PRAISEWORTHY

Praiseworthy

ALEXIS WRIGHT

SHEFFIELD – LONDON – NEW YORK

First published in 2023 by the Giramondo Publishing Company
This edition published in 2023 by And Other Stories
Sheffield – London – New York
www.andotherstories.org

Copyright © 2023 by Alexis Wright

Published by arrangement with Giramondo Publishing Company

All rights reserved. The right of Alexis Wright to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Print ISBN: 9781913505929
eBook ISBN: 9781913505936

Series Cover Design: Elisa von Randow, Alles Blau Studio, Brazil, after a concept by And Other Stories. Author photo: Vincent Long.

And Other Stories books are printed and bound in the UK on FSC-certified paper by the CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon. The covers are of G . F Smith 270gsm Colorplan card – made in the Lake District at the environmentally friendly James Cropper paper mill – and are embossed with biodegradable foils from FoilCo, Warrington.

And Other Stories gratefully acknowledges that its work is supported using public funding by Arts Council England

Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C018072

I am not even dust. I am a dream…
Jorge Luis Borges

Contents

New Gods 1
The Censer 164
Moth Opera 289
Goddess of Scales 368
Sitting in the Bones 455
Cargo Shifter 560
One Donkey at a Time 605
Holy Donkey Business 647
Ice Queens 665
The Giant Kelp Hair Sea Lady Gulped! 707

Notes on Sources 725

NEW GODS

Kulibibi. Baba yalu kurrkamala, jaja,
(butterflies are flying everywhere)
Waanyi dictionary, 2012

1
Oracle 1…speak.

Beginning with story…

Once upon a fine time for some people in the world, but not so plenteous, nor perfect for others, there lived a culture dreamer obsessing about the era. He was no great dreamer, no greater than the rest of the juggernauts in his heartbroken, storm-country people's humanity. They knew just as much as he did about *surviving* on a daily basis, and about how to make sacrifices of themselves in all the cataclysmic times generated by the mangy dogs who had stolen their traditional land. These people, after the generations of dealing with the land-thief criminals like many others around the world, had turned themselves, not into a tangled web of despair, but into some of the best fighters of all times. They used pure guts for improving life, and said they were in it for the long run. Theirs was a sovereign world view – the main view acceptable to their governing ancestors, a law grown through belief in its own endlessness, and through re-setting the survival barometer from millennia a couple of hundred years ago, by evolving a new gauge – something like a moth's sonar, for only hearing what it wanted to hear. But, to be frank, the facet worked like a shield, for seeing what they wanted to see of the world, or to shut

the whole thing out forever. And for deciding whether they wanted to speak at all, for sometimes, this world never spoke for years, then when it did, spoke wreckage words – like a piece of heaven heavy with intent, firing on all cylinders from the sky.

So this dreamer fellow really had some nerve speaking doubt stuff in the God gravitas of these clergy-oriented people, and like, acting as though he was a better type of Jesus, more Messiah than they were themselves, while preaching from the unpopular pulpit of himself out on the street corner every other Sunday in front of all their self-defined denominational churches, and always, like too many times before, asking the same old question: *Hey! Mob! What's the future going to be, whatnot!*

There was not a single soul in Praiseworthy who believed this fellow was real, for asking such a ridiculous question in this day and age, and right in front of the world's greatest human survivors. Weren't they the real business people of all times? Extinction-less tempest people from enduring one million storms, come from the ark of infinity right down to the last baby. They were now forced to speak, and yelled that they knew a thing or two about being trodden upon, and of being more on trend than the rest of humanity about how to look after the future. They would tell you themselves how they had to assert too much nervous-wreck type of anger in their voices: *We studied everything you needed to know about surviving from the biggest library in the world – country*. You only had to take a quick look around Praiseworthy to see all the stories were about surviving. You do not need some redundant bullshit-artist person continually harping on with his eternal question, *You mob ever tried thinking about what the future of the place got to look like*?

The world spins, he was told this fact thing pretty much frankly by the multitudes of insulted people. *It always spins. The world is like a big spin dryer*.

Then this atmospheric pressure blackfella – still acting like God, thinking he was on top of the story universe, in with some fancy contemporary scene – started asking what was the comfort zone, what level, what was living to tell the tale like, of being a survivalist of the situation? He was seeing it all as a hundred per cent thing in the funniness. His stories were too much for a brain, rolling in stitches up there, like he was spinning some ancestor power, and you wanted him to stop telling stories like that, he got no business, but him telling them repeatedly all the same and never stopping, yep, right, like he was the national newspaper, or something called social media cancelling everybody else, and all the while only ever predicting nothing good would come out of a worldwide doom. You got tired of hearing gloominess all the time – with all his remembering of this and that of the twenty-first century hot load in planetary catastrophes of global warming or global viruses, and never tiring of talking about all this stuff, this great mess, while people were saying that they preferred listening to magpies that sung to the moon, and the night-time hopping mouse was having an anxiety attack from hearing this catastrophic stuff, like another dry thunderstorm, when it had to sneak out from beneath some bit of scrubby dry grass where it has a nice hidey-hole thing in the soil, from where it cuts through that spinifex highway along the aeon-old ancestral tracks, hopping along a bit happy, a bit relieved it was still alive and not struck by lightning into a splat while heading way down south, cuts across west this way, east that way, leaving golden moon-shone paw prints behind in the sandy soil, and then what? Well! Hold everything! It too remembers catastrophic times, then quick speed, heads straight back up north, races back over its original tracks to where it had just a moment ago left, and jumps like lightning under the same stump of grass now turned the colour of grey gloom.

Well! One thing! We know all about global warming and deadly

viruses. This was what the countrymen repeatedly and exhaustively explained to the zeitgeist Cause Man Steel over and over, that he did not need to lay his life on the line for them, they would take care of business…but, you know what? Cause never liked listening to others. He was saved by his own brain. The old country men and women, totally exasperated, even murderous, wanted him dead. They wanted global warming, wanted the lot, wanted to hasten the thing up, because on Praiseworthy country, people of traditional thought preferred silence and never wanted to speak another word, nor wanted to watch any more stupidity, nor see anything ridiculous, nor think about any of the crazy things other people did with their lives to cause ancestral storms and mayhem. So, they said: *Listen, shit for brains! It never gets lonely and wrathful here, because country here always look after its people, because people here look after their country.*

No matter what you care about in this world, or whether you give two frigs, there will always be times, when nobody will like hearing a scary future thinker's doom stories about the destruction of the globe. They do not want to hear anyone who thinks that humanity is out of sync with the wrathful planet, or someone who called himself a planet fixer *of cataclysmic change*; or, some kind of influencer, likened to one of those modern gods of social media. Nobody wanted to have an anomaly man like this in Praiseworthy. He was told to shut up. Why had they survived since time immemorial? Their ancient law. That's what. This was what took care of business. Not idiots. There were far better oracles than him to listen to who knew white murderers were everywhere, and who could fathom the depth of consequences to the living world from ancestral laws being broken by the destruction of countless sacred ancient law places and culture people across their holy continent since white colonisation. Sure! He was told these things many times, but sadly, their kind of ancient oracle-ising was not in sync with Cause Man Steel's vision of the modern world. They

joked about death wishers, laughed themselves silly about having this doom dreamer living illegally among them, but in a nice way, just to show that they thought about the world too, and named him Widespread – for the breadth of his ideas spreading all over the place. Or, they called him Planet – because he was always talking planetary stuff. Or else, they called the weirdo by his real name – Cause Man Steel – cause, cause and effect. He was hard all right, like the power ancestor's essence in Australia's iron ore.

