

*Exultation is the going  
Of an inland soul to sea,  
Past the houses — past the headlands —  
Into deep Eternity —*

*Bred as we, among the mountains,  
Can the sailor understand  
The divine intoxication  
Of the first league out from land?*

– Emily Dickinson, 'Exultation is the Going'

## Prologue

**Haarlem Downs Station, Kimberley coast, north-west Australia, 1934**

### Machine Dreams

In the days and nights of his reckoning with the heat, the dust and his wrong-footed ways, the boy has this: the hushed bite of his tyres along the sheep pads before the world awakens. He freewheels over the packed dirt in a smooth, irresistible dash, occasionally backpedalling for a root or stone-reef kink in the trail. In the east, the basalt escarpment is a static line of pink, a long wave breaching. Soon it will turn, brushed fully red by the sun. In the west, not so far away, the Indian Ocean is breaking along the Eighty Mile Beach. The sheep pads give out at the dunes. You must lean forward and high-step up their flanks, your machine balanced on one shoulder, to reach the downslope and the hard sand at the edge of the water. There might be a pearling fleet on the horizon, or even a Dutch guilden washed up on to the sand after three hundred years of motion and encrustation on the bed of the sea. Neil Quiller has these things, too. Otherwise there is only his numbness.

But then, as he coasts along the sheep pads in the elongated shadows of the rising sun, he registers two faint wheel-thumps in the cork handgrips. He wobbles, risking a backward glance, and sees a snake rear up, hunting him before it flicks away into the grass. Of what use against snakes are puttees, thorn-proof tyres and the sections of rope he'd mounted between the forks to scrape away the burrs? Uncle Leonard's blacksmith hadn't prepared him for snakes.

He begins to tremble. His elbow joints can't sustain his weight, nor his knee joints drive the pedals. He dismounts and ploughs along the bed of a dry watercourse until he's clear of tricky grass shadows and living things, then sits on the ground, breathing in and out, listening to the blood jolt in his temples. Presently, his wits restored, he stretches out on the accommodating sand. If the sand were a February snowfall in the north of England, he'd mark it with an angel.

Strange to think that time here is ten hours ahead of time there. If it's dawn here then a long twilight must be settling there, along the River Tyne. In his old life he would be resisting sleep about now, protesting to his mother that it was too light outside for sleep to come. He might even slip through the back lane to watch for owls nesting in Jesmond Dene, where, in the breezeless shadows, hot voices murmur, waistbands snap, fabrics

scrape against thighs, coal eyes flare, and raw smoke drifts. On still nights you can hear the riveters at work in the shipyards. Then darkness and a new day. Perhaps not a school day but one spent with his mother, a day kind to her wasted chest, when she might rally and take him by train to Durham or the Roman wall in one direction, or the priory sacked by the Danes in the other, where three ancient kings lie buried on the headland, together with lives more recently lost to the sea, old age or the experience of childbirth.

And so Neil Quiller brings his mind to his mother's grave, which is hard against the wall that divides the cemetery from the school where he'd had a measure of happiness.

The light had seemed shallower in Newcastle, with tree canopies, lamp posts and chimneystops always crowding the margins of sight. He'd never had cause to gaze up and name the colour of the sky.

As he does here, on the other side of the world.

He opens his eyes. The sky is limitless above him, and he can't bear it.

Perhaps his mother had felt the sky pressing down upon her, too. She'd bolted from it in the end.

In 1917, after a sea voyage of sixteen weeks, she was posted with other nurses to an army hospital south of London. It wasn't duty calling, but adventure, for Hazel had always inclined toward risks and opportunities.

All those sweet fellows passing through her ministering hands. She saw many of them die of wounds, scoured lungs and hopelessness.

Then the war ended and she set out for Aberdeen. She couldn't go back to the north-west of Australia, only forward to somewhere else. 'I thought Scotland would be as good a place as any. But as we crossed the Tyne Bridge you were kicking so much inside me, and I was so taken with the river, the ships and the castle, that I got off the train there and then.'

She was full of stories like that, and full of secrets. Neil listened, put two and two together, and conjured up who his father might have been: an English officer, no, an Australian, no, a Canadian, a soldier with a hard, flat, tobaccoey chest for cushioning a son's love-starved little spine. A man who always wore a grin; lights always danced in his eyes. A man who later died, or went home.

But Neil's mother would say, 'Oh, your dad could be anywhere now, son. Not to worry. We have each other.'

Newcastle was an end to the bolting. There was a son to raise, and plenty of work for a nurse in a city of furnaces and molten metal. She settled in Jesmond, just a twenty-minute walk from the Royal Infirmary and the centre of the city. When, thirteen years later, her lungs gave in to the prevailing dampness, Neil wondered if they'd failed in sympathy with the lungs of her soldiers and shipwrights. She hid nothing from him; it was her way of preparing him for her death, and soon he was so immersed in her dying that it was like a condition of her life.

