



**An  
Airline  
Suite**

**Chester Eagle**

## Qantas 1

The pilot says, 'We're coming up to Lake Frome. Passengers on the right hand side of the plane should get a good view of it. A bit later, we'll be passing Lake Eyre.' I'm in the middle bank of seats, and can't see out; as the minutes go by, with sunlight streaming through the windows on the left, so that people are pulling down blinds, I think about what's below - Sturt's Stony Desert, the Simpson Desert, Uluru, the Olgas. I'd love to be on the ground, walking about; I'd love to be in the pilot's seat, commanding those expanses through the narrow windows above a Jumbo's nose that look like the eye slit of a helmet.

Pilots are the god-people of our age, casually dispersing information we can't put to any use. 'We're flying at an altitude of ... Outside temperature is minus ... Travelling at a speed of ... Should arrive in Singapore at approximately ... Where the ground temperature is currently ... If you want to set your watch to Singapore time, it's now ...' And the MacDonnell Ranges are below us, and we veer towards the Great Sandy Desert. This I have to see. I walk to the back of the plane. Two women are looking down. There's no seat next to this window. I join them. They're French, and we talk. Phrases that haven't passed my lips since university make me feel that part of me is already in Europe. They want to know about this desert, the aborigines, the explorers. Telling them things, I feel pride. My country is below, and what a land; we've been flying across it for hours. And what a colour! I decide I'll stay at this window until the red tract has a boundary of glittering sea.

A hand reaches between us. One of our servants, a steward. He pulls the blind down. I look at him in amazement, anger. What else is flying for, but these moments of wonder and expectation? I say this to him. Sorry, he says, we're about to show a film, and the glare will spoil the image. I push the blind back. What is this film, anyway?

*Grease*, starring John Travolta and Melbourne's own Olivia Newton John. He pulls the blind down again. The French women disappear.

In Rome, the luggage takes a long time to come. What are they doing, roasting chestnuts? It comes, I buy tickets. My wife and children board the bus. I bump the man beside me. 'I beg your pardon,' I say: he makes room for me. 'Prego', he says; I have never had this word said to me before.

It's dark as we drive in. We're on the wrong side of the road; I hope none of my fellow countrymen are approaching. I realise that a bridge we're crossing must span the Tiber. Something unbelievably ancient is running beneath us. Which side Tiber were Caesar's parks?

We're dropped at Roma Termini. The first buildings we walk past are dilapidated. We pause on a small island in the traffic; there's a stench of piss. We find the Via Nazionale. We press a button, a voice says 'Si?' An extra bed is put in our room, we decide to freshen up. The bath is very big. There are two taps and the head of a lion, whose mouth is supposed to emit water. It doesn't. Many seconds pass, then there is a rumble, a gurgling. More waiting, then some

luke-cold water dribbles through the lion's teeth. I'm not impressed.

I've seen photos of Saint Peter's, years before, in Life magazine. Full colour. Triumphant white statues, Christ in the middle, looking down a street cunningly widened at one end to give a sense of approach; the Italians are good at optical tricks. I've seen postcards of Saint Peter's, and dissections of it in books on renaissance architecture; I know what I'm going to see. What I'm not ready for is that it's waiting for me. It uses its height and place on a hill to overwhelm us. We're four little tourists in the throng that come every day. Tomorrow another lot, same coaches, different people to eat the chestnuts, buy Vatican souvenirs, stare in wonder. Christ is the nominal ruler of the scene, with his cross leaning lightly on the crook of his arm, and his right hand extended in a salute unnervingly like Hitler's. Christ's majesty has been borrowed to ratify the pope - and there's his balcony - whose authority in turn sanctions the grey nuncios, prelates and dubious bankers who must be hidden somewhere behind, and even the priests who are everywhere when we enter the church, a category of men no more attractive than the numerous priests of Irish extraction to be seen, faces flushed with whisky and sexual frustration, whenever the Collingwood football club is playing. I think their system stinks - and I have never seen such grandeur in my life. They have Michelangelo's *Pieta* to make me cry, and on the inside of the dome, black letters on gilt, is their deed of establishment from God through the person of his son: TU ES PETRUS AEDIFICABO ECCLESIAM TIBI

DABO CLAVES REGNI CAELORUM. (You are the rock on which I shall build a church, and to you will I give the keys of the kingdom of heaven.)