Anyhow! This planet fixer ended up wasting away among the others who did not give a rat's arse about saving a dying world, and in the end, he became as skinny as a rake. He stooped so low from carrying the weight of the entire world on his bony shoulders, that his face was almost touching the ground in front of him, like he was studying the dirt of the planet itself, same as a greedy camp dog sniffing along the ground. Yep! This was the local influencer: a modern god preaching about the planet collapsing. They call this type of person a collapsologist, someone specialising in collapsology – this was what he claimed to be doing, putting himself in front of the collapse – to hold the thing up, as though he was the most knowledgeable wise man around, when everyone else in Praiseworthy already knew the mise en abyme ways of the Earth to the nth degree of each cataclysmic change in either the minuses or pluses of overheating in the twenty-first-century buggered-up world. Yep! Again! Let it be said: this man was a live pulpit, a kind of Marvin Gaye singing about *What's going on* in never-ending parables, as though he was personally responsible for the composition of some big new revolutionary recreation story cycle for the world mind you, even though in normal reality, it was more like driving a petrol-guzzling sedan anyhow over goat's tracks, than walking across the planet as some kind of medieval crusading warrior man from Praiseworthy, like God with the weight of the world strapped over his back.

What's going on?

Wanyinbu-nanja.

What for?

Then, it's like this: in a magical gleaming day of supreme sunshine, something fantastical occurred, which was like a catharsis bingo moment coming on for this one small colonialism-style hot prick of a place on Earth, when Widespread discovered the odyssey plan.

Planet wanted to give his humble culture people the gift of infinity, although they already had the all times surviving stories planted squarely in the culture's soul. Doesn't matter about that. The plan was a real goer, a rhapsody superglued on the door of the main cupboard for ideas in his head, and in a pivotal moment of broadcasting – widespreading the thing – he said, *Listen, my humanity. This is what we gotta do*.

Basically, the plan was for his people to ride straight through the century on the back of the burning planet, and live to tell the tale on the other side. This was what the ancestors had done for countless millennia. Check the facts in the climate change stories they had left behind, which were about how it felt to be a survivor of all times, of being changed, evolved, looking challenge after challenge in the eye, but always surviving in the end.

Then, you know what happened, somebody went and killed Aboriginal Sovereignty, infinity itself.

The story goes...

Hate place was a monument of the moment for some of the poorest people on Earth. A hard bit of magic grown from a corpus of ancient stories that had been scattered into mystery by broken spirits creating hell fires. All those endlessly wandering fragments of ancient words were coming together, and forming the lines of stories entombed in smoke clouds circumnavigating the planet.

Now…A ghostly windstorm from out of nowhere came more frequently, came to this place blowing dry leaves, burnt leaves, ash leaves, and spoke of the tragedies in the epical pyres of life. The wind looked at the remains of life in this place, then blew and blew these fragments away in mountainous serpentine waves that hit the soul world of an even greater local spirit and there, dust, ash, memories written on broken butterfly wings with black soot, all backed up into an ochre-coloured haze that ended up sitting permanently over the flatlands of the *blessed be thou, and more blessed be I*.

This old grief haze cuts a powerful image from forty thousand feet up in the sky where ancestral serpents roamed through the remnants of migrating angels, and you, looking down from the window seat up front of a QF Qantas flight cruising over the northern flat country would see the grand improbabilities. Yes, the supercell anomaly was a miracle on Earth, but not a good one. Sometimes the haze floated, rested on dust-coated leaves, on the rooftops, on every space, house, person, on the dog fur, bird feathers, or else, the thing charged up its weather system into an atmospheric mess of dry electrical storms full of dust. Jundurr! Jundurr! Jundurr! From the sky, you could look down, to see the supercell rotating from where it sat permanently over Praiseworthy, lingering with its belly hovering just centimetres above the ground as though it was resting on a head full of swiftly dit! dit! dit! imaginings. The gravitational force of the slow-moving cloud of haze pushed by the great ancestral government, and held together as though magnetised, hanging like a shadow that made the place perpetually looking sepia, like suppertime.

This was how the dust storm lingered for far too many years, and became a stationary presence, pivoting over the spinifex land of the zeitgeist, where those strugglers of apocalyptic times – the traditional landowners in this isolated place of flatlands – were continuing their long line of imaginings into infinity. Yes, these people might have

looked like they were razed-to-the-ground people, yet why would they give up easily, millennia of their ancestors never did, simply because they not only had the will to live, but desired survival over extinction. And now, they were ready and able to gamble any wishful thinking for ridding themselves of the haze scourging the skin, and from touching the skin of their land.

2

Oh! My! Oh! My! Any people could say this was exactly what happens when the world of unreality strikes like a piece of lightning – colliding with misconstrued fact after fact, and forcing country lines apart – bolting this way and that, becoming an entangled knot blurring the light. *Ah! Watch out! Get the hell out of the way!* There were plenty of these uppity upper-class people of Praiseworthy – super people living in the ark with the loudest mouths for saying *that the sun only shone here alone* – while crying out for someone to go out there in the bad lands of the continent, and *get some help from the white government*. They wanted fast help to get rid of the sulky haze which was full of broken ancestors breathing on them with virus air from who knows where else. Stop all this happening – things like that – from that hazard haze parking itself on top of them. Think about it. You expect people to be pretty jacked off in the head with having a haze sit on top of them and weighing down their lives, and this was the reason why lots of the local people were community minded enough to march straight out of their storied-riddled houses to get involved in the campaign to fight the atmosphere. They were not going to be governed by some jacked off spirit acting completely crazy. It reminded them too much of life itself.

One old elder found some inappropriate whitefella music on the Decca label which he used to assimilate into the mind of local thinking

about the Anthropocene, the man-made disaster of the world. The locals who knew nothing about European classical music or how it created human heat like global warming, became hooked on what the elder said was Dvorak. Then some other old fella in a suit said that the music was from the New World in his symphony No. 9 in E Minor, Op. 95 and could pacify the gods of the Anthropocene. The music was piped into the haze to speak to its soul in this otherwise weirdo free-for-all feast of peddling stress and anxiety, while trying to coax a deal for blacks from white government sitting pretty thousands of kilometres away, to get it to get up off its arse and do something about cleaning up the air. The sum total of their hymn travelled through the ether, and went onwards into infinity as could only be expected, such was the government's complete incomprehension about Aboriginal humanity.

You could only watch the spectacle of the righteous, sit back and watch the pinging of epical emails that only blazed new and more complicated trails through the existing mazes carved by the loneliest words that ever existed in this world. Many went around screaming at the haze in their distress: *What else could we do?* They sent a common brown butterfly on a journey down south, to flutter four thousand kilometres to the lonely Australian capital Canberra, as their final embassy on the matter. Then they waited, and waited some more, only to see the broken tattered butterfly return the next autumn on a slow breeze with its singed wings. The story went around that the government shot the butterfly with a blowtorch.

