

Obliqua

WE COULD BEGIN with *desertorum*, common name Hooked Mallee. Its leaf tapers into a slender hook, and is normally found in semi-arid parts of the interior.

But *desertorum* (to begin with) is only one of several hundred eucalypts; there is no precise number. And anyway the very word, *desert-or-um*, harks back to a stale version of the national landscape and from there in a more or less straight line on to the national character, all those linings of the soul and the larynx, which have their origins in the *bush*, so it is said, the poetic virtues (can you believe it?) of being belted about by droughts, bushfires, smelly sheep and so on; and let's not forget the isolation, the exhausted shapeless women, the crude language, the always wide horizon, and the flies.

It is these circumstances which have been responsible for all those extremely dry (dun-coloured – can we say that?) hard-luck stories which have been told around fires and on the page. All that was once upon a time, interesting for a while, but largely irrelevant here.

Besides, there is something unattractive, unhealthy even, about *Eucalyptus desertorum*. It's more like a bush than a

tree; has hardly a trunk at all: just several stems sprouting at ground level, stunted and *itchy*-looking.

We might as well turn to the rarely sighted *Eucalyptus pulverulenta*, which has an energetic name and curious heart-shaped leaves, and is found only on two narrow ledges of the Blue Mountains. What about *diversifolia* or *transcontinentalis*? At least they imply breadth and richness of purpose. Same too with *E. globulus*, normally employed as a windbreak. A solitary specimen could be seen from Holland's front verandah at two o'clock, a filigree pin of greyish-green stuck stylishly in a woman's felt hat, giving stability to the bleached and swaying vista.

Each and every eucalypt is interesting for its own reasons. Some eucalypts imply a distinctly feminine world (Yellow Jacket, Rose-of-the-West, Weeping Gum). *E. maidenii* has given photogenic shade to the Hollywood stars. Jarrah is the timber everyone professes to love. *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*? We call it River Red Gum. Too masculine, too overbearingly masculine; covered in grandfatherly warts and carbuncles, as well. As for the Ghost Gum (*E. papuana*), there are those who maintain with a lump in their throats it is the most beautiful tree on earth, which would explain why it's been done to death on our nation's calendars, postage stamps and tea-towels. Holland had one marking the north-eastern corner, towards town, waving its white arms in the dark, a surveyor's peg gone mad.

We could go on forever holding up favourites or returning to botanical names which possess almost the right resonance or offer some sort of summary, if such a thing were possible, or which are hopelessly wide of the mark

but catch the eye for their sheer linguistic strangeness – *platypodos*; whereas all that’s needed, aside from a beginning itself, is a eucalypt independent of, yet one which . . . it doesn’t really matter.

Once upon a time there was a man – what’s wrong with that? Not the most original way to begin, but certainly tried and proven over time, which suggests something of value, some deep impulse beginning to be answered, a range of possibilities about to be set down.

There was once a man on a property outside a one-horse town, in New South Wales, who couldn’t come to a decision about his daughter. He then made an unexpected decision. Incredible! For a while people talked and dreamed about little else until they realised it was entirely in keeping with him; they shouldn’t have been surprised. To this day it’s still talked about, its effects still felt in the town and surrounding districts.

His name was Holland. With his one and only daughter Holland lived on a property bordered along one side by a khaki river.

It was west of Sydney, over the ranges and into the sun – about four hours in a Japanese car.

All around, the earth had a geological camel-look: slowly rearing brown, calloused and blotched with shadows, which appeared to sway in the heat, and an overwhelming air of patience.

Some people say they remember the day he arrived.

It was stinking hot, a scorcher. He stepped off the train alone, not accompanied by a woman, not then. Without pausing in the town, not even for a glass of water, he went

out to his newly acquired property, a deceased estate, and began going over it on foot.

With each step the landscape unfolded and named itself. The man's voice could be heard singing out-of-tune songs. It all belonged to him.

There were dams the colour of milky tea, corrugated sheds at the trapezoid tilt, yards of split timber, rust. And solitary fat eucalypts lorded it over hot paddocks, trunks glowing like aluminium at dusk.

A thin man and his three sons had been the original settlers. A local dirt road is named after them. In the beginning they slept in their clothes, a kelpie or wheat bags for warmth, no time for the complications of women – hairy men with pinched faces. They never married. They were secretive. In business they liked to keep their real intentions hidden. They lived in order to acquire, to add, to amass. At every opportunity they kept adding, a paddock here and there, in all directions, acres and acres, going into hock to do it, even poxy land around the other side of the hill, sloping and perpetually drenched in shadow and infected with the burr, until the original plot on stony ground had completely disappeared into a long undulating spread, the shape of a wishbone or a broken pelvis.