But she wouldn't confirm or deny that his father was a Canadian soldier.

'Auntie Crystal and Uncle Len will take you, dear,' she said. 'Be brave for me now.'

Neil, his steamer trunk and his bicycle were at sea for fourteen weeks. In Fremantle the agent for the line met him, hurrying him along the wharf, saying, 'We don't have much time.' Apparently Neil was to board another ship, the monthly Fremantle to Singapore steamer, which would drop him at Broome. For the next six days he stood at the rail, in vegetably currents of air, as crates of fresh provisions for the northern ports rotted around him.

Crystal, his mother's sister, met him at the other end, holding a scented handkerchief to her nose. She was as stiff and plaited as a length of rope, with the rawboned look of a disappointed woman in a drying climate—not a bit like his mother, who'd been round and soft until just before she died, and always shrewd and humorous. As Neil walked beside her down the long jetty in Roebuck Bay, the bicycle ticking against his hip, a Koepanger behind them carrying the steamer trunk, his aunt didn't once ask after him, or speculate,

or mention Hazel's death. It was as if she couldn't get her head around England, a sea voyage or the needs and grief of a thirteen-year-old boy. Neil observed the line of her lips and was reminded of a day toward the end, a letter crushed in his mother's claw:

'My sister has never mentioned you, acknowledged that I'm sick, or offered to come and be with me, even though Leonard would have paid for her ticket. I was always the favoured older sister, with the looks, brains and luck, and apparently I'm still the favoured one, even on my deathbed.'

His mother had paused then, looking down the years. 'Leonard was in love with me, you know.'

Feeling that he was another raw deal in the life of his aunt, Neil walked mutely to the end of the jetty, where a dusty touring car waited under a tree. Haarlem Downs, Crystal told him, was six hours away, dirt road all the way.

That first evening, his cousin Cameron had said: 'Neil, say "home".'

'Hawm.'

'Hah! Say "stand".'

Neil obliged. 'Stund.'

The Dunns grinned at him around the dining-room table.

The gleam in Crystal's eyes was like a nail in Hazel's coffin; Uncle Leonard's pipe sucked wetly; Cameron watched beneath his lazy lids. Neil pulled his familiar numbness around himself and sawed at his slab of goat. He was in a solid room in a house on a frontier. The dining chairs were upholstered in buffalo hide, rifles sat on wooden pegs above the sideboard, there was a chipped piano, and porcelain dishes and shepherd girls gathered dust on the shelves. He knew at once that he'd never be able to take on the Dunns' colouring, or make their stories his own, even if he'd wanted to.

'Say "lass",' Cameron said.

'Luss.'

Leonard removed his pipe from his teeth. 'Cam, leave your cousin alone.'

Neil glanced at his uncle in gratitude, and saw the man's pain. *You're the spitting image of your mother*: the first thing Uncle Leonard had said to him.

Neil climbs to his feet, brushing off the sand. The half-light is the time for a thumping heart: curses snarled after him at dusk in Jesmond Dene, snakes in the early-morning dirt beside the Indian Ocean, bad memories.

He remounts and pedals across the flat. He's been on Haarlem Downs for a year now; he's mapped its ruptures and corrugations, been mired in mud and bulldust, splashed across claypans, and traversed wastes of tiny red abraded stone chips—red as though giants had passed by, trailing blood spots. He's even woven the S of American dollar signs around the parallel bars of his old tyre marks, and last month he tracked the leper patrol, the crisp outlines of horseshoes and the softer depressions of bare feet where Trooper Dalvean and his mounted native constables had walked half-a-dozen blacks chained together at the neck.

Neil rides to be solitary, and to encourage the past—sometimes even to banish it—but a part of him is always alert to the singing of his bicycle. Every run is a test run, the wheels, saddle, pedals and handlebars transmitters of information: the chain is working loose; a thread is worn; he's lost a nut in the dust behind him; a welded joint is fatigued.

This time it's the saddle. It begins to tip forward, and wrenches left and right with the motion of his inner thighs. He dismounts: a nut is missing.

He walks the bicycle home.

This is a country where men, women and children flow into their horses, assuming fluid new configurations. As Neil passes the stallion paddock and heads toward the workshop, one hand on the loose saddle, Cameron appears, cantering across the main yard on a mare, his body whipping lazily.

Too late—Cameron has seen him. ‘Who’s this on a pushbike? A shearer? A ratbag from the union?’ He strikes his head with the heel of his hand: ‘Wait a minute, it’s the lud.’

Cameron canters away again. Neil tracks him past the gins’ hut and the cook’s quarters and on to the flatland at the edge of Haarlem Downs, where the black stockmen are slopping white paint along a roundstone border and raking and picking clean the new surface. Soon Cameron is no more than a dusty wraith and Neil, watching in his mind’s eye, sees him dismount at a distant stand of acacias, where a horse is tethered, and call: ‘Jeannie, Jeannie.’