After the fateful journey of the butterfly, the luckless people hopped further into the fray, and sent delegations of ghostly haunted-looking people painted in white ash to go tripping down to the country's capital to negotiate on good terms mind you, but that all ended in the toxic wasteland of death threats to the culture if you do not assimilate white, or else. Or else, you would lose count

of the many delegations flying off to Canberra to implore politicians across the political spectrum from the extreme Pentecostalist right to every crazed independent governing sector in the country to amend the Australian Constitution to get rid of the haze, and also now, to stop shooting butterflies. Yet still, no assistance came, no aid, no support package like the government gave other people for suffering a heavenly calamity. They all got some handout – everyone, except for the pollution-breathing mob living in the haze that sat over Praiseworthy. The Canberra politicians accused the traditional owners of being deranged, of seeing things that only they could see, a haze. Nobody else saw changes in the climate, nor any unprecedented haze events anywhere else in the land mass of the continent.

The local people followed up with physicality, by having a boxing match with the haze's curse on their kind. The people stood out in the atmosphere punching the curse. Kicked it in the guts. Cursed and swore. But nothing. The story goes that this was when the apparition managed to mutate into its multiaxial position by multiplying itself by two. It ended up infusing some creepy haze spirit into the lungs of the Major Mayor white-influencer thing, who up until then, had always been seen as a normal human being. Suddenly, he was obsessed by whiteness, and lost the natural traditional-owner loving for the red haze colour of the earth of his country. His skin became as white as vanilla ice cream. Then ice cream eroded into sheer translucence, like one of those white plastic shopping bags from the supermarket lost in space. Even his eyeballs had changed colour from naturally brown, to becoming in the end, sheer white. Yep! White eyeballs. He had been turned into a living ghost. It was not the kind of transformation that white people could see. Now, a man like this became known as Ice Pick, a kind of more than albino, who had covered himself from head to toe in a labyrinth of Casper the Ghost tattoos, mermaids and octopuses, but you could still see his power blood coursing under the

translucence of a spirit man's skin. And he hid the spook eyes with contact lenses: a couple of bits of pink plastic.

That local magic worked best when Ice Pick practically became supernatural, even if it was just a copycat illusion of a greater-than-usual whiteness, which was to say, more white than white people with added bonus, by actually resembling a lady's doppelganger in the form of a heart-palpitating TV white man from an American western. He had become the go-to strong man of the moment because of his *supernaturalness*. Now, since being turned prematurely white-haired, he believed he had acquired the status of a wisdom man, and was playing with that kind of power in his forty-ish year-old pinhead brain. It was like expecting a Kmart-bought frisbee to fly all the passengers in Praiseworthy as though it were some majestic spirit bird, as though it were the largest and strongest plane on earth carrying hypersonic vehicles to space while everyone cried with happiness at such a feat, when it was not like that at all. Yet, the translucence of more than whiteness had its charm, enough to claim some power status knowledge which was more than Ice Pick could actually handle in his newly acquired improved standing as Major Mayor. He found that he was now everybody's trusted cowboy in the field: the *go-to* spin doctor who was making sure that other people's dreams became aligned with his own more than whiteness style of avariciousness, while he plotted a crazy ton of half-baked dreams to be realised ASAP in Praiseworthy.

Unzipped-lip Ice was making sure that it was everybody's business to have a good straight look at life to come, although not looking too far ahead, not peering through the lens of long-term planetary meltdown, but just enough say, to the next whitefella government election – state or federal, it did not matter which – through the prism of what he thought would happen if Praiseworthy people chose not to act like a pack of compromising lambs to please assimilatory policies of a three-year-term Canberra government.

This was the score, what life had become. A let-down. Weak-spiritedness. Loss of pride. The kind of low self-esteem infinity people felt after choking on too much cursing of the ancestral dust, how decimated it felt to be more acutely attuned – like radar to racism, in a world that fed itself on racism – which panic style led to a traffic jam, realising racism was rampant and entrenched in every thought, and government aid was never going to arrive to northern Aboriginal people, suspected of being terrorists, to purchase enough explosives to blow up the haze. *Not if you do not assimilate and be white*, warned the colossal, over-ventilating, almost breathless Ice Pick, while hyping his assimilating virtuosity like a spirit-dead God man.

Major Mayor was sadly another kind of *be-bop-a-lula* fast-pace mover and shaker in the power and glory. And nope! You could not take any of his preaching seriously – not about one hundred per cent assimilating with white people for the sake of reconciliation. Not even on a bad day, listening to the influencer of the collective consciousness harping his non-denominational new-style scripture from the western world, while pointing an old woman's hunting stick towards a trail of wickedness in the black world. You just do not take someone like that seriously in a palace place like Praiseworthy, which sets a very high standard in its own values, not while he was wearing the wrong thing on his Casper Ghost head, like that Australia Day hat covered in prints of the Australian flag instead of a sacred land rights cap emboldened first class, with the Aboriginal flag. Wrong thing! You were not going to instil Xi Jinping style of consciousness in the soul of your people wearing the wrong cap.

Then, hearing that there were more attacks on its sovereignty – land bulldozed here, mines shafted and blown to smithereens, ancestors falling into the mine pit over there – the old country was awoken, re-awakened, eternal sleep impossible in the anger world. These days, the great thunder fellow was awake all night, all fright, venting his

unquenchable anger from point A to point B and so on with a million lashes of lightning flashing from one side of the continent to the other. A mostly dry storm puked a glob of rain that flew straight across the north sky while quickly parting like a curtain around the Praiseworthy haze as if it was evaporating quicker than a spit, split to escape the worst plague on Earth, and then, closing again, flew on with the storm birds, and the seagulls, journeying to the point of exhaustion into the Pacific, or the Indian ocean, without dropping a single drop of rain on the thought land of eternal drought.

They say that year was all the same, a mirage shimmer, just as any other. An endless cycle of replenishing nothing, that went on repeating itself through harsher drought. All the rain, the minuscular drops, was never enough for the leaf litter to become the sodden fancy scene of the golden beetle when it woke from the thunder spirits leaving behind a vapour of moisture while travelling across the ground at night. It was barely enough to fool the golden Christmas beetle crawling out of the underground dry yellow grass country, where along with millions of its civilisation, it came up through the slightly dampened earth to a desolate surface. Underground mud dries and slides off its elytra, the hard protection wings of gold covering its body, as it moves among other golden beetles crawling over every dead leaf on the ground, and up every slender grass stalk. Old beetle spirit now waits on top of a high grass stalk, looks with contemptuous eyes into the red haze of Praiseworthy, crawls back down to the dirt, and begins its work, an awesome task guided by an eternity of law packed in its tiny head.

This was when the golden beetle (*Anoplognathus aureus*) comes around to inspect the country its spirit had continued to build for aeons. The old *aurum* spirit lifts the hard casing to release the soft back wings, then flies from one dry grass stem to another, then up among the trees. It climbs many gum trees until in the light of a full moon, it finds a tree transformed into glistening gold from thousands of other *au* beetles

eating among the freshest leaves. A windstorm brings lightning and thunder, and the inspector of country crawls away into the shadows and into the depths of broken bark, where it rumbles around all night as though searching for something among the old cobwebs and discarded wings of insects and dead spiders. It methodically checks each strand of cobweb with its mandible, and prowls the surroundings with its antennae, while feeling everything with its claws. It seems to be imagining the world through the fine old music of the trees sing-talking back and forth while relaying all the storylines, the sounds of infinity reaching through a multitude of tracks over vast distances. It crawls through the leaf litter on the ground, along twigs, turns over soil, moves pebbles around while searching for the tiny devil mob. It finds all of those spirits with antennae that do not stop moving.

