh of dejection. But as the breeze now slowed, the perforations grew further apart, and the spaces of blank paper became larger, until – after the final beat – it was large enough to have a conversation on.

“So, you live in Canberra?” asked Russell.

“Actually, I live in Hong Kong.”

“Oh, yes.” It was only after I said the words “Hong Kong” that I felt how out of place they were here. The images they conjured of skyscrapers, pounding feet, and the clouds of industry seemed to offend the high escarpments. I imagined the aggressive plosive in “Kong” shake the hills at their base, and cause small avalanches of ancient rock to spill from the cliff faces. What if – and here I fed myself with most delicious poison – what if, just over those hills, was a city of 10 million industrious souls, all striving to make what they could of life, with no less right to be here than I, and who would also be invited to share in Russell’s one universal truth? I imagined smoke ooze over the hills, and for the sound of jack-hammers to echo in the valley. How long might all this last? Might it all be taken away? I stopped. I felt sunburn on the side of my neck. What would I know of all this being taken away?

“And what do you do in Hong Kong?”

“I’m a teacher at one of the universities there.” I hate saying that I am a “lecturer.” It conjures images of a magnanimous sage anointing with his wisdom the young, sore-travelled pilgrim. “Academic” is worse still: it expresses pride in being too smart to live a useful life. So, I reaffirmed: “I’m a teacher.”

“What do you teach?”

“English.” And in a misguided effort to soften the blow: “Shakespeare and stuff.” “And stuff” was designed in turn to soften the blow of “Shakespeare.” I should have known, though, that hendiadys more often enacts a blow than softens one: Russell now sat more upright.

“Do you like living in Hong Kong?” Somehow, when Russell said “Hong Kong” it sounded more attuned to the environment. I imagined those little avalanches in reverse, defying the laws of gravity and matter, all falling back up into place, allowing the escarpments to resume their eternity.

“It’s a good place to be a teacher. Lots going on. Good students. But you really need to live somewhere outside the city so you can get away from it all. It can be pretty busy and noisy.”

Russell now seemed to engage in an attempt to imagine what busyness and noise would be like. He took several moments, and then said, “Yes. I guess it can be pretty ... oppressive.” Then he rethought. “That’s the right word, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Exactly right,” I said. And as I chastised myself for revealing that I was an English teacher, perhaps Russell berated himself for using an unfamiliar word. We squinted at the mountains. The weather-worn Cornetto flags fluttered in the breeze. The tin roof cracked. And the clicking windmill, which had started up again, eventually brought us to the reprise.

“Steve will be here soon.”

“No worries. Plenty of worse places to wait,” and I gestured to the hills in front. As soon as those words were out of my mouth I realised I had broken a cardinal rule of country-talk: avoid aesthetic judgements about the landscape. I need not have worried.

“My word,” he said. And he looked back at the hills, blinking, as if seeing them afresh.

“So how long have you lived in Araluen?”

“I moved here about 15 years ago.”

“You must like it then, if you’ve lived here that long?”

“Oh yes.” As I have mentioned, Russell typically lingered on the final “s” of all his yeses. This particular “s” sound was held, and then allowed to tail off wistfully, as if the word had been tossed into the well, and waiting for what was wished for now began. He swallowed, took a breath, and said, “I’ve lived up and down the South Coast. I used to come to Araluen as a kid. We had family holidays here. I loved it. And I always thought that I’d like to live here. I came into a bit of money. So I decided to buy a place.”

Thus, presented before me, was a life: childhood desires implanting in the consciousness a silent but omniscient desire which hauls a living being through the interstices of time, geography, and economics, and which leaves what remains of his life in the cupped hand of a green valley. The roof cracked and the windmill measured.

“Was it much different when you were a kid?”

“My word. Much busier. The orchard up the road used to do toffee apples. We loved them. Difficult to eat though. I always tried to bite through. My mother told me to slow down and enjoy it.”

I did not think there was anything essentially busy about toffee apples. I imagined Russell the younger frustrated in his attempts to bite through the crust of toffee to the apple beneath. I suppose this was a form of busyness. A similar form of busyness, perhaps, was my own failed attempt to imagine Russell as a young boy. I would picture a boy with tidy ginger hair standing four foot in the Araluen sun. But as soon as I applied the name “Russell” to this figure, the wrinkles of the adult would wince forth upon the face of the child, and I’d have before me the face of an adult earnestly struggling to crack through a thin crust of toffee. “Russell” is an adult’s name. And it was now indelibly inscribed onto his features and mannerisms. His blue eyes were slightly bloodshot and watery, but were kept open, as if they would have gladly shut had they not been impelled awake by his commitment to the conversation. Russell sat with both feet straight, close together, the right slightly in front of the left, as if he refused himself the brashness that might lead splayed feet widely spaced. They also gave the impression that his body was always ready for a movement out of repose, poised for forward diligence. Even when he did ease into a slouch, he would soon regain himself, and sit up straight. And when he sat straight, his back would rarely touch the back of the chair. His hair remained neat and recently combed. He rarely smiled, not because he wasn’t friendly, but simply because conversation deserved effort. Every sound was an effort to be understood, a call from the darkness of another mind. He was Russell: a word which stressed its first syllable, gathered haste in its middle fricative, and swallowed its ending as if it were already being spirited away to something more important to say. The “ell” sound seeks the back of the mouth as an explorer might in ages past have sought an unknown hinterland, but decided instead to repose in a green valley, with the dying echoes of his ambition tailing away in the valley made by the concave tongue. Russell.

