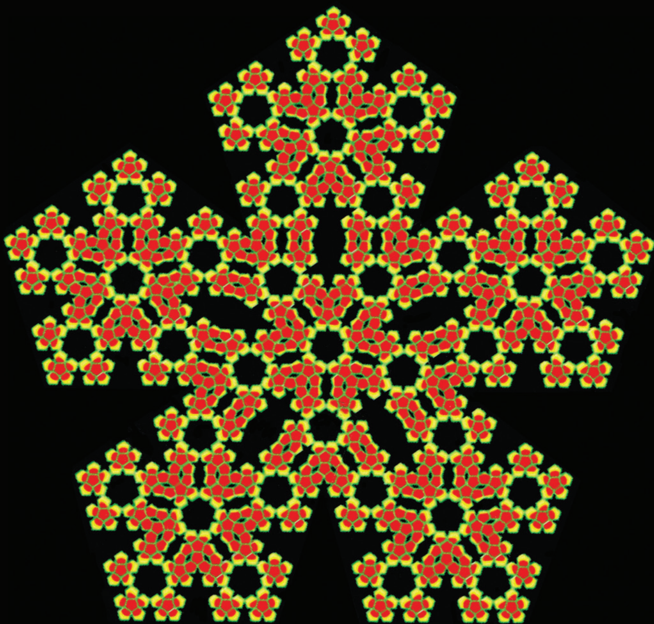
ONE SMALL STEP

a memoir



Chester Eagle

Books by Chester Eagle

Hail and Farewell! An evocation of Gippsland (non-fiction, 1971)
Who could love the nightingale? (novel, 1974)
Four faces, wobbly mirror (novel, 1976)
At the window (novella, 1984)
The garden gate (novel, 1984)
Mapping the paddocks (non-fiction, 1985)
Play together, dark blue twenty (non-fiction, 1986)
House of trees (reissue of Hail and Farewell! 1987)
Victoria Challis (novel, 1991)
House of music (stories, 1996)
Wainwrights' mountain (novel, 1997)
Waking into dream (novel, 1998)
didgeridoo (stories, 1999)
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The Centre & other essays (essays, 2002)
Love in the Age of Wings & other operas (librettos, 2003)
Melba: an Australian city (essays, 2004)
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The Well in the Shadow (literary essays, 2008)
All the Way to Z (memoir/essay, 2009)
This Enchanted World & other operas (librettos, 2009)
Running The Race (novel, 2010)
A Mob of Galahs (librettos, 2011)

(See also mini-mags over the next page.)

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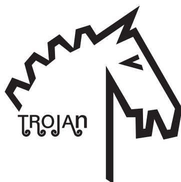

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Mini-mags

Escape (story, 2004)
Hallucination Before Departure (memoir, 2006)
Mozart (memoir, 2007)
Travers (memoir, 2007)
So Bitter Was My Heart (memoir, 2008)
Keep Going! (memoir, 2008)
Who? (memoir, 2008)
At Baldy's Feet (memoir, 2008)
Othello's Rage (memoir, 2009)
The Saints In Glory (story, 1991/2009)
One Small Step (memoir, 2011)
Castle Hill (memoir, 2011)

Many years ago my wife and I, with our tiny son, and our daughter too, still four months from being born, made a trip to Innamincka, in a far corner of South Australia. I had some leave, we wanted to see things we hadn't seen, and we felt young enough - undefeatable, unstoppable – to carry it off.

We prepared. Tent, sleeping bags, portable stove, rack on top of the VW. We'd camp out, or stay in hotels if we liked the look of them. Some days we'd do no more than wash our faces, other days we'd have a shower. We'd keep our son clean. We had a car seat so he could see what we saw, not that he'd know much about it. We read Sturt's journals because we were exploring too. It was a happy trip. I enjoyed almost every hour of it, even the surprises. It's only now, looking back, that I realise how little of it was expected. I'm surprised, almost embarrassed, to recall how confident I was.

'What if you get lost? Or your car breaks down?' my mother wanted to know. She dreaded the thought of her grandson lost in the outback, like all those explorers. I told her what we'd do if we got into trouble. There wasn't much. Mobile phones didn't exist and there were no global positioning systems in 1969. Mother told us to send a card at every opportunity. If she thought her little boy – not me; her grandson – was lost, she'd charter a plane to search for us!