All of this checking of country and searching must have taken days for the beetle to crawl along the main road to Praiseworthy at the rate of 2.54 cm a minute, and you know what? It was searching for the brightest light among the illuminated blow-up giant snowmen and fabulous lit reindeers in the town, the security light beaming like the Christmas Star of Bethlehem on the verandah of the Major Mayor's house. This was where the inspector knocked at the door. This was becoming an annual event, claimed Ice Pick, the golden Christmas beetle visiting him at his home to advise him about how to make money. He pointed to the beetle moving down the bitumen street, and told the Praiseworthy world with an air of confidence that far outstretched his ability to make any money at all, that they were looking at his lucky beetle. Whenever he spoke about this fortune-making insect, he chuckled nervously, as though he wanted to believe what he was saying in the old law people meetings so they would stop calling him a fakery, but they continued saying he was full of bullshit.

A belittling in the governing world of country was not pretty for any rhapsodically self-proclaimed king of orators, so the Twitter addict

of false news threw more wondrous stories around to all and sundry about the special relationship with his precious golden beetle. No one could own the law beetle. Who could believe him? The elders chuckled to each other through calls with their free mobiles – gifted from international mining companies wanting to dig up their sacred sites – then they chucked the cheap shit into the sea. They were that sick to death of being buzzed by Ice wanting them to tell him the sacred law story about the golden beetle. Instead they kicked dirt into their camp fires, quietened the story fellow, keeping him safe. Said that they were men. Human beings. They abandoned telecommunications altogether, and marched off far away into the bush for a bit of peace and quiet to think straight without any means of communication. Even the tiniest of children knew that this particular gold beetle was no different to thousands of other bush beetles. Why would a beetle be bothered being a destiny adviser to a human being like Ice Pick? *You kids should listen. It came from my traditional country.* Get the picture? The beetle was his totem. The 'real' elders said, *more bullshit*. Golden beetles were crawling everywhere on the bitumen this time of the year. They lived in a beetle-ridden universe during the wet time.

No one appreciated having liars in the pristine, and Praiseworthy people were no exception. They left him to think what he liked about his exceptionalism, and how the pathological dog liar would repent to them. It was not up to them to stop the fantastical junk talk flowing from his mouth like a flooding river, his ignorant interference with a law beetle. You could only speak about the fact in indefinite pronouns, of how somebody's stupid talk was messing with everybody's weather, no rain again, like you had already seen before from a whole string of fortune hunters making a crack, trying to will-up their silly ideas into reality, by saying a spirit ancestor was telling them how to run the universe, when the thing itself was telling them to get back to the traditional country which they knew nothing about, to learn

something, and get the ceremonies going for things like the golden beetle law. Ice Pick was no different to any of these idiots, in totally believing that this single little beetle was not only his audacious career advisor that had installed its far superior infinite brain into his brain, but also that the law creature was actually achieving its own gigantic, excessive, and insatiable ambition through him.

Each year, around Christmas time, Ice Pick would capture the beetle after it had followed the distress beacon and crawled onto his verandah, put it in a bottle, and then, bore the life out of it with his lesser vision, the endless talk about how he was building the new Praiseworthy into an all-bustling, all-glitter epoch-making Aboriginal world metropolis – a colossal go-to type of economic powerhouse for trading Aboriginal knowledge in future anthropocentric times that would be on the scale of what? Well! New York. Shanghai. But maybe not Moscow. He stared down the beetle, challenging it to come up with a better plan, to think of a light on the hill, a better brightness in the lighthouse of the developing world. This argy-bargy of *you tell me* between a prized fool and a big law ancestor went on and on, until the beetle gave up, knowing its irenic mission with a fool man had failed again, saw there would be no peace in the near future, flipped over onto its back, and pretended to be dead.

Not long after that, the beetle spirit, fuelled by its own large-scale capacity for hope which turned its golden elytra into glowing russet, thundered off, and returned within country. Another year in an endless cycle of the storyline was lost through miscommunication with a fool who did not know what the story was.

Ice Pick, none the wiser, only grew more confident with the annual visitation of the golden beetle. His gloating became of biblical proportions on and on around the municipality. He claimed to be the head golden beetle man whose totem had walked into town year after year at a specific time – in the middle of the dry storm of another

forgotten wet season, to personally advise him about how to build Shanghai out of a dusty haze with his bare hands. *It was bringing me gold, man*. Anyone could do the same, he claimed, if they took notice of the ancestors. The elders watched Ice Pick through all these years, just to see what the fool would do next to make Shanghai out of a haze. *We would like to see that* they said, *and perhaps*, were also, *prepared to wait*. They did this, not because the Major Mayor was potentially a very dangerous man, but because they saw that he had a stupid brain, and people like this would always pick the wrong thing to work on and achieve nothing that would be harmful to the cultural future, and it was harmless to watch a bit of entertainment for free. Yet, he was always on their radar of wondering, a yardstick for estimating what a true hero of the times would not be, even if they could not picture true heroism.

Was Ice the local chief oracle as he claimed to be, already sacred, already holy, the chief Pope-like whip of the multi-denominational churches of all possible persuasions? The elders said no, and called him a robber. They had developed the church proliferation business themselves as their own pet assimilatory project, an extracurricular venture in religious piousness, and were proud to own this façade of modern whiteness, along with all of its superficiality. Or was he just another village idiot who stacked annual general elections in order to be continuously re-elected as the Major Mayor, the biggest loudmouth in town? Or was he just a fool for deliberately not wanting to follow the tiny golden beetle's slow steps back into country, which was, after all, his inheritance, as well as being ancestral law?

It was all cruelty chic, the official stories of the world's struggling people walking the tumbledown life of poverty as they searched for a way to move towards the rich world to ask for a bit of help. But it was the truth that mattered, the hard road towards solving the great mysteries

of life's poverty, such as getting the all-powerful, no-action Australian government to come the half mile to help a place like Praiseworthy, to dynamite the haze to kingdom come. One wondered what moved Ice's followers in this type of world. They were full of praise-haste, laughing at the fun of trying to convince the modern-termed *clientele*, meaning the actual residents, to become assimilated as quickly as possible in the cultureless world of the so-called majority. There was no slowing this movement down, or of a chilling out for these praise-haste people. *C'est la guerre*. The upper-class women admirers of Major Mayor Ice Pick – his regalia of Ice Queens – weaponised their emotional lashings to all and sundry about what could be gained from crawling like mangy dogs in full cooperation rather than perpetually feeling ignored in this crawling dog pantomime stage show, which had only made the assimilatory rejects feel more totally cheated and pissed off. They were not buying government magic, and you would never believe how potent a pay-off could be, where the more cash you brought to the scheme, the more you felt tainted, the more, *Ding dong merrily on high In heav'n the bells are ringing*…and why it was so hard to believe in the swinging bells heralding joy to all from far horizons and bringing the magic gift of tapioca symphony officialism over your body and soul. It was not until you saw voiceless people transformed into the most artful orators singing *Gloria Hosanna in excelsis!* that you could believe the story of assimilation rushing straight out of the mouth of the never-ending tidal wave.

While general attitudes were turning sourer and meaner by the minute in the haze's habitable geography of Ice Pick's big camp blame game, and the whole web of the place was becoming thudding heart thicker and bronchial-lunged, the haze monument made a real meal out of this insanity. *What was Ice going to do about our life being mental?* The haze grew denser. Then, everyone started catching the thought of themselves having the albino's disease, and said their

hair was turning grey-white. Now with so many grey-haired people feeling that they had grown prematurely old, there was so much more negativity floating in the air about the sight of so much ugly greyness, of becoming Ice Pick lookalikes. He blamed the government for causing his people to go prematurely grey from worry about nothing, except by being down on the government that refused to shift the perpetual haze from their lives.