What will we be like when we get home? Changed? In the twinkling of a month? We go to Florence, called, here, Firenze; Milano, Genève, Barcelona, Gerona, Carcassonne, Toulouse. And Paris, of the matchless reputation, lies ahead.

And Melbourne. Have we a base of which we can only be ashamed, or is there life beyond the wonders of Europe?

Coming over, in the long stretch between Singapore and Bahrain, I investigate the headphones. Nine is the classical channel. The same program cycles endlessly. I work out when the Elgar cello concerto should start, I put the headphones on.

The music's pianissimo, I can't hear a thing. I wait a minute and try again. There it is, the inner communing of a man who liked to watch horses and chat to his king as if music was an imperial activity. Poor Elgar, whose music, when he wasn't inspired, moved in fits and starts. Sad Elgar, born to express the doubts and record the transition from solidarity to ghost-hood of the empire of which he and his king were part. When the engines drown the music again, I turn it off and imagine his first symphony, playing the imperial theme in my mind. Do all events, or is it only the lucky ones, move through a stage of madness, greed, lust and brutality to a final, consummate expression of what they've been about? Their geist, their dream? I believe it, thinking of that *nobilmente*

theme. I have another go with the headphones. Schubert's C major symphony is starting; could anything be more grand?

It could; it makes me think of Bruckner, and I take off the headphones again so that I can imagine the opening of his 7th, music which belongs amid the clouds; belongs where we are - comfortable, bored, 35,000 feet above the poverty of India. I rear up in my mind the brass castles of Bruckner's 8th, 7th, 4th; my ticket, for which I've paid one thousand, one hundred and one dollars, is taking me to the imaginative centre of the world.

Before I give Schubert another try, I think of Wagner's Valhalla music, of Prince Ludwig who befriended him, of the castles along the Rhine. Of Wotan's farewell, and the motif that brings *Gotterdammerung* to an end, of love's redemptive power.

I have never lived.

## Qantas 2

We've crossed the Bay of Bengal, and followed the coast of Burma. We've walked around the airport for an hour, exercising. There were empty seats on the Athens-Bangkok flight, giving us room to stretch out and sleep. As the passengers file on board, it's clear that we've got about the same number on board. Great! The doors should close any minute. I've got my eye on the seats I'm going to grab.

Then the stewards start counting the empty seats, and a handful of Asians are brought on board. More. And more, a steady trickle of poorly dressed people, carrying nothing,

who, to judge by their faces, have never been on a plane before. They keep coming, led by the cabin crew, until all seats on the plane are filled except the one beside me and the one behind it. Then a man and a woman with a tiny baby are settled in these places. Flight QF6 is full.

The baby is asleep. The man speaks a little English. They are Kampuchean. They have been living in a refugee camp on the Thai border for over two years. He pulls out papers and shows me a letter written by the American manager of the camp, commending him for learning English and for his help with the work of running the place. He is a man of initiative, the American says, and able to take responsibility. I think of all the references I've written. 'We go Australia now,' says my Kampuchean. 'New country for us.' I ask him if his wife speaks English. 'Little,' he says.