Forget the pair of them. Neil enters the workshop, a vast, cool, dim wooden shed with a sump-oiled dirt floor. It’s filled with the odours of hammered metal, hot manifolds, welded pipes, patched inner tubes, and needle valves and dampers soaking in bowls of oily petrol. Tools hang from a wall of stencilled shapes above the main workbench—heaven help those who borrow and fail to rehang them. Neil stops in the shaft of light at the open door and scans the crowded interior, finally locating the blacksmith in a far corner, crouched at a pump. There’s an eight-cylinder engine waiting for attention in an angle-iron cradle nearby, together with a tumbled stack of crooked artesian pipes and a broken mangle from the laundry. Wally Webb is irreplaceable. He can stitch a torn chair, carve a table leg or plait a stockwhip.

‘The lud himself,’ Wally says.

It’s a friendly mutter. The blacksmith is absorbed with packing ball bearings in grease, and doesn’t have enough fingers for the task. His bony chin juts downward into the guts of the pump. ‘Neil, would you hold this for me, please?’

Their foreheads touch. Before he met the blacksmith, Neil’s hands hadn’t been good for anything but holding a spoon or wiping his arse. From the very start Wally had refused to repair the bicycle from England. Instead he’d demonstrated how it might be done, extolling the simple beauty of logical thought. Presently Neil developed nimble fingers and a knack for plotting the stages of a mechanical task before he performed it, and soon he could think his way into the secret motions of an engine or a gear assembly, or the stresses and strains of a chassis, as others are born to assume horses.

‘All done,’ Wally says.

They stand, wiping their fingers with scraps of cotton sheet. ‘Your saddle’s offline, son.’ ‘I lost a nut.’

‘Have a gander under the bench.’

Neil crouches at a crate of mismatched bolts, nuts and washers. Behind him the blacksmith’s boots scuff softly across the dirt floor. Willy is often drawn to the open door. He likes to lean on the doorframe and woolgather for a minute or two, his eyes fixed on the indeterminate line between the sand and the sky.

He coughs. ‘Cameron was in here a minute ago. Said the boss radioed from Wyndham. We can expect him within the hour.’

Neil finds a replacement nut and joins the blacksmith. Together they gaze out at the landing strip. The hands have finished raking and painting. There’s a windsock at one end but no wind, and no hangar yet. A month ago there hadn’t even been an airstrip.

‘Pull a long face and carry on.’

Neil knows what the blacksmith is thinking. He’s thinking about the extra work that an aeroplane will bring: an unfamiliar engine, dust, dirty fuel, bent struts, tears in the fabric.

Wally returns to the comforting shadows, leaving Neil to watch as two figures materialise from the heat shimmers on the flat beyond the border of stones. Jeannie Verco must have been off with her sketchbook again, and Cam is fetching her back to wait for Leonard’s arrival. They walk their horses as though they have all the time in the world, but eventually step over the white stone border and pick their way delicately across the landing strip toward the workshop. When Jeannie spots Neil she stands in the saddle, waving, grinning enough to turn his heart over. Are they special or indiscriminate, these smiles of hers? Is she being charitable? Where Cameron has proximity and history on his side, horse sense and carelessness, Neil is no more than the poor, pale cousin from a buttoned-down, penny-pinching land. Ah, well, Jeannie won’t be here next week. She’ll be

down south again, in a pleated uniform, attending chapel, playing hockey, reading Wordsworth with her inky fingers, waiting for the May holidays to roll around.

Neil steps away from the workshop and helps her to dismount. Dismounting is something she's done since she could walk, but she thanks him from a well of affection and good humour. At that moment they both stiffen, hearing the faraway drone, and look up. Now Wally's at their shoulders, tilting an ear at the sky. Finally Cameron shades his eyes against the slanting sun, registering more their expectation than the beat of the approaching aeroplane. As Wally often mutters in the protected corners of the workshop, Cameron Dunn wouldn't know a piston from a pipewrench.

Neil locates the speck in the sky. Uncle Leonard has been away for a month, over on the east coast, taking delivery of a Percival Gull from the agent and receiving instruction from a Sydney Aero Club pilot. There's a sales brochure up at the big house: *A low-wing cabin monoplane of streamlined appearance and superior performance, capable of speeds of 165 m.p.h. with a 160 horsepower Napier Javelin motor.* In the course of Leonard's first pass over the homestead and steeply banked turn above the killing pen and night paddock, the Gull templated against the sun, Neil begins to fuse with the natty wheel cowlings, the neat snout, the ribbed airframe beneath the silvery skin, and his heart shifts, his toes lift from the ground, and his destination is altered forever.