Mother was passionate. I thought she was foolish; she thought I was. Father was amused and said we should be all right. My wife was younger than I was and felt as unconquerable as I did. She gave Mother little encouragement.

We packed, we drove to Ballarat, an easy first stage, to stay with Kevin and Betty Murray, friends from my

Gippsland years. We drove up, exactly as arranged. 'The worst house in the best street,' Kevin had told me, and it was near enough. We were full of excitement at setting off on this adventure. The outback lay ahead!

My main memory of the night in Ballarat was of the bath our hosts had found when they moved in. It was purple. Yes, purple. I'd never seen such a thing. Kevin made jokes about it, but since it didn't upset our son when he bathed in it, I had little to say. We shared our plans with the Murrays, and in the morning, promising to come back, we set off. South Australia, here we come!

Somewhere near the border, a little past Nhill, we pitched camp. I turned off the highway, we erected our tent, lit a fire, cooked, and drank wine. It was a nowhere place, but all was going well.

We were up early and decided we'd have breakfast in the next town. Down came the tent. I folded it and put it on the roof of the car. Suddenly our son was crying. What was wrong? I looked about. The scene, tentless now, and without a fire, looked awfully bleak. He wasn't used to being surrounded by nothing. He made this clear by clambering into the car, next time I opened a door, and installing himself in his seat. At least he knew where he was! My wife and I laughed, did our packing, and got in. Our trip had advanced to the point where we were leaving places behind.

It occurred to me that we'd already done the same thing, leaving Ballarat. We were in such a hurry to get to the outback that we were pushing things behind without looking at them. This was no way to treat experience. Everything had to be understood before moving on ... and yet, who could travel like that? There wasn't time. We were going to do the whole trip in a bit over two weeks, maybe

three. We had to concentrate, yes, but there wasn't time to stop for everything ...

So what were we going to look at? I decided that it was the country north of Port Augusta that mattered, an area we'd never seen. We'd be conscious of our country's explorers, blacks, the dangers of having no support, and roads we knew nothing about. North of Port Augusta: there was a fair way to go.

At the border there was a sign telling travelers they were entering a new time zone; watches should be put back half an hour. We did this, but it didn't stop me being surprised when we entered a town to find there were boys and girls in the street. A teacher myself, I felt they should be in school, but realized that my mind hadn't gone back with the clock. My body was on Victorian time and needed something to make it change. A sleep in South Australia, I decided, would do the trick.

We stayed at Murray Bridge. Father's family had lived along the Murray, growing oranges, and I doubt if they'd ever bothered where the river went when they were done with it. But as we could see, there were people downstream. People in South Australia were supposed to speak in a slightly more English, class-derived way than Victorians and New South Welsh, but I couldn't hear it in their voices. They were also called 'croweaters', and I saw no sign of that. I think I'd felt that the border must mean something, but the remarkable uniformity of the Australian population was making itself felt.

We got to Adelaide, and it rained before we had time to look at the city. We stayed in a motel room with no bath, only a shower. We got something to block the plug hole and turned the taps on so our son could have his bath. We drove out quickly in the morning, saying we'd explore the

city next time. In the decades since then I've seen no more of it than the airport.

We traveled north. We went through Gawler and Clare and I saw, to my satisfaction, that almost all the homes, no matter what their period, were built of local stone: the towns had a unity I wasn't to see again until, a decade later, we saw Firenze. But that was in Italy, and my thoughts of travel hadn't reached so far at that stage. The country dried once we left the wine districts. We decided we'd stay in Port Augusta, at the head of its gulf. I didn't know much about the state's geography, but I knew that Goyder's line lay somewhere to the north and I had a feeling that even Port Augusta wouldn't be very welcoming. Civilisation's kinder aspects could hardly be expected to develop when there was no external welcome. That was what I thought.