These four men had gone mad with ring-barking. Steel traps, fire, and all types of poisons and chains were also used. On the curvaceous back paddocks great gums slowly bleached and curled against the curve as trimmings of fingernails. Here and there bare straight trunks lay scattered and angled like a catastrophe of derailed carriages. By then

the men had already turned their backs and moved on to the next rectangle to be cleared.

When at last it came to building a proper homestead they built it in pessimistic grey stone, ludicrously called *bluestone*, quarried in a foggy and distinctly dripping part of Victoria. At a later date one of the brothers was seen painting a wandering white line between the brick-courses, up and along, concentrating so hard his tongue protruded. As with their land, bits were always being tacked on – verandahs, outhouses. To commemorate dominance of a kind they added in 1923 a tower where the four of them could sit drinking at dusk and take pot shots at anything that moved – kangaroos, emus, eagles. By the time the father died the property had become one of the district's largest and potentially the finest (all that river frontage); but the three remaining sons began fighting among themselves, and some of the paddocks were sold off.

Late one afternoon – in the 1940s – the last of the bachelor-brothers fell in the river. No one could remember a word he had said during his life. He was known for having the slowest walk in the district. He was the one responsible for the infuriating system of paddock gates and their clumsy phallic-fitting latchbolts. And it was he who built with his bare hands the suspension bridge across the river, partly as a rickety memorial to the faraway world war he had missed against all the odds, but more to allow the merinos with their ridiculous permed parted heads to cross without getting their feet wet when every seven years floodwaters turned the gentle bend below the house into a sodden anabranh. For a while it had been the talk of

the district, its motif, until the next generation saw it as an embarrassment. Now it appears in glossy books produced in the distant city to illustrate the ingenious, utilitarian nature of folk art: four cables slung between two trees, floored with cypress, laced with fencing wire.

In the beginning Holland didn't look like a countryman, not to the men. Without looking down at his perforated shoes they could tell at once he was from Sydney. It was not one thing; it was everything.

To those who crossed the street and introduced themselves he offered a soft hand, the proverbial fish itching to slip out under the slightest pressure. He'd smile slightly, then hold it like someone raising a window before committing himself. People didn't trust him. The double smile didn't help. Only when he was seen to lose his temper over something trivial did people begin to trust him. The men walking about either had a loose smile, or faces like grains of wheat. And every other one had a fingertip missing, a rip in the ear, the broken nose, one eye in a flutter from the flick of the fencing wire. As soon as talk moved to the solid ground of old machinery, or pet stories about humourless bank managers or the power of certain weeds, it was noticed that although Holland looked thoughtful he took no part.

Early on some children had surprised him with pegs in his mouth while he was hanging the washing, and the row of pegs dangling like camel teeth gave him a grinning illiterate look. Actually he was shrewd and interested in many things. The word was he didn't know which way a

gate opened. His ideas on paddock rotation had them grinning and scratching their necks as well. It made them wonder how he'd ever managed to buy the place. As for the perpetually pissing bull which had every man and his dog steering clear of the square back-paddock he solved that problem by shooting it.

It would take years of random appearances in all weather, at arm's length and across the street, before he and his face settled into place.

He told the butcher's wife, "I expect to live here for seven years. Who knows after that?" Catching the pursing of her Presbyterian lips he added, "It's nice country you've got here."

It was a very small town. As with any new arrival the women discussed him in clusters, turning to each other quite solemnly. Vague suggestions of melancholy showed in the fold of their arms.

They decided there had to be a woman hidden away in a part of his life somewhere. It was the way he spoke, the assumptions settled in his face. And to see him always in his black coat without a hat walking along the street or at the Greek's having breakfast alone, where nobody in their right mind took a pew and ate, was enough to produce in these dreaming women elongated vistas of the dark-stone homestead, its many bare rooms, the absence of flowers, all those broad acres and stock untended – with this man, half-lost in its empty dimensions. He appeared then as a figure demanding all kinds of attention, correction even.