Hours pass. The baby wakes, and is fed. The father holds his child, with a cloth covering the eyes. It is soon asleep again, and handed back to the mother. I am very moved by this child. He, or she, will have no memory of Kampuchea or Thailand. Only I and the parents are witness to the flight, the escape it has made without knowing. Fate, fortune, destiny or what you will has lifted it from its refugee camp to put it down in my city, about which, I can tell, the Kampuchean is curious. Sometimes he peers past me at my son and daughter. My son has been collecting notes and coins in Europe, and is going through his collection, one by one. The man - who's paying for his flight? - feels in his pocket and produces a coin, which he passes to my son. The coin is examined, then passed to me. It is the second lowest Thai denomination. I give it to my

daughter, who studies it, then tells her brother that he has to give the man something in return. He doesn't see why. He's already said thank you, he knows it's of no value, and thinks the man, being a man, will have plenty more. My daughter finds a fifty cent coin and reaches past me. 'Here,' she says. 'This is for you.'

The effect is surprising. The Kampuchean seems to be in awe of the object. It occupies him for minutes. I become embarrassed; the fifty cent coin is not a successful piece. The coat of arms is constricted by its dodecahedral shape, and it displeases me that one side is given to the Queen of England, whom I despise because of her role as keystone of the English class system. Will my own generation, as well as that of my parents, have to pass away before this offence is removed? I'm ashamed of what the coin is saying. But he turns it over, many times, and turns it around as if it can somehow, if he looks at it hard enough, reveal to him his future.

When we leave the land and enter the Bight, the air becomes turbulent. The inexperienced passengers cry out. The cabin crew soothe them in a language they don't understand. Some of them are given brown paper bags but don't know what they're for. The plane steadies; I calculate the remaining length of the flight, and subtract twenty-five minutes, because that's when the pilot will put the nose of the plane down: that's when they will be sick.

Many of them are. My neighbour seems surprised. He's put the coin in his pocket by now. He turns to look at his wife, who smiles. She lifts the cloth so he can see their baby's face. It's still asleep. We land, I wish them luck. Thank you, he says,



and thank you to my daughter, for the coin.

We're at L'Aéroport Charles De Gaulle. My wife is staying to do research; the children and I are going home. It's two o'clock - 1400 - but the sun is so weak that the day seems to be ending before it's properly begun. Our flight leaves from Frankfurt and we have to make a connection. Security is tight. Passengers going through the barrier have to go into a cubicle with a guard of the same sex to be searched; the word 'frisked' comes to my mind. It's done behind a carelessly drawn curtain and I don't care for what I see, so we sit down; there's plenty of time. My wife will be in another sort of transit - from the metro where she left us, to the hotel, then the library. Weeks on her own without us. I feel very responsible for our children. We wait, because I don't like the next step, the inspection.

Then comes the signal that it's time to move. A *body* of people - it's the best way I can describe them - in dark uniforms crosses the terminal towards our barrier. They are the Lufthansa crew, and they are very smart. They are not in step, and they are not ranged in twos or threes, but I feel this is a conscious decision. They are brisk and neat. As they near the barrier, where they will surely be privileged, they slow; one man, who has an air of authority and braid on his cap, pulls a packet of menthols from his pocket. When he stops, they all stop. He says something and each in turn offers a hand. He supports the men's hands with his own, while letting fall a menthol; the women's hands are not touched, but notionally supported by his hand lingering sensuously beneath.

He is the captain. They pass the guards, smiling.

We go through the search. I realise that my hesitation has had something to do with the tear in the lining of my overcoat. We board. We fly. The German hostess is charming, and has things to occupy the children, for which I'm grateful. The day darkens quickly during our short flight. What do people do in these northern winters? As we lower to land, I see snow everywhere, and everything that isn't covered by snow is shrouded in a gloom only slightly lighter than the blue of the airline's uniform. I half expect to see Fasolt, Fafner and a bear. How did a high civilisation develop in such an inhospitable place?

The pilot says, 'We're crossing the coastline now, a little bit north of Port Hedland. There's quite a bit of cloud, but you might catch a glimpse of it out on the right.' My seat's on the left and I can only see darkness, but it does seem ... not safer ... more *welcoming* to be where we are.

Time passes. I realise I'm waiting for a signal from the land, but it's dark. A different darkness from the middle east, where ports and oil installations, and I suppose military installations, offer clusters of lights which puzzle me as we fly over and which are never explained by our captains.