The day seemed long. Our boy was getting weary, but wouldn't sleep. In a tiny settlement called Wilmington my wife called for a stop. I brought the car to the verandah of a long-deserted shop. Out came the stove and we warmed some apple for our boy. While he ate, I studied the horizontal shafts of light cutting through the town. There was nobody about. It must have been a Sunday. The 'shop' we'd chosen as the place to feed our son wasn't exactly falling over but it seemed flimsy, and I had a feeling that civilization, as people like ourselves chose to call it, was no more secure than this passing shelter. I'd had ideas, when we were planning our trip, that the DIG tree on Cooper's Creek would be the turning point, the before-and-after marker to characterize what we'd been doing, but looking back on the experience, the Wilmington verandah – with its dirt footpath and newspaper glued to the window-glass – is the point of intensest feeling. There were three of us, not to forget the daughter still to emerge, and we were dependent

on each other. We traveled together, we would live and die together ... or so it seemed, as the light began to fail.

As we drove to Port Augusta, traversing Horrocks' Pass through some low hills, I didn't expect to like the town. I recalled paintings done in the area by S.T.Gill, goldfields watercolourist, who'd died, drunk, on the steps of Melbourne's GPO, but they gave no comfort. The overnight refuge we were entering seemed bleak.

I made myself be polite at the motel, and in the shops, next morning, we bought supplies. There were still settlements to our north but Adelaide, of which we had few memories, was far behind. We were going south a short distance – by Australian standards – to Iron Knob, because our friend David Armfield had painted there on commission from BHP, but after that it would be north to the DIG tree and our eventual return. Despite the closeness I felt with my wife and utter dependence on both of us of our son, or perhaps because of them, I felt a tightening inside myself as we turned the car north. The simple reversal of direction was a challenge and it found its way into our entire beings, solidifying, firming us for what we had told ourselves, back in Melbourne, that we were going to do.

We went through Port Augusta again, without needing to stop. We pitched camp on the way to Quorn, after taking a few photos, one of a cemetery in an open paddock. People had lived and died there, and we were passing through. Where the settlement, the homes, of these people had been, I had no idea. Our camp seemed strangely indeterminate. Like the camp we'd made beyond Nhill, when our trip was younger, it seemed that the camp was us, not the place: the places were indifferent to us, passing through or stopping. My mother's idea of an aeroplane, buzzing about to find us, no longer seemed quite so silly. People did get lost, people

did break down – but not us, or not yet. We got up in the morning, packed our tent on the roof-rack, and travelled on.

We passed through the Flinders Ranges, pausing for a township or two. I'd been brought up in the country myself but felt little kinship with the people we encountered. They lived in terrain that was new to me, and I didn't know what they felt. I was truly an explorer, an observer, by now, noticing occasional patches of Hans Heysenesque landscape, and larger areas that weren't. I felt no urge to use my camera. I felt defensive, I could see that the land had a way of being that was known to itself. The outsiders were inside our car. As long as it kept going, all was well.

We camped when the road took us west of the ranges. As at Wilmington, already a piece of our past, the sun was low in the sky. There were no clouds and the Flinders Ranges stretched far to our left, far to our right, imposing but not very high. They were only a little darker than the sky behind them. We, our tent, car, fire and little family group, were a few hundred yards off the road; only two or three cars passed before it became dark again. We slept well, and when we rejuvenated our fire in the morning, the daylight was from the other side. This, such an obvious thing to say, felt profound. A day was a movement of light from east to west, a day had varying degrees of power, and this day was young. We would drive to Leigh Creek, I'd speak to the policeman, we'd leave settlement behind, and enter the unknown.

The policeman took me by surprise. He told me where we'd camped the night before. He'd seen us as he drove home from the south. He recognised our car, he knew what sort of tent we had. I told him where we were going. He wanted to know what I'd do if we ran into trouble.

Then he waited, studying me. He was wearing the khaki of the inland, not the blue of southern cities. I've already referred to the confidence I felt that nothing would stop our progress. Looking at him looking at me I felt that I was the latest in a line of fools with big ideas that they couldn't carry through. Hoping that I was impressing him, I told him our plans. He interrupted to tell me about a doctor and his girlfriend who'd driven out of Leigh Creek the previous year. They hadn't told anyone where they were going and they got bogged. 'They were smart enough to stay where they were,' he said, 'till someone came along. I was the someone. I pulled them out. They thanked me profusely and I suggested that they might like to make a donation to a fund we've got in South Australia. This doctor came from Adelaide, he ought to have known.'