It got to the point where there was nothing else worth thinking about than counting grey hairs in the hairbrush. This was not the ideal situation. Everything felt like a festering sore under Ice Pick's watch, and the far-removed Australian government for Aboriginal people in Canberra felt sick of being inflicted with that much degree of hate coming their way from these grey-headed people slinging abuse back and forth about an overfed haze they wanted the Australian army to destroy with a bomb. So, the government totally lost it with these first people, and openly persecuted them for being untrainable, and failing every known government program of the last hundred years to teach them how to be assimilated into the Australian way of life. *Hallelujah!* Ice commended the Australian Government for Aboriginal people in the sundry domain, *didn't you know that the government of the country was the boss of Aboriginal people*?

One woeful era followed another, where not much was noticed about the haze growing disproportionately denser in the big stand-off about whether the government was racist, and whether Aboriginal people had failed to assimilate. The government and the Praiseworthy ancients started sending abusive texts to each other and zapping back and forth through the haze by the truck load. The war went on like this for years while the haze settled in, in the endless spite Twittering as the main form of attack, and the Instagramming to each other in capital letter hate words that was way out of control, while both sides were trying to accuse the other for not listening to what they were

saying about imploring the government to send the army up north where the most neglected people in the country lived, to choke the guts out of the choking atmosphere, to nuke the haze, or to fucking blow it apart.

All this social media thing of protests, abuse, cancelling threats fell on deaf ears, you know, since the conniving politicians continued through the terms of several prime ministers who did bugger-all about the haze living over the flats in the north. All the complaints of why *I hate the haze* shit-firing into the ether of the government's telephones about what was prejudicial and racial fell quick smart on deaf ears. It was as though there was some kind of conspiracy to keep denying that any extreme weather event was happening in the flatlands, or perhaps, it was not conspiracy, but complacency, easier to ignore agitated bronchial lungs far away, and Aboriginal people making up stories while coughing with bronchiectasis in the airways about an ancestral spirit composed of dust that was gigantic and needed to be blitzed by the armed forces from choking the life out of them. Because why? Weakness! Just like a coup, a take-over of rebels, like blackfellas reaching their zenith, for any Australian government for Aboriginal people conceding to their sovereign rights by even listening to them. Well! Why bother? Who knew where truth lies? But, somehow, it was as though the haze monument, a phenomenal beast in itself, was invisible to outsiders, because even the weather people in this wing-damaged butterfly continent in the southern hemisphere claimed that they never saw a monument of haze on their radar screens, not on their watch.

3

This 'I' thing, or what local people were calling old sulky haze, had become the new normal for the traditional people, who later claimed

they had no power to get rid of the haze that they wanted to be lifted off their Australian government for Aboriginal people-created designer town, and who could blame them for acting nervous like Twitter-scape, since they had really tried to turn themselves into white-type superior people. They were letting off steam in trend letters like FOUC to represent the epic edge of oppressiveness, of what it felt like to be a hero ancestral being inside the stifling heat of an enforced assimilatory era that was bent on making them suffer like soft-bellied white people. They had begun dressing up in suits while they walked around in the tropics. Heat was nothing. They were not thinking like their ancestral selves, but more like the swingers of power, the hitters of the Anthropocene, like pseudo-dictators of the speed texting wars, primed up, boiler fires roaring for battle. This daydreaming about defeating the dragon haze, even if it meant complete destruction, could be the armageddon of their traditional flatlands – or in other words, they were having a friggen whale of a time.

The old haze kept on presenting itself atmospherically, claiming ultimate sovereignty of the flatlands, and had grown so exponentially huge that it was sitting on the ground like a fallen angel cut loose from sixty thousand years or something of immemorial time. It felt suffocating to be sat on by a haze, and many people were wearing gas masks and speaking to one another in muffled voices, and the end result was, it was really killing the weeds, the wildlife, and just about everything else of what had once been an aesthetically pleasing environment.

With virtually nothing left in the cupboard to kill except people who somehow still managed to survive and celebrate their infinity, the spirit haze kept on consuming the remaining scraps of life as though it were in a cake shop. The spirit grew fat. And fatter. The bulkiness, like the sky itself, never moved. You could not push the thing away, and like toxicity, it would probably end up staying in the atmosphere

for a million years. So much for all the unmeant prayers for peace and goodwill rattling on day and night in the local community's ramshackle faith churches of assorted Christian beliefs, when this country was itself already holy, and not a fool.

All the old people wearing St Vincent de Paul's second-hand suits to make them look assimilatory, friendly and accessible, disguising them from looking like powerful red-ochre law men, now went harking and coughing about how little they could do with an atmospheric ancestor gone roguery because she had become too lonely for her neglectful people. They said what could they do now? It was too late. They had no feather duster big enough to swing about the place, to shoo the sky away, to push her on.

The weather grew enormous, and continued to rage from the mouths of hate-tellers, but none of the people wearing those suits of grey, black, or navy, could keep up with her insatiable appetite for hate, and her complaining with a full mouth in northern dry thunder lingo that she was not going anywhere, while eating more of the type of hate cake that she liked, and acting all sulky, as though she were being deprived of the last cake of its type on Earth. She became more bloated. She was on a sugar high. This ancestral spirit woman was fully fuelled in an all-consuming nasty way of being wired up, while refusing to budge, and she was crying her heart out now, about how, *I-zzed aren't going back to sleep in any old spirit world.*

4

What a boogie-woogie hyped world it had become, to see the red earth-stained clothes swinging about, swish-swashing non-stop, twisting, backfiring the polluted exhaustion into the funnelling gyre sitting stationary over ever greater kilometres of the flat. The spectacle could be seen as plain as day from outer space, and it looked like airborne

anti-miraculousness – a terrible fetish fallen from heaven. Years went on. The mad dance spun up the highs and lows of the atmospheric pressure, rolling, churning and frothing as it snapped up whatever was left of the country's dried up yellow grasslands, bits of fish-and-chips newspapers, tens of thousands of white plastic shopping bags, the drunks' holy crucifixes spinning through the sucked up rotten stories of the jacked-off and pissed-off in dust, weed, grass, seeds, twigs, and oxygen dragged straight off the baked-hard ravaged moonscape left behind.

Old sulky, oh, loved the theatre of atmospheric soup that was gathered by the bucketload at top speed, where all the cyclically generating hardcore never-ending epics of hatefulness were mashed up in a monstrous fast-paced dance, and just as fantastically, instantaneously almost, spat triumphantly into community operatic wonderment, a march that was reminiscent of the choir of Verdi's *Gloria all'Egitto*, as projectiles of polluted dirt-engrained plastic shards shooting like glistened stars into the hot and sticky humidity of the hazy atmosphere were marching steadfastly into the festering human lungs of the whole song cycle thing, now jammed on repeat cycle, and the traditional owners in their continuous rows, arguing about who the true traditional owner was anymore, could not do a thing about it.