Everywhere dark. I do my usual calculations; so many hours till we're home. Suddenly in the enormous blackness that's been refusing me, there's a light. One.

I try to imagine what's on the ground. A camp fire? A pastoral homestead? A bunch of black-abusing hoons? The trouble with my country is that the nearer you get to the

tribal life, or remnants of it, of the aboriginal people, the worse the attitudes are. I'm a city dweller, comfortably supportive, but as remote as I am in an aeroplane. So the light moves behind me while I'm still wondering how I feel about it.

Twenty-five minutes out, the pilot puts the nose down. I've loved Paris of the matchless reputation, I've discovered a Frenchman in me, as well as a Spaniard and an Italian, and I'm dying to be home.

The taxi takes us through Coburg. On the De Chene oval, a faint ground mist is visible. I tell my son and daughter that the moment the sun lifts over the hill, the mist will disappear; it hasn't the clinging strength of the mists, the wet cottonwool, we've encountered in Gerona, the Pyrenees, the air above the Rhine. As our taxi breasts the hill that separates Coburg from Preston, we feel hot, and start to take off our clothes. Another ten minutes and the driver's dropped us; before I pay him I put, for some reason, our cases on the domestic side of the gate, and I smell the earth, our black basalt soil. The day's just stirring, the heat's still to come, but I love the smell rising from this soil.

We run madly around the garden, the three of us, picking up the cat, gazing at the gum trees, feeling, even through the soles of our shoes, the dry earth, and taking in the intoxicating scents from the leaves, the grasses, that have been living through a summer while we've been away.

## **Thai**

I'm going to a conference in Paris. The seat beside me is again filled late, by a very beautiful woman, who is in some way ill

at ease. People moving down the aisle look at her, and the stewards are very solicitous. When the seat belt signs go off, a plump Thai makes a great show of coming to her side with a tray on which is a newly opened bottle of Spanish champagne, and a glass. She says she doesn't drink wine, and the glass is given to me. I'm amused, and the wine is good. She asks me what I'm reading, and I tell her it's the manuscript of a book I've just finished; it starts in Paris before returning to Melbourne and Sydney, and I want to see what it looks like when it's read away from those two cities. She's interested in this and tells me she's a painter. I don't believe it; she may have been an art student for a few weeks. I ask her where she comes from, and she says Firenze. I tell her I fell in love with Firenze at first sight; she smiles, but says she needs to travel too.

She shows me her passport; it's been stamped in half the countries of the world. Why does she travel so *much*? Because she's a model. Her agency has a catalogue which circulates worldwide. She shows me pictures of herself, in which she appears at once glamorous, natural, and reserved. When I start reading again, pencil in hand, she opens a magazine. She turns the pages impatiently, then pulls a piece of paper, folded once, from somewhere in her things. She's slow to do anything with it. '*Micio mio*' is written on the outside. She unfolds it. It begins 'To my everlasting ...' and ends 'I will love you forever.' She looks at it for a long time, thinking, then she finds a pad in her bag. Do I have a pen? The pen I offer her is one I bought in Italy, but I can't remember the brand name. 'Aurora,' she says, pleased. While she's writing, one of the

men who's admired her comes down to talk; she's startled by the voice in her ear, and dashes the pen at the magazine. Blobs of ink appear on the glossy pages. Her tension is palpable.

When her reply is written, and in the bag, I ask her what she's been doing. She says she's been working for a Sydney agency which is connected with a magazine owned by an Englishman - whom she names - and she and his son have just spent a month together. He wants her to stay, and marry, but she's told him she needs to think clearly, she must go back to Firenze to decide ...

I'm in love myself, I've just spent the happiest weeks of my life, another life entwined in mine. I'm on such a cloud of elation that I'm disposed to think that everything in the world is well - but the words 'everlasting' and 'forever' trouble me. She says she's told - she says his name - 'Perhaps, but I need to know how I feel when I'm home.'