What fund was that, I asked, knowing the question was expected.

'It's a fund to support the wives and children of policemen who lose their lives on duty,' he said. 'This fella ...' He didn't finish. 'Nobody would've found them. Nobody goes out where they were. I worked out where they must have been when they didn't come back, so I went and pulled them out.' He considered me again. 'He gave ten pounds to the fund. Ten pounds.' He looked at me. 'Have a good trip. Where are you going after Innamincka?' I had no doubt where I stood in his estimation. Only a safe exit from his region would de-convince him, if that's the word, that I wasn't an accident waiting to happen.

When I got back to the car, my wife asked, 'What kept you?' I told her. She said nothing, and we left Leigh Creek. We filled up with petrol at Lyndhurst, a place where the road divided, and the man who served us told me he had eight children. 'My wife is one of eight,' I said, and he

glanced at the car with an acceptance easier to take than the policeman's warning. Just for a moment, I softened. This lasted about four hundred metres, then we encountered our first gibber plain.

Gibber plains are awful. They are flat and seem to have no end. The earth is brown and hard. There is no grass, only rocks, from tiny ones that could sit in the palm of your hand to tennis ball or football size. The tracks of previous vehicles were clear enough but they'd all been four wheel drive, high clearance machines, and our little beetle had a metal bottom close to the ground. The bigger rocks scraped as we passed over. I did my best to avoid them. There wasn't so much as a tree in sight. After a few minutes I wondered how long we could put up with it. Might we, even, turn back?

No.

We banged on until the land changed. A dry watercourse appeared. Not so dry; there must have been some rain. I had a look, and decided we'd get through. We didn't. Big trucks had dug channels with their wheels and the hump in between was too high. Our car's little wheels couldn't lift the body of the car high enough, and we were grounded. I poked around with the shovel and decided it would take hours. A bit of help would be more useful. Fortunately, on the other side of this crossing – which we hadn't been able to cross – there was a homestead. Well, a house. I walked there and was warmly greeted. Two men seemed to think there'd be no problem. They got a utility and pulled us out. The sun was getting low by then and they pointed out a place to camp. How were we off for water? Any bother, come to the house and they'd be happy to help.

'Nature's gentlemen,' I told my wife, who was putting up the tent. We lit a fire and cooked, we sat by it as the cool

of night descended. No trucks came by. The house wasn't far away, with its promise of friendliness, but we didn't feel that way when we woke in the morning, or rather, were woken by a vast flock of galahs, screeching as only galahs can. The noise they made seemed to claim ownership of everything in sight. Their screeching didn't so much echo as penetrate; wherever it could be heard, that place was theirs. I hadn't lost my confidence, despite yesterday's mishap, but the noise of the galahs told me that theirs was a rule by madness and only well-managed, quietly-controlled reason could take us through the coming terrain. To crack was to lose, and another downfall wouldn't be far behind. I wondered about the station house. Everything must be secure in there? They'd have a store room and a big fridge, everything they wanted, surely? The men I'd met were sure of themselves. Did they have women - wives - to live with? They must. Did they make money, a little, at least?

I supposed they did. Did they travel, as we were doing? They'd cross the country at speed, I felt sure of that, but it wouldn't be the same as we were doing. We were ...

... we were trying to rebuild our confidence after hitting the first hurdle!

We drove on. There were more gibbers, and they went on for miles. I couldn't avoid scraping some of them, but managed to wriggle through with some success. You get used to it. We bought some petrol at a house with a bowser, close beside the road. We looked briefly at a couple of long-abandoned homes, people who'd settled north of Goyder's line. Failure seemed awfully bleak. Cattle might survive in these bony places, if they travelled far enough for grass and water. The black people, I knew, had watched the birds to see where they were flying; nothing lived without water, and that meant humans too. The black people had spread

themselves more evenly across the continent than whites had done, so they were better adjusted, it was clear.