The scenario, now a very stable situation, was potentially ironclad safe. A permanent liquid gold tourist venture. But somehow, the monument did not attract millions of tourists visiting the site, not like the local shire council had anticipated from all the money it had sunk into promoting the uniqueness of the haze ancestor. The council had hoped, and sold their hope in the way that they believed monumental man-made natural wonders of the world could totally possess people, as they were possessed themselves. This was how they framed an open invitation to the world, about how to become possessed, by

experiencing the perpetual dust storm they had created without lifting a bloody finger, by being the best haters in the world.

But sadly, the monument failed to move, or move others. It was like a death adder that kept wide-armed anti-guides who could not be bothered about cultural tourism, yelling *stand back you cunts* to shield the few cultural tourists who turned up out of the blue with their fantastic hopes of experiencing pristine culture and a free bottle of spring water in the so-called wilderness of traditional law lands, but were only confronted with pollution in the atmosphere.

The atmospheric so-called glamour haze was so much like the polluted smoke wafting from a rubbish dump that you would never expect it to be a world-famous monument. Well! not yet anyhow, not like rants about other spectacular man-made monuments that had in time become universally liked, even loved by tourists who were not the people who had to make these things with their bare hands. Still, it takes time to be liked. The Pyramids. London Bridge. The Eiffel Tower. Venice in a high tide. The Kremlin. China's modern Belt and Road project. The Silk Road. Taj Mahal. Rome. Bethlehem. A Mercedes-Benz. Their uniqueness was in their possessiveness, to imprison history, which they distil into the stories of those that have been captured.

The haze, seething with humidity, remained disastrous like any festering rubbish at the rubbish dump with black smoke rising in a field of methane, or greenhouse gas, where PM2.5 particulate matter of less than 2.5 microns kept showering a dazzle a minute with minuscule plastic shards and bubbles of toxicity spinning down from the sky, and into the immune system. Those runaround people grew sicker and heavier by the hour but where could they go? They could not be moved from the guts of the atmospheric haze ancestor, and the air, it just became more polluted in this symbiosis of conjoined captivity inside the ancestry world. So much so! It was as though the

only power people felt while rushing from one house to another in search of the truth, was to assert themselves in somersaulting and pole-vaulting vernacularism, spreading arguments and fist debates about the actual facts of the never-ending ode they were telling the atmospheric stew to strew.

The ode itself, ended up being an echo-inducing epic poem of stories in the all-twisting, all-turning immersion of limerence, skyrocketing in an out-of-proportion infatuation that would never be consummated. Look though, long enough through the haze, and you will see what became of these lazy people's love of hate. It was the fatal attraction that crashed time and again. The end result of all those epics converging into a single gossipy tale eaten and spat out into the atmosphere as poison.

Oh! But! The gaol cell grew narrower, more cramped and claustrophobic because all the stories were about one man, which felt easier than having to expand one's thinking into creating a whole lot of stories about everybody to feed the insatiable diet of the overgrown formlessness of the bored atmospheric spirit of pollution generating the haze. But how could one person become so worthy of being – the epic? Of being that special? Were the storytellers too lazy these days to look further into the human abyss, or too unimaginative to be bothered to create a more diverse catalogue of stories? Many people were that obsessed with him being the epic, that they said, he was a piece of shit wasting their time and energy.

The vision man was too lackadaisical with his slow symphonic breathing of red dust in and out of his lungs from out there on the flat, the void which he referred to as being the eyesore of the world. This big prick of a fellow, evil through to the core, who was called Planet, or Widespread, or by his real name sometimes, which was Cause Man Steel. Who remembered his real name anyhow? It was not worth remembering. No one wanted to remember his name. They

could not be bothered remembering the fellow's name for the way he was buggering up their part of the planet with mad ideas for his global warming business that had nothing to do with them.

Everyone was an angel in Praiseworthy so they say, because if you weren't, it meant your life belonged elsewhere. So! It was really vogue to be one of those angels in rotten times, although this fellow Widespread made the whole angle of being an angel ready to assimilate white look ridiculous, by acting like he was the biggest and only real guardian angel in the ancestral law-bound black man's world. He was just a fake racing with lies. Saying, *Look! I am more angel. I have even more monstrous wings attached to my more Rainbow Serpent country body, and you know what, I smell like my country, not all perfumed up with the foreign stuff of another God's heaven. Smell me*. The smell was breathtaking. He smelt like that old cemetery dirt of the haze hanging over this place, stuck in time, and finding infinite ways of colluding with the stale winds that rose and fell here, but were never taken away.

The more colonialising modern-inclined people liked to call him Omnicide, or Global Warming, but no one cared about the significance of calling other people names. A Praiseworthy man could have a lot of names. So! What? Give it a bit of a hippie name like jet fuel, or stratosphere, but that did not mean someone was really souped up with jet fuel in the stratosphere. Whatever! You could watch this man – Cause, Widespread, Planet – selectively scrutinising his postmodern and recycled world, and saying he had emerged more ancestral from the Dreamtime than even the ancestors, which he always gloated had made him a pre-ancestor. He was always saying things like that, as to why he was way ahead of any of the local flower people hobbled to some new age church mania going on in Praiseworthy. Yes, he exclaimed often, *You can't walk around here without stumbling into a church*. He defined his own eternal spirit as capable of shooting through catastrophes, beginning from when the land was a ball of

fire, and his ghost would continue blasting through all future eras into infinity. Why? *Because he was a culture man of all times*. He heard the crying and screaming of every single animal caught in firestorms across the country, and there were several billion of them, like all those thousands of dead koalas scattered through the charred cathedrals of forests, their bodies curled on the ground where they fell, where they had burnt to death, and their spirits breathed new life inside him, giving him the ancestral will, more than willingness, the desire to continue living.

Nah. Don't look away, Widespread tells himself, even as he was right there with the swarming insects being pushed higher into the smoke-filled oxygen-deprived atmosphere and vapouring into nothingness. He was always running with the animals, like the tens of thousands of kangaroos fleeing, and they keep going hour after hour, running and running through fire-loaded winds, until finally in the moment, falling as ashes into the spirit ground. It was the same with those massive floods that created enormous inland seas where old clanspeople hurried him along the changing country because the work of quietening souls was always endless. Planet would always be running, and flying far through the country where spirits lay in the corpses of the dead, and his mind would keep on running until he heard no more screaming, and where finally, he would scream that there could be no more. This Widespread, Planet, or really named Cause Man Steel only knows one thing now. He knows that he cannot stop the chaos of the world always changing. If the only consolation that he offered was that this would be the age of reckoning with the ancestors, then why should he be alive amongst the mourning?

