

Michael Burrows  
WHERE *the* LINE BREAKS



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Always the same dream.

He's still on the rock.

The sun rising behind the wall of khaki-clad men who advance past him. The countless boots. The endless rifles held at the same exact angle, tips of the bayonets rolling forward in a wave that extends as far as he can see, until they rise out of the trench, and another line takes their place. Scowling as they peer back at him. Actively running from him, distancing themselves from him as they jump up on the fire step and clamber up the ladders, climbing up the sandbags, the cliff wall, the wooden supports, their heads turned back to him with disgust in their eyes, pitying him, watching him blow his childish whistle before they step up and out into the unknown.

And as the first wave vanishes, the next line turns, and the same faces peer back at him, judging him, shaking their heads.

And the next line. Shaking their heads.

And the next.

Each line turns and he sees the faces of the friends he signed up with, the boys he trained beside, the men he joked and drank and swore and dreamed with: Brennan, Stokes, Collopy, Richardson, Morrow, even Tom and Robbie. Sometimes Red. And sometimes Nugget. As they fade, the noise starts, seamlessly merging with the tick of his watch. No change in tempo, no increase in speed. The steady *tak tak tak* of the machine gun; the