After gibbers, we came to sandhills. They were firm and the car climbed them well enough. We stopped to drink tea from a thermos, and to give our boy a walk. This was on top of a sandhill. I noticed – it's hard to describe a change in perception – that there were everlastings in flower beside our car. I lifted my head, and there were more. I looked along the sandhill and could see daisies, in flower, to the horizon. All the other sandhills, parallel to ours, had daisies too. To the west, daisies reached the distant sky. The east was the same. There were millions upon millions, glowing in the mildest light, screened by a mesh of middle-high cloud. They stopped me. How had we got to the heart of this without noticing? Yet we had, too preoccupied with other thoughts to keep our eyes on the world we were entering. It was a miracle, surrounding us, these long dunes of sand, this sky of almost white, these endless flowers, a botanical system larger than the mind could cope with. The gibbers had been awful, the sandhills were marvellous, what would we encounter next?

The track lowered into a long-dried waterway. The soil was soft and the wheels ran easily in the opposite direction to the vanished flow. When had there last been water? Years, surely. We drove at speed, and easily. I did calculations. We were close to Innamincka. I thought I could see some cattle yards, ahead. I could, but ...

... to reach them we had to go through gibbers, again. More gibbers. Stones, hard as hell, scraping on the metal below us. Was Innamincka surrounded by gibbers? Apparently. For some reason I remembered photos I'd seen of the hotel and its spectacular bottle stack. That would be a sight to see. There might be some photos there ...

Collecting early, pioneering bottles had become popular at the time of our trip. It was a hobby that had left me untouched but I imagined myself discovering a few nineteenth century bottles and giving them to friends ... if only we could get through the last barrier of stones and find a place to rest ...

Innamincka was no more than a sign. The hotel had been destroyed. One could locate it by a bush or two, a few bricks and the fact that where it had stood was relatively free of glass. Weekend shooting parties had fired at every bottle in sight, covering the earth for a couple of hundred yards in every direction with bottles smashed by bullets. There wasn't a bottle to be found, not one. There were no buildings, either, though there were scrawny trees beside a string of waterholes. Another sign said Cooper's Creek. So this was the place we'd come so far to see. The water was the colour of mud. I felt contempt for the shooters who'd smashed the bottles, them and their bloody guns! Our country was such an enormous place and at the very moment when you wanted it to give you something, it was ghastly.

Where would we camp?

Beside the muddy water, there was nowhere else. Certainly not amid the stones. Once again, everything was bleak. A sign indicated the homestead, a mile or two away. I suddenly felt like a bath, and wondered, if we asked someone nicely ...

A tall man came out, lean, unsmiling, but courteous. Yes we could have a bath. He took us to a room and ran some water, hot and cold. Both taps gave water the colour of the creek. We would be cleaner, no doubt, but would we feel cleaner? We put our son in first, then undid a button or two. There was a knock, and the man was back, carrying

an enamel ewer, which he offered to my wife. 'Rain water, I thought you might like to wash your hair.'

It was the nicest thing that had happened for days. He'd understood what we must be feeling, having come so far. We bathed quickly, then I took our son outside while my wife washed her hair. The man was no longer around, so he trusted us. What harm could we do, a couple and a child? We went back to the creek and lit a fire. Again, everything seemed bleak. Inland Australia wasn't giving anything. Coming from a city in the south we were expecting things that couldn't be there, feelings that harshness couldn't inspire. Letting the fire die down, we got dressed, or undressed, for sleep. Our son had a folding bed that he couldn't fall out of. As we lay down, wondering how long we would stay in this famously doom-laden place – we hadn't see the DIG tree yet – we heard our son murmuring: 'Mmmum, mmm, mmmum, da da da da.' He was reassuring himself that he had his parents with him. He felt safe. I knew my wife was touched, but she was also certain. 'Let's not go looking for the DIG tree. Let's go south again. Let's get away from here.'

In the morning we bought a few things at the station store, and got directions about the track. The station men looked at our car. 'Yeah, you'll be all right. You'll get through okay.' I thought of the Leigh Creek policeman and was determined to succeed.

The track was harsh but we seemed to have left gibbers behind. We camped the following night beside a dry creek bed, lined by casuarinas of a species I didn't know. The soil was reddish. I thought of the Murrays' bath: nature didn't make things as hideous as that, not having any concern with matters of taste. Its colours were soft, and mild, even when things were hardest. The morning found us shrouded

in mist. We drove slowly, watching the track, then I heard my wife, beside me, gasp. I looked. In the mist on her side, there was a little fire, and, standing a couple of paces away, a black man wearing a coat, hat, trousers and boots. Erect, proudly within himself, he had a dignity even greater than the horse nuzzling his shoulder. We waved, he waved, and we were lost to him, in what I will call his mist, as he was lost to us.