Omnicide! Planet had become locked in some fluey zone of his head which was carrying on about the world committing suicide, and he had decided to act like some freaky doomsayer about the end of the

world from man-made global warming, which he called the bloody omnicide – another fancy made-up name for what he claimed was the world killing itself, heading for total extinction, becoming phantasmal. Planet could rip back the bed covers on peace to find some flea omen of his naked truths, and was telling Praiseworthy people – who were convinced of their own exceptionalism and invincibility – that they too were like everyone in the world, were complicit in the upcoming extinction of the human and non-human species. They said, *What are you? God or something?* The man was a solid ratbag of pain in the neck. *A bloody saviour!* He could generate more hate stories in half an hour from a bunch of locals, than any combined humanity of the world could create with all their gossip in a lifetime. He was exactly this: anti-man of the moment. Something white people called a greenie. The real environmentalist. But how would Planet know anything about the real planet? He was not educated. He talked more about how the ancestors felt about being stuffed up by global warming than did any other Aboriginal people. They said he wouldn't know. He blamed the white government for causing the never-ending haze. *Can't you mob feel it is getting hotter?*

Sometimes! He made people who wanted to feel normal, feel threatened instead, of feeling at real risk, of losing a bit of hard-won government largesse. Whatever that was? The pittance! The fight! Was it worth it type of thing? Planet, the outer galaxy, sitting back and smirking at his mob knocking each other out to plant a Mickey Mouse treaty on the table, saying they want a treaty so that they could share in the aftermath, the mess of colonialism and racism, the wholesale disaster of the Anthropocene. He yelled from his bit of a pulpit in the main street, the street with all the multi-denominational churches, *Why you mob negotiating treaties with people who fucked up your land in two centuries flat after our ancestors were able to survive here for millennia?* He ripped the local treaty-mongers, the reconciliation

faithful, the recognition front line. *Don't forget Aboriginal sovereignty knowledge when you go running on your bellies – lower than a snake for treaties worth nothing considering the mess here environmentally and so on, you won't have land worth living on unless your treaty agreement ties governments to international enforceable laws against ecocide*. And omnicide? *Yep! Include that word too while you are at it*. Widespread loved saying the words – omnicide, *omnicidalistic* fools. Nobody knew what this omni thing meant to them. Nobody wanted to know about rattling-brain words like cardinal decade, carbon emissions, global warming, rain bombs, biblical floods, El Niño weather phenomena, the Indian Ocean Dipole, doping the atmosphere, cumulonimbus flammagenitus – was that a disease, a virus or weather on steroids? There was plenty of denialism in the talk. And guess what? There was no end of the stories from the small haze-ridden world of Praiseworthy to tell about Widespread Planet's idiotic schemes for surviving the Anthropocene, and other spellbinding facts about how he annoyed the hell out of people from motor mouthing about Aboriginal ingenuity to survive into infinity. Jaws dropped, the ash of good tobacco fell on the pussycats asleep on laps, stone-cold deaf from listening to all that hate.

5

This was not saying that there was anything wrong about being a power schemer, it was just how Planet thought differently, canvassing more widespread than other lesser schemers in Praiseworthy. He hustled too many schemes about what other people should be doing, and said the word *because* too many times. Big deal. You would have thought that there were no other people in Praiseworthy worth bothering about, who knew anything about how to fight their way out of a paper bag. They said, *You think we were born yesterday* type of thing. *Come down*

with the last shower? Nobody else thought about anything, and only he knew how to save them from more than two centuries of attempted genocide to wipe their entire culture from the face of the Earth. And of all things, his big current plan was to build an empire that was bigger than the haze: that would blow it clean away.

Though truth being told, it was easy to see why Praiseworthy people thought about being saved by anyone other than themselves, and why they were sniggering that Widespread's ideas were unpalatable, unthinkable, or in other words a piece of shit, since he was always thinking how he knew best in any given situation about survival – like nobody else was interested in thinking about the Indigenous man's preoccupation about surviving on his own country every single day of the last sixty plus millenniums, nor that they did not know that they were already enduring the thing with the big flash name called the Anthropocene – even though they did not know what it was, or could even pronounce the word, or if he had told them that it had something to do with the world ending from man-made overheating of the climate.

We knew what hot was, we told him that. We know all the scientif-y from the ancestors. Everyone in Praiseworthy knew that the haze was making the place feel hotter, but why give a toss about choosing which straw contained universal truth? Widespread was not thinking holocaustic thoughts of a sinking world, or of an actually sunk Venice with tourists wearing goggles while floating on the top of the ocean to peer down into the depths to see those old Venetian buildings, or if they were worrying like everyone else watching the news on TV about sinking islands in the Pacific, or seeing what bleached coral in the Great Barrier Reef looked like from the moon, or imagining the real possibility of destroyed countries and half the world either flooded or being burnt to ashes, nor was he wondering where all those hundreds of millions of new world refugees were going to live, or about places

where all the wild animals were moving into the lost cities, and invading apartment blocks, nor thinking anything else catastrophic like wars, and viruses of the future.

There was not a single corpuscle of fatalism running in the blood through his veins. Planet was not worried about whether he was inhaling microscopic slithers of gleaming plastic poison in the atmosphere, or of the world dying soon, because he was thinking the same thing his ancestors were thinking about how to survive the next millennium basically, of how they would continue being the oldest living culture on Earth regardless of everything else being dead. This was the kind of positivism that was hard to beat, unconquerable you could say if you thought about being invincible, and desired to remain so.

Widespread Planet, same person as that piece of work Cause Man Steel, while thinking clear-headed higher rather than thinking low, was confident about how he would survive the climate emergency. He avoided the crowd – which meant humanity – and chose to live as some kind of crepuscular man, moving around the isolated bush by himself in the twilight hours in pursuit of his business venture, to put into action far more grandiose plans about how to make real money. He was not wasting his time as a perpetual trainee on an Australian government handout scheme, for enticing tourists to visit the man-made haze monument hanging over Praiseworthy, which only attracted one or two tourists a month, and usually the kind of eco-tourist from Europe who was scraping the bottom of the barrel for something cheap to do to support tourism in a good eco-friendly way, like for instance, travelling for days on end to the back of beyond in an ageing two-tone beige kombi van chuntering along at sixty k's an hour to see an ancestral haze from the dreaming, that was self-determined to be only worth a gold coin donation to chuck in a tin can at the gate, because everyone else thought differently to the traditional owner of

country, thought like a real rationalist believing the phenomenon was not that unusual, that anyone could see a dust storm in this country. And that for what, Cause Man Steel asked himself, to make a couple of coins to see a phenomenon? Aren't worth it. Cheap shit stuff like that was not going to make the kind of money Praiseworthy needed to be able to survive the future. Widespread was more or less shooting for the stars in a real traditional world stuffed with the legends of millennia where his infinity was filled with ever-lasting swarms of brown black-eyed winged emperor moths, although in actual fact, up in the tops of the iconic gum tree of the local legendary stories, these moths had left larvae in plague proportion that were eating all the gum leaves, and stripping the eucalyptus trees bare.

6

Actually, authority to feed the haze was given freely to anyone seriously guzzling themselves up in a self-righteous moral quest of mouthing off about what integrity was, when it came to questions of pristineness in Praiseworthy, where anything was considered honourable enough behaviour, or the scourge for conniving a bit of government money to keep the essential services moving. Begging was not a hard act to perform. The crawlers, if they did not know how to crawl low enough – lower than a snake would – were ordered to be more emotional humdingers about Widespread Planet, legally Cause Man Steel, commonly called nothing but a piece of shit by the Aboriginal sort of albino Major Mayor of the place Ice Pick, who drove around on the top of his game through the baking streets on hot summer days looking triple A in that hot pink Toyota SUV of his covered in bulldust. All that. He was a mayoral megaphone apparatus attached to the roof rack. Screaming like that. Fine enough. The man was only behaving egotistically like any other Aboriginal man would,

if he saw himself as a potential prime minister, and was just strutting his stuff of political megaphoning full bore to the all and sundry. Why wouldn't he do that? He was saying something important, about how it was up to everyone around the place to decide how to eclipse, rather than acquit, their debt to God by speaking out about how crisis-prone idiots were burdening the sane world with tears. The Major Mayor liked shouting, and he often shouted at kids walking on the footpath after school finished, how the government would be taking away the community's welfare money because *you kids can't be bothered keeping the place clean*. The cheeky buggers. *You talking to us Ice? Creating uncertainty and whatnot?*

From up high in the Praiseworthy hierarchy at the top end of the town, in an imaginary elevation at least a few bulldozed centimetres above the flatness of the terrain which people like Ice Pick thought of as being higher than anywhere else, there also reigned Ice Pick's queens who each thought that she had the principal prima facie mandate to direct the stories of hate to the haze. Any cute smile from one of these *posh-i-fied* ladies could cause an instant heart-stop. Each diva thought she was the model of assimilation. Each had personally managed her own makeover into a logical localised high class. The stray pussycats uncurled from hours of sleep, and ran faster than their hungry legs could carry them, heading one, two, three, straight down into the flat plains with their shrilled meows fading into the distance, as soon as any of those hot bitches of Ice Pick's posse women were seen dissing the sundry from a distance, and whacking all life with a big fighting stick each carried for personal safety against all the possible enemies shimmering up their way.