A certain widow with florid hands made a move. It didn't come to much. What did she expect? Every morning

she polished the front of her house with a rag. In quick succession she was followed by the mothers of sturdy daughters from properties surrounding Holland's, inviting him to their homesteads facing north, where heaps of mutton were served. These were kitchen meals on pine scrubbed to a lung colour, the kitchens dominated by the flame-leaking mass of black stove; other houses employed the papered dining-room, the oakish-looking table, pieces of silver, crystal and Spode – a purple husband looking like death at the head. And the mothers and daughters watched with interest as this complete stranger in their midst took the food in by his exceptionally wide mouth, mopped up with his hunk of white bread. He nodded in appreciation. He dropped his aitches, which was a relief.

Afterwards he took out his handkerchief and wiped his hands, so to these mothers and daughters it was like a magician offering one of his khaki paddocks as an example, before whipping it away, leaving nothing.

Almost five months had passed; on a Monday morning Holland was seen at the railway station. The others standing about gave the country-nod, assuming he was there like them to collect machinery parts ordered from Sydney.

Holland took a cigarette.

The heavy rails went away parallel to the platform on the regularly spaced sleepers darkened by shadow and grease, and darkened further as they went away into the sunlight, the rails converging with a silver wobble in bushes, bend and mid-morning haze.

The train was late.

Those darkened sleepers which cushioned the tremendous travelling weight of trains: they had been axed from the forests of Grey Ironbark (*E. paniculata*) around hilly Bunyah, a few hours to the east. The same dark eucalypts felled by the same axemen filled export contracts for the expansion of steam across China, India, British Africa. Most of the sleepers for the Trans-Siberian railway were cut from the forests around Bunyah, and so – here’s poetic justice – carried the weight of thousands of Russians, transported to isolation and worse. Truly, Grey Ironbark is one of the hardest woods available to man.

Faint whistle and smoke. The rails began their knuckle-cracking. The train appeared, grew, and eventually came to rest alongside the platform, letting out a series of sighs like an exhausted black dog, dribbling, its paws outstretched. For a moment people were too occupied to notice Holland.

Holland tilted his bare head down to a small girl in a blue dress. As they left the station he was seen taking her small wicker case and doing his best to talk. She was looking up at him.

Soon after, women came out in the sunlight on the street and appeared to bump into each other. They joined at the hem and elbow. The news quickly jumped the long distances out of town, and from there spread in different directions, entering the houses Holland had sat down and eaten in, the way a fire leaps over fences, roads, bare paddocks and rivers, depositing smaller, always slightly different, versions of itself.

She was his daughter. He could do anything he liked

with her. Yes; but weeks passed before he brought her into town. “Acclimatising” was very much on his mind.

The women wanted to see her. They wanted to see the two of them together. Some wondered if he’d be stern with her; the various degrees of. Instead Holland appeared unusually stiff, at the same time, casual.

Traces of him showed around the child’s eyes and jaw. There was the same two-stage smile, and the same frown when answering a question. To the town women she was perfectly polite.

She was called Ellen.

Holland had met and married a river woman from outside Waikerie, on the Murray, in South Australia; Ellen never tired of hearing the story.

Her father had placed one of those matrimonial advertisements.

“What’s wrong with that? It has a high curiosity value for both parties. You never know what’s going to come up. That’s what I’m going to do when you’re old enough. I’ll write the advertisement myself. I’ll try to list your most attractive features, if I can think of any. We’ll probably have to advertise in Scotland and Venezuela.”

It is still the custom for certain rural newspapers to run these advertisements, handy for the man who simply hasn’t got around to finding himself a suitable woman, or one who’s been on the move, doing seasonal work. It’s a custom well and truly established in other places, such as Nigeria, where men are given the names of flowers, and in India, one newspaper especially, published in New Delhi, is read avidly

just for these advertisements artfully penned and placed from all corners of the subcontinent. There it's a convenient service for marriages arranged by others, when it becomes necessary to cast a wider net.

Worth mentioning in this context. In circular New Delhi, wherever the eye turns, even as a bride tilts her cloudy mirror-ring to glimpse for the first time the face with pencil-moustache of her arranged-by-others husband, it invariably picks up the Blue Gum (*E. globulus*) – they're all over the place; just as the tall fast-growing *E. kirtoni*, common name Half Mahogany, has virtually taken over the dusty city of Lucknow.

Of the three replies to Holland's one-liner clearly the most promising was the childish rounded hand on ruled paper. Some suggestion here about being a fresh widow: hers was another man who'd ended up headfirst in the river, still in his boots.

She was one of seven or eight. Holland saw bodies draped everywhere, pale sisters, transfixed by lines of piercing light, as if the tin shack had been shot up with bullet holes.