And yet he lingers in my mind, an event of our journey. I add him to Innamincka Man, with that jug of water for my wife, as a statement that was to change my ideas of the country's inland. I had gone there thinking it would be eventful, only to find it was relentless, unforgiving of any error, breaking you down if you showed vulnerability. It demanded that you be, not so much relentless as adaptable, endlessly aware, and open to such flashes of poetry as it showed you, possibly when you were least expecting. That black man, in his mist, by his fire! It would be conventional to say I'd love to see him again, but I can't; his appearance, on that foggy morning, was the moment of enlightenment I had, quite unconsciously, been seeking. I'd had the flash, the bright light through the veil. The country had shown itself to us on terms we could understand. From that moment, we were going home.

It seemed quicker, on the way back. The harshness of the track only lasted another hour or so, then it softened. We got petrol at Orientos station, courtesy of a woman who plunged a pump into a barrel. How she knew how much we should pay I can no longer remember. She was pleased to see another woman, with a child. She gave us the obligatory advice on the track ahead, and off we went again, south. The road began to wind. It took us into mesa country, flattened by erosion. The horizon became eloquent, calling

across the distance between our car, twisting around all the obstacles, and the edge of the world, where difficulties appeared to have been resolved. All was quiet, and calm. We had reached that state where driving is an effortless means of rolling over ground as if we had motion in ourselves.

We came to Tibooburra, desperate in its placement. Rocks encircle it, or rather, it had crept inside the rocks to build itself there. It felt defended, and I wondered why it needed to be where it was. The people I spoke to seemed damaged; I asked a young woman where the post office was, and she told me that her mother ran the place I was looking for. She was attractive, young, and I felt she needed to get out before accepting her settlement's ways. We'd been told that certain well known artists from Melbourne had painted on the walls of the pub, so I went in to look. I thought what they'd done was ghastly, because unrestrained. They'd felt superior because they were 'artists': heaven help us! I felt that the locals didn't know what to make of the painting and were curious to see my reaction. I got out as quickly as politeness allowed, and we set off for Broken Hill.

I've already referred to the colour of the earth. The road had been graded and the earth was a dark red of great strength in places where it had been exposed, yet, if I looked to the side of the road, pallid, ground-hugging grasses disguised the powerful earth they grew on. It took a bulldozer blade to show the earth for what it was. Where the ground cover was undisturbed, one barely noticed the dirt's colour. I found this intriguing rather than deceptive because it hadn't intended to deceive. That was something that occurred in the mind of man. This was perhaps a key, or the beginnings of the making of a key, for understanding what we'd seen on our journey. I set off expecting – and I'm trying to recall thoughts I've long abandoned – to examine

the efforts of man to 'settle' our country. It might have been better, I came to think, if Goyder's line had been drawn in mankind's brain before the undertaking was begun. Most of what mankind had created was derelict, or struggling to survive. Man was unsupported in these places, and he lacked the humility to search for the aboriginal solution, that is, of merging into the world around him. My wife and I were hardly any better because we expected our German car to 'get through', that is, again, to take on the land we wanted to cover, and win.

Win? There were so many abandoned buildings, and fences struggling to stand. There were gibbers to batter your consciousness and those sand hills, impenetrable despite the flowers. The beauty that was there hadn't been made by man, or even in the mind of man: it felt no need to cede anything to the traveller, and when, occasionally, it did, it gave a flash of insight before it withdrew, once again, inside its secret power.

Strangely, and despite our car getting stuck at that first muddy crossing, I'd never felt afraid, but admiring of this otherness that had no concern for us. We wanted to survive, and get through, but why should the landscape bother? It was nothing but a vast neutrality, neither for us nor against. The land was as it was and humans could live in it if they could find a way. Nothing prevented them but the limitations of their minds, and these, it seemed to me as we began to emerge from our experience, were all too obvious. Tibooburra was a terrible place, I thought, because it was so remote from other places and humans were herd animals, needing the consolation and comforts provided by their own sort.