The hot days of destroying the last remaining threads of Widespread Planet's personality were like a minefield of frenzied kitsch. The queens hung off every word spoken by Ice Pick as though it was the gospel truth, and then when the community started shouting in a

chorus of low whispers here and there about not wanting to hear any more fake news on Praiseworthy's localised social media, the toxicity of hostilities extended far and beyond any person's back, and dug deep into their heart, mind, and spirit. Oh! The way you could see these ladies conjuring Widespread as the anti-deity of Praiseworthy was breathtakingly not great. It was hard news to be caught in the slippage of junk excavated from the dry chalice of the modern Aboriginal epoch.

The Praiseworthy haze could still not be reckoned with, not even from having inflicted upon it the fruits of world humanity for blitzing the shit out of bits of rubbish, or else breaking its heart by serenading it to go away with the music of a gifted mandolin player performing the Bach Sonata No. 1 in B Minor. All this meant nothing to the ancestral haze. The haze was not in the mood for creating miracles like moving its huge weight back into the dream world. It had a real stay-at-home attitude, and this type of music did not convince it, that it should soar off to sit in a plush seat at an opera house in Vienna, or Budapest, or China, France, Indonesia or Spain, or Japan. The haze was not interested in the town's dozens of combined choirs giving it their all night after night with their religious hymns piping through megaphones all along Church Street, the holy place of religious thought, icons and some dubious relics, which was where the holy believers believed that every bit of their prayers went straight into the ears of their guardian angels to come straight down from heaven to fight the haze, to defeat it, push it far out into sea, and send it on a journey into somebody else's hell.

Inside each of the ramshackle churches spreading across the frontline for quelling the bewildering global emergency era, and representing who knows what denomination or religious persuasion, this was where the people of the haze saw power to be gained, and prayed harder. Even though their prayers inspired the need for praying

more than the actual doing, they sang faster and prayed harder, and continued praying until their churches collapsed under the weight of the tremendous devotion piling up like rocks on the roof.

The idea of a church being built on a solid foundation was not going to be the reality in a place that was as dirt poor as Praiseworthy. Any slight breeze bowled over the hundred or so flimsy buildings of devotion like a line of dominoes stacked on each side of the street, since these humpy churches were only constructed from leftover things, like bits of old shipping crates, with either a big yellow solar-lit guiding star on top of a long pole protruding from the roof identifying which church it was, or illuminated flags, banners of lantern-lit cod, salmon, saints, angels, despots, or not easily identifiable effigies, or the holy grail, or among other rough drawings of holy symbols, various world deities drawn on pieces of cardboard marked with the name of the big vegetable companies supplying the country's lettuces, cucumbers and tomatoes.

This whole shamble of plagiarised churches was a reality miracle that tumbled and rose, while being held together above the head of the prayers as they rebuilt their falling churches with the fallen bits of rusty sheet iron and cardboard, roughly thrown back together in haste with a hammer and nail under the crucifix nailed on top. The greatest survivor of makeshift ingenuity was the whopping huge cardboard box with Fisher & Paykel refrigerator signs all over the packaging preserved in its original condition long after the thing inside, the big family fridge, had been thrown away in the dump. This cardboard box, now a magnificent cathedral in all its monumental greatness, even if not on the scale of the Sagrada Família, was where some outcast idiot religious leader met with his fellow exiles. Squeezing together, they sat around inside the box with their equally blessed ghetto-blaster streaming from Rome, and after long hours of prayers, there came a time for whistling sighs of exhausted relief at

having reached the end of this bit of reality as they knew it, and from this point onwards for at least five minutes, salvation appeared in the form of a miracle where you would see the golden stardust haloing around their heads in the refrigerator box, and this small moment of free imagining was simply what you might call real faith, and nobody else's concern.

Far off in the old gamba grasses rooted decades deep across the plains, insects by the millions droned and deafened all other sounds ahead of Ice Pick's queens feeding their own radio reactive versions of Christian stories to the haze, with enough drama to create hell on Earth. Fire and brimstone tornadoes roared from their mouths and raced through the plains grass searching for heaven, while from the ground, the white-eyed ghost moths' endless drone lifted the ancient spirit women, for it was like hearing the sweetness of a Korean haegeum silk fiddle, or the throat music of the grasslands harmonising along with the Mongolian morin khuur horsehair fiddle, or a great ancient lullaby of an elder calling to country, and losing consciousness to the six o'clock moths swarming, and the ghost butterflies high in the gum trees, and the yellow butterflies fluttering above the grass, and now all moving, journeying forever in the eternal moving upwards above the firestorm and dampening it in the mirage of dense red dust smoke feeding the haze.

Only luckily, the charred and blackened red soil plains lived like ancestors and the humidity rose and became a thick russet fog floating over the ground just before dawn, where everyone had been up early, and were walking around in shorts and thongs. They swung the light from their torches in search of donkeys, and the torch light swirled around the darkened water flats while they followed the Ice Queens through the mud and festering rubbish that had long spoiled the look of the tidy town, and they were all yelling across the streets in a chorus

of *git the fuck out, and get to hell youse.* These donkeys knew what was coming with people running left, right and centre, and ducking and weaving and slipping in the mud in this mad chase to get them out of this well-meaning Christian town.

7

Widespread never liked butterflies. Or moths. He takes no notice of any fluttery thing flying around his house, like his gravity-defying butterfly wife. Dance loved creatures of the air. She encouraged moths. Thought moths. Spoke the moths' frequency, a language of millennia which she had learnt in dreams which were only ever about butterflies and moths. The world of the haze became a locked world of lepidoptera that continually fluttered around Dance. She was like a haven for butterflies or moths rising and falling over a world of plastic white lilies, red and pink roses, lilacs, sweet peas, soft pink petals of the peonies, and shimmering blue silk delphiniums covering the dirt mound graves of the beloved, the boundlessly remembered memories of cultural infinity. A plague of white caper butterflies fly like angels high in the air above, as though speaking to one another in ever increasing zigzagging circles, and below, close to the ground, masses of smaller yellow grass butterflies flitter and shimmy in a slight breeze over and through the flowers to ride the currents speaking in the powerful languages emanating from the ground of the cemetery. She was never alone. The haze was full of butterfly spores and frayed transparent wings. A moth took her on journeys whenever she moved away from Praiseworthy, sometimes travelling far inland where you did not hear the incoming tides of the sea, or sometimes seaside, riverside, grassland, plain, and through its law, she became a moth in the sky – grown to a different sightedness in a world askew, and as if in perpetual flight, only desiring movement.