"I introduced myself," Holland explained. "And your mother went very quiet. She hardly opened her mouth. She must have realised what she'd let herself in for. Now there I was, standing in front of her. Maybe she took one look at my mug and wanted to run a mile?" Daughter smiled. "A very, very nice woman. I had a lot of time for your mother."

Sometimes a sister sat alongside and without a word began brushing the eldest sister's hair. It was straw-blonde; the others were dark. The kitchen table had its legs standing

in jam-tins of kero. The father would come in and go out. He hardly registered Holland's presence. No sign of the mother. Holland presented an axe and a blanket, as if they were Red Indians.

At last he carried her back to Sydney.

There in his rooms, which was more or less within his world, she appeared plump, or (put it this way) softer than he imagined, and glowed, as if dusted with flour. And she busied herself. Casually she introduced a different order. Unpinned, her hair fell like a sudden dumping of sand and rhythmically she brushed it, a religious habit in front of the mirror. Amazing was her faith in him: how she allowed him to enter. His hands felt clumsy and coarse, as did sometimes his words. Here was someone who listened to him.

What happened next began as a joke. On the spur of the moment he took out, with some difficulty, insurance against his river woman delivering twins. He was challenging Nature. It was also his way of celebrating. The actuaries calculated tremendous odds; Holland immediately increased the policy. He waved the ye olde certificate with its phoney red seal in front of his friends. Those were the days he was drinking.

"I'd emptied my pockets, every spare zac I had."

Ellen had little interest in the financial side.

"You were the first-born," he nodded. "We named you Ellen. I mean, that was your mother's preference – Ellen. Your brother lived just a few days. Something broke in your mother. No one has ever seen anyone cry as much, I'm willing to bet. The top of your head, here, was always wet. And blood, a lot of blood. She just lay there crying, you

know, softly. She couldn't stop. She grew weak with it. As I watched, her life seemed to leak away. There was nothing I could do. I'd hardly even got to know her. I don't know how it happened.

“And you, the picture of health and the fat cheque arriving soon afterwards. I should have been throwing my hat up in the air. I'd never seen so much money, so many noughts. I had all this dough on a piece of paper in the back of my trousers for a month or more before I had the stomach to march into a bank with it. And so, here we are. There's a fine view from the verandah. At least I've got some say in that. And look at you. Already you're the prettiest doll for a hundred miles.”

And Ellen never tired of hearing the story, and asking questions, often the same questions, about her mother. Often in the retelling Holland would stop and say, “Come over here and give your father a big kiss.”

Eximia

SOME PEOPLE, SOME nations, are permanently in shade. Some people cast a shadow. Lengths of elongated darkness precede them, even in church or when the sun is in, as they say, mopped up by the dirty cloth of the clouds. A puddle of dark forms around their feet. It's very *pine-like*. The pine and darkness are one. Eucalypts are unusual in this respect: set pendulously their leaves allow see-through foliage which in turn produces a frail patterned sort of shade, if at all. Clarity, lack of darkness – these might be called “eucalyptus qualities”.

Anyway, don't you think the compliant pine is associated with numbers, geometry, the majority, whereas the eucalypt stands apart, solitary, essentially undemocratic?

The gum tree has a pale ragged beauty. A single specimen can dominate an entire Australian hill. It's an egotistical tree. Standing apart it draws attention to itself and soaks up moisture and all signs of life, such as harmless weeds and grass, for a radius beyond its roots, at the same time giving precious little in the way of shade.

It is trees which compose a landscape.

A long time passed before Holland could accept the idea

(rather than the fact) that the land he was standing on, including every lump of quartz and broken stick and tuft of dry grass, every tree upright and growing or fallen grey, belonged to him, was his. Sometimes then it felt as if even the weather belonged to him.

In a rush of keenness Holland decided he wanted to know everything, beginning with the names of things – the birds and the rocks, above all, the trees. Almost smiling and with a certain blank politeness the town people could not always come up with the answers; Holland ordered a number of reference books from Sydney.

By the time Ellen arrived in her blue-check dress Holland had planted a few eucalypts, and often she would accompany her father with a bucket and yellow spade, squatting alongside as he planted more.

So she, Ellen, was sowing the seeds of her own future.

The first eucalypt – if it's possible to be precise about a passion – is the one closest to the front of the house. Positioned off-centre it breaks the accelerating horizontality of the front verandah, and from most angles happens to obscure the window of the daughter's bedroom.