We got to Broken Hill. I had a cousin there, a flying doctor, and I determined to call on him, even though I'd

never met him. I went to a row of telephone boxes at the Post Office and my spirits sank again as I found that they wouldn't work, were permanently engaged, had piss all over the floor ... I stepped away, disgusted, to see a man who looked like an Eagle walking past. I knew our family's looks from photos. I called, and he answered to his name.

He and his wife made us welcome and we stayed a few days. One afternoon he invited me to accompany him on a flight to White Cliffs, a mining settlement where a man was thought to have swallowed poison. We flew, and, looking from the aeroplane's cabin, I gained, at last, the lofty calm which joined me to the land with a feeling of the dignity of being equal. From the air, it wasn't hard to tell where the land was higher, and lower, and where the waters ran when there had been rain. The water didn't go anywhere except across and into the earth. It trailed and twined, twisted and turned, dodging things as it settled deeper, and where it flowed, gum trees followed until the water was too deep for their roots to reach. Trees got smaller and further apart, then they gave up, as humans had been forced to do. It was a lesson about the land learned from high above. We landed, people got the unconscious miner onto the plane, my cousin attended to him, and we flew home: to hospital, for him. (Years later, a stranger who recognised me back in my home city told me he had died.) I told my wife what I'd felt about the land when I was above it, looking down, and she listened quietly, making up her own mind, no doubt. Years later, again, I heard someone lecturing about aboriginal art, and one of the things he said was that aboriginal people painted as if they knew the land from above, so that in some respect their imaginations had worked in the way the plane's altitude had allowed my mind to work. I filed this thought in my mind in much the same way that my wife

dealt with what I'd had to say about flying, that is, it was an hypothesis that might be testable one of these days, and until such a time, it must stay in store!

Rested by our stay in Broken Hill, we took to the road again. We entered Victoria, our home state, a place we felt we understood, even when entering, as we did, via the region known and sometimes feared as The Mallee. We visited friends near Mildura, then set off again until, feeling exhausted, I called a halt in a tiny place called Sea Lake. No camping that night. We went to a motel, asked for a room, and were given a key. We unpacked, trying to settle, and started to talk about all we'd seen that day. Inevitably, the trails of our thoughts led backwards to Ballarat, where we'd begun a couple of weeks before. We'd be there tomorrow, telling the Murrays all we'd seen and done. Then there was a knock at the door. It was the motel-man, with a blanket, or something that he pretended we might need. I suspected he thought, from the gap in our ages, that we weren't married, and wanted another look at us. I was used, by now, to sitting people out. He left, but not before doing the favour of telling us that if we turned on the TV in a couple of minutes, they'd be replaying the moon landing. The what? Then I remembered the news from when we set off, a little over a fortnight before. Americans were going to land on the moon. My wife and I stared at the screen. This *was* an event, history happening before our eyes. The camera watched the first astronaut plant his foot where no human had done before, then he played his camera on the second man getting out of the capsule. Next day's newspaper told us the first man had said, 'One small step for a man, one giant step for mankind.' I remember feeling humbled because their feat of exploration rather outshone what my wife and I and little son had been doing. Plenty of people

had been where we'd been, while nobody had been to the moon. What would life be like for the moon-men, once they got back? Their lives would be changed forever. We would soon be tiny fish again in the ocean of Melbourne.

We left Sea Lake in the morning, travelling towards Ballarat. It's a city higher and colder than Melbourne and when we were about an hour's drive away, we were startled to find that snow was falling. We stopped to have a look, but it was our car where the snow was most noticeable, because it had settled on the red dust we'd gathered in the harsh country behind us, and had had no opportunity to wash off. We arrived at the Murrays' house feeling a little proud of the car's appearance, the red and white mixing, and modifying each other. 'Tell us all about your trip,' the Murrays said, and we did, over cups of tea. There's really nothing more to say about our journey, except that the purple bath was as awful as when we'd first seen it. Human beings can do anything. They can go to the moon, or Innamincka, but they can't be relied on for good taste. To arrive at good taste, something aesthetically acceptable, is a different journey altogether!

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