She leaves the flight at Bangkok. I wander around the stalls at the airport, money in my pocket. I'm looking at some silk when I find Patrizia, that was the name on her passport, beside me. She tells me never to buy things in airports, there's always better stuff, at better prices, in the city. She says if I have any trouble getting my book published I'm to contact ... she names her lover's father, who runs the magazine ... because he's sure to be able to help. We say goodbye. It's another six years before I'm in Firenze again, and I stay three days without giving her a thought. It's only now, in writing this, that I recall the dangers I perceived, the caverns and catacombs making the ground hollow beneath

those anxiety-laden words. Forever. Everlasting.

Patrizia's seat is filled by a tiny Thai merchant. He ships Asian goods to European restaurant suppliers. He shows me his price list. 'This is only approximate,' he says, and when a meal's been served and cleared away, he produces a calculator, making his notes on a pad of cheap yellow paper before pencilling on his orders the exact prices he'll quote. They are worked out, I notice, to the third decimal place.

He offers me his copy of the English language *Bangkok Post*. There is a photo of a demonstration by a crowd of farmers who want the government to raise prices. He tells me that something will have to be done for these people, or they will turn socialist or communist. One of their complaints, which I notice he doesn't mention, is that any profit to be had from rice growing is swallowed up by greedy middlemen. His suit is, by my standards, about op-shop quality, so perhaps he doesn't consider himself one of these.

There's a party of French people on board. Their *excursion organisée* has brought them together. They swap seats to talk to each other, and stand in groups in the aisle. The one nearest me looks like a farmer, but when I question him he describes himself as *un paysan*. He grows grapes for a wine coöperative near Nîmes, and there is confusion when I ask him how I will recognise a bottle of this wine when I'm shopping in Paris. Eventually he draws a bottle in something like the shape of de Stael's bottle painting in the Melbourne gallery, with a rough rectangle for a label, in which he prints *Coteaux*

*Flaviens/VDOS/Castières du Gard*. I tell him I'll make a point of asking for it. He doesn't seem very interested. When the plane lands in Athens, a neat enough landing, I think, but nothing special, the French travellers clap. I'm surprised. Have they done this every landing in a trip of several weeks? The Greeks get off.

The last leg of the flight is like a camp that's breaking up. The plane's a quarter full, mostly the French party and a few Paris-bound Australians. We shift around talking, or catching views from windows; others spread themselves to sleep. We help ourselves to wine and coffee because the cabin crew have stopped bothering about us, except that somewhere over Switzerland they give everyone an orchid in the corporate colours of the airline. A second plump Thai takes me by the elbow to point out my little merchant, still bent over his calculations. 'He works too hard,' he says, picking up a rug, and takes himself to an empty row of seats. When I pass him a little later, he's asleep. Eventually the seat belt signs come on: we're approaching Charles De Gaulle.

I've felt during the flight that the Thai pilots handle their Jumbo somewhat differently from a Qantas crew; instead of coming in high, and stepping the plane down with magisterial control, they throttle the engines back, allowing the plane to drift gently downwards. Something about this practice makes the engines roar. I sit bolt upright, remembering the weeks before I left Melbourne. I'm in love, and cannot bear the thought that my connection with what's happened should be severed because I'm landing in France. I think of the long last

day before I ordered a taxi to the airport. I played the Barenboim recording of Berlioz's *Grande Messe des Morts*. One of the many things I like about it is that when the composer introduces the famous, or notorious, sixteen tympani, they play quietly, insisting that the earth always shakes, rather than making an assault on the senses. I cling to the love I've brought to France, hearing, in the muffled roar of the engines, the tympani; seeing, in the foggy landscape beneath, Europe's mystery; believing, as my hands grip the seats, that nothing has changed by my leaving my love to unguarded chance. We land, disembark. We enter the cavern of an amazing up-hill-and-down-dale moving footpath. The terminal is like a three dimensional switchboard of escalators, embarkation points, and passenger conduits. I follow signs, find my way through corridors, take a lift. I find the bus rank. There are several buses. I think where I want to go, and jump on. The driver says, 'Nation?' I have my francs ready. 'Oui, Nation,' I say. 'Merçi.'