Holland could have put in any tree under the sun, a creepy pine, for example, with its sycophantic shadow (an Umbrella Pine? a Norfolk?), or else an acacia, the dreariest of all trees; a loquat would have been the sentimental local favourite. And if he was especially attracted to eucalypts, because they were native so-called, or solitary or whatever, plenty of different seedlings were commercially available in rusty tins, even in those days.

Holland planted a Yellow Bloodwood (*E. eximia*).

Here we have a tree so sensitive to frosts it sticks close to the coast, within cooee of Sydney. Holland's first attempt quickly died. With peculiar stubbornness he planted others, and nursed the last remaining plant, a weedy-looking thing. Every day he forked the earth, and gave it a drink from a cup, distributed bits of sheep manure, and at night threw up an anti-frost barricade of tin and hessian. It grew and thrived. There it stands now.

Unusual for a eucalypt the Yellow Bloodwood has a shivering canopy of leaves almost touching the ground, like an errant oak. The botanical journals have this to say: "The specific name is taken from the English adjective *eximious*, in the sense that the tree in flower is extraordinary." Late spring the flowers put on their show. It is as if someone has merrily chucked handfuls of dirty snow into the military-green leaves. Dirty snow – so far inland? Colour of beer froth. Make that a blonde's hair. Perpetually oozing red gum is the "blood" in the rest of the name.

As she grew older Ellen wanted to know still more about her invisible mother. The sophistication of Ellen's expectations, her impatience with his replies, puzzled her father.

A photograph might have eased the pressure. But apparently no such point of reference existed – although Holland's wife had grown up in the very midst of a national outbreak of black-and-white as well as brown photography, the flowering of the gawky pose. (The boredom of picnics caught, black sheep there pulling faces, the country cousin in the old teapot pose, babies grimacing in prams like angry

motorcyclists. God knows, a long list of the regulation snaps could be made, along with a disgusted footnote on the unreliability of the locally made photo-corners . . .) From the moment the shutter clicks, future reactions of shock-horror, pity and surprise are stored in silver and gelatin. Photography is the art of comparison. Anyone can take a photograph. The “art” has already been composed by the subject itself, even when it’s a brick wall – really, the word “art” here is an amazing pretension, since it is merely a description of feet placement, whether the photographer aims for the poetics of shadow, the curious subject or juxtaposition, the concentration of austerity, or merely the decency of the ordinary mugshot.

“They could hardly afford a loaf of bread,” Holland explained, “let alone a box camera. They had sores, and no shoes. I think their place had a dirt floor.”

As well, the great river was known to spill over every set number of years and carry away the most intimate possessions of a person.

Whatever the reason, Ellen was left feeling incomplete, conscious of a missing element.

Holland did his best. To picture Ellen’s mother he first had to smooth away the blood thinned with the dripping tears which had seeped into her dress, dissolved her shape, that is, those hips, wrists, breasts, mouth with expression, her voice – not that she was one of the world’s great talkers.

But then he saw the woman he hardly knew had haemorrhaged gentleness, whether breathing at his side or sitting in a kitchen chair, an abundance of gentleness, *overflowing*, so much gentleness and with it serenity, he had

trouble realising her true centre. And as time passed this too began to fade.

He hadn't told Ellen about her grandfather. Holland wasn't sure what to say about him. Quite a scenario on the outskirts of Waikerie: father, seven or eight daughters growing up inside an oven, mother nowhere to be seen, drowsy brown river slow-flowing in sunlight. Even though Holland had been about to stroll away with his eldest daughter, and so was there most days with his hair Brylcreemed and parted, the father took little notice of him. Loose-limbed, a wreck, a pisspot; by the popular American handbooks on the family, strong on statistics, he was a total disappointment, a really poor low-grade example of what a father should be.

What exactly is a father to a daughter?

The father is a man, yet to the daughter he is not. Wherever she goes he is behind or alongside at an angle, her often clumsy shadow. She'll never shake him off. The father has the advantage of the older man. He is solid; at arm's length; at the same time, distant: a blurry authority, always with the promise of softening. And this particular father in the torn singlet, this black spot on the statistical curve, had a mermaid tattooed on the wrist (a long way from the sea) whose perspiring breasts and fishy hips he liked to wriggle for his many daughters by opening and closing his fist. Talk about mixed signals: he was caught doing it at the funeral.

Holland's wife had told about the games they played on the river bank, she and her many sisters.

All shrieks and plaits and grazed knees they singled out a tree and took turns to embrace it, whispering against the