Russell and I chatted for many more minutes, but I cannot remember what we spoke of. Perhaps I remained struck by his short autobiography. And maybe I became lost in the act of projecting my own self into his story. Or perhaps I had gathered all I needed from the real Russell to turn him into a piece of fiction, and my mind then wandered to a consideration of how I might describe him to you. Russell the younger fails to bite through to the apple beneath the toffee: the image swelled with possibilities. The mother’s instruction to slow down ignored. The child obeys the example only of his first parents. But his unbroken milk teeth are unable to penetrate the flesh. All his busyness comprised of failed attempts to sin. Free to stand, but

without the strength to fall. Or perhaps it is my sugary narrative that has crystallised around the apple that Russell cannot bite into. No matter how hard he might try, Russell cannot not fall in this story. I realise now that I have abandoned Russell to some pre-lapsarian non-place framed by the gesture of that gumtree. In those moments that I have now forgotten, I was already leaving him.

Others eventually arrived to wait for Steve to open the door. There was Brett, a man in his mid 20s who hadn't seen a bike like that before, and was intrigued to know why it only had one fork; there was an older man, with darker skin, unshaven, wearing a high-visibility vest who seemed to regard it as a source of pride that he hadn't seen a bike like that before; and a middle-aged couple, Susan and Dave, who had just come from a physiotherapy appointment in Braidwood, and who had not seen a bike like that before either, but whose son was into downhill riding, and was in possession of "some bloody strange looking machines." All parties reassured each other that Steve was always on time – a truth that gained strength through communal agreement, and remained undiminished by the brute fact that it was now 4:30. Steve eventually did arrive, but not before we learned that Susan had a dickie knee, and Dave had buggered his back trying to uproot a tree stump.

"I told him to leave it in the ground," said Susan. "It belongs in the ground."

"We all belong in the ground," said Dave.

"Some more than others."

Steve opened the doors, and all descended inside, resumed their usual seats, and were served their usual drinks without having to order them. I was then shown to my room: high ceilings, cornicing, old beds.

The evening passed by uneventfully. I dined in the pub at the end of a long table. At the other end of the table were Steve's three children who had been served burgers for dinner, but who took them apart, and ate only those parts that interested them. Russell dined alone. I think he had a steak. He sat very upright. His hair remained recently combed. I remember wondering if I should speak to him. He may have been glad of the company. But I felt that I now had a story to protect from an excess of reality. So I sat facing away from Russell, and turned my attention instead to the other end of my table where unwanted lettuce was passed from plate to plate with increasing ferocity, and finger prints of tomato sauce appeared on clothes, on faces, and on all other surfaces of the reachable world.

I left early next morning. My route took me to the far end of the valley where the road wandered, as it were, east of Eden. The Araluen Road follows the course of the river, and is grooved into the sides of mountains. You occasionally catch glimpses of smaller, more isolated

valleys slither away into undiscovered country as if afraid of ever being found. I couldn't help thinking as I passed them that each valley offered the opportunity for a second innocence. What if I made my life upon a valley floor? Could I expose my ambitions so completely to the elements that they evaporated away, or were interred by the soil, or were washed into the Deua? Could I apportion my life so evenly into my remaining years that I simply lived according to the demands of the day, and I lost the aspiration to accumulate experience as I went? Of course, these were fantasies, but all the more powerful as such. I thought of the framing gesture of the gum, and ascribed its effect to every branch that I now passed, each one framing a scene to be longed for: a shady grove, a profusion of leaves, a hollow in a hill, wisps of spinifex dissolving into metaphysics.

As one nears the coast, human life begins again: farms made of tin and weather board with paddocks for sheep give way to brick houses with only room enough for ducks, a chicken run, and the obligatory husk of a car. It was behind one such husk that a family of geese took refuge as I approached. And as I rode past, they all leaned forward, opened their mouths, stuck out their tongues, and hissed as if performing some infernal parody of a church choir. The "s" sound of their hiss resonated in my mind as I rode on. I smiled. They too seemed to invest it with great sincerity.

Moruya does not sit directly on the coast, but on a river with spills out into the sea. Once again, I had arrived early. I decided to wait on the bank of the river. The bright day was showing the first signs of easing into evening. The ripples in the water caught the softening light, and seemed as if they were hauling daylight downstream. And I imagined the mouth of the river yawn into the sea what remained of the afternoon sun. The word "Moruya" now assumed the course of the river: the mazy error of its first two syllables as it wound through the mountains is then let loose downstream in a final tragic yawp into the silent sea. Moruya. The brief daylight of this single word now dissolving into evening. And that final syllable – like one final heave of life. For there, I fancy, downstream and at dusk, your eye would be drawn to the vast curvature of the earth which Russells up the lights of all our days, and Araluens them over the crest of the world.