## Thai 2, Qantas 3

In the Rue Mouffetard someone asks me how to find Saint Etienne du Mont. I point it out with an expansive gesture. In a wine shop I ask for my paysan's *Coteaux Flavians*: the man at the counter is contemptuous, they've got nothing from that region in stock. I buy an umbrella for my daughter. I drink a beer, I go to Saint Etienne, where a Bach cantata is being prepared.

I try to slow down but my excitement's uncontrollable. *Une autre bière, un café?* I go back to my hotel, where I've



left Thai's purple orchid dangling its feet in an ashtray.

Days pass. I search out L'Eglise des Invalides, because this is where *La Grande Messe des Morts* was first performed. I try to imagine the church before it was changed to accommodate Napoleon's tomb. Where must Berlioz have been standing when Habeneck put down his baton to take that pinch of snuff immortalised in the *Memoirs*? I walk through the city to Saint Eustache, where the *Te Deum* was first given. There is a passage for the violins in the Sanctus which I am sure Berlioz intended us to hear as the rustling of angels' wings: since people of my sort no longer believe in angels it may seem strange to say that I intend to sit in the middle of the church, and try to discover in myself the feeling, the spiritual dimension, Berlioz has embodied - should I say 'made incarnate'? - in the music. That dimension, surely attainable in a gothic church if anywhere, must be available to me because I recognise it in myself when the music's played: I intend, therefore, to concentrate, meditate, until I find it in myself without the aid of the composer calling it up. I sit. I let my thoughts run aimlessly until I feel a stillness taking me over from within. This can only be a very early stage but I feel I'm on my way.

Then my eye's caught by a beggar I've already encountered slipping through a door. He's coming towards me. There's no one else in the church. My stillness is replaced by bristling rage. I glare at him. I take a firm grip on my bag and hunch my shoulders. My body language is violent. He did the same thing to me two days before when I was here for the same purpose. I told him I didn't want my meditation

interrupted. And here he is again. I shout at him. He puts two fingers to his mouth and says, '*Manger, manger.*' I shout at him again. I get up in a rage. No angels' wings today! I walk to the far end of the church and stare at the grand organ of Ducroquet, installed a year before the *Te Deum's* premiere. I try to calm down, but it's no good. *Manger, manger.* Let him bloody well eat cake!

Much of this anger is directed at myself because of my inability to be indifferent to beggars, to the gypsies who molest travellers in Rome, the women in Spain who beg with drugged, sleeping babies in their arms, the men, sometimes well dressed, who hand you hard luck stories on scraps of paper. If you say you can't read the language, they know, and you know they know, that you can understand it well enough. *Manger, manger.* They want your money. There is nothing in Europe that makes me more aware that I belong in another place.

I walk towards the hotel. I sit for a while in Notre Dame. I read in the Shakespeare Bookshop. I find a shop that has a wonderful stock of musical scores and I buy some songs of Poulenc for a friend who is a singer. I walk towards the hotel. It flatters me that I am twice asked for directions by French people; oh yes, I feel very much at home. Very much at home. I go to my favourite bar and write postcards.

When I was a student I heard Joseph Burke, professor of Fine Arts, say that during the war he'd been flown into Athens. The pilot called down the plane that if they looked out they'd see the Parthenon. Joe stayed where he was because the

Parthenon had been so placed that one approached it on foot, and had one's first sight of it looking up. It was never meant to be looked down on.

I was entranced by flying, even then, but his point stuck in my mind, and on the occasions that I've flown in and out of Athens, I've stopped myself looking at the Parthenon. This is only a gesture on my part, since my embargo doesn't extend to Mount Olympus, which doesn't seem very high, viewed from a plane. Just a good, average, run of the mill, bare stony mountain, stripped today of Zeus and co. Passing it, I'm even a little patronising about the belief systems of the Greeks; remarkable for their time, I tell myself, and certainly their imaginations engaged passionately with the world ...

Question. Why do I like flying? Answer. Because it gives me - anyone - a god's eye view. Question. What does that expression mean? Answer. Nothing. There are no gods any more, we have to take responsibility for ourselves and the earth we dominate too easily. Question. Are we going to survive?

No answer.

We are flying through the clouds above Greece. The sun is striking dramatically through openings, reaching the sea in places, leaving it dark elsewhere. Islands look like stones. It's not stormy, but the clouds are in motion: the word 'fuming' comes to my mind. Darkness and light shift radically from moment to moment; it's as if the seething history of the plains and valleys hidden from my sight is being re-enacted in shadow play.

We cross the heel of Italy, we follow a stony range. The land - this land - looks like worn black velvet, threadbare but rich in visual effect. And hammered into the hard hills like nails in a packing case are the separate buildings which form hilltop towns. They make me think of ancient feuds and vendettas. As the mountains get higher and have snow on their flanks we turn away because we're dropping down for Roma Fiumicino, Aeroporto Leonardo da Vinci. Crossing the eternal city, the plane is quivering, and my son and daughter recognize with delight the places they know. Saint Peter's, the wondrous piazza before it; already there are buses drawn up in lines. The Colosseum is there, the ancient Forum ... the dirty, dilapidated city crammed with traffic. Happy, excited, we get our gear from the overhead lockers and pull our seat belts on. Click, click, click, it's happening all over the plane.

In Singapore, I'm given a seat in the front row, next to the bulkhead. Then I'm asked to move because a couple with a baby have boarded, and they'll need the baby's basket that clips to the roof of the cabin. The change is effected with much smiling and polite questioning. 'Where did you board the plane?' 'How long have you been away?'

My new seat is next to a woman who's been eight years in London and isn't sure that she wants to be back. I have a feeling that it's the unmarried daughter being called home when someone in the family needs looking after.

Hours pass. We cross the coastline. I set my watch to Melbourne time. Those I love will be asleep. I think with pleasure of the things I've bought them in Paris. The couple in

front of me feed their baby, burp it, play with it, then rig up the basket. When the baby's asleep, they put it above them, then they sleep too. I watch the basket from the seat behind. When the plane lurches in an air pocket, the basket swings. I think of the Kampuchean couple; this baby, too, was born in another country, while its parents were away. It's very young; its eyes aren't focussing yet. Its helplessness is symbolised by its position - doubly dependent, doubly aloft.

I can't sleep sitting up, I read, I keep looking out the window, waiting for the dawn. I want to see the outback landforms, the meandering lines of trees, tracing the movement of underground water. I want to see the land as an aboriginal painting with circles, dots and serpentine curves, full of mysterious awareness. I want to be home, but first, I want to see the land.

Dawn does come, and the clouds thin. We're over featureless country and really I can't see anything at all. But the man in front of me, who's woken by now, is excited. He gets the baby down, and cuddles it. When there's a little more light, and we can see things on the ground, he holds the baby to the window. 'Look Geoffrey,' he says - it's the first time he's said the baby's name - 'There's Australia! Look! There's Australia!' His hands are shaking; I'm very moved, and I ask myself, is he showing Australia to the child, or the child to Australia?

We leave the land and enter the Bight. We cross the Victorian border. Twenty-five minutes out, the pilot puts the nose down. We come in low over Melbourne, I can see where I live, I can see where I work. Then the plane veers to align

itself with the runway, and we're dropping down over farmland. I think of the woman beside me, eight years in London, and I suggest that she might like the window seat. She moves, mostly to oblige me, I think, but I keep peering over her shoulder at the gum trees and dry grass. 'God Australia's beautiful!' I say: she looks at me as if she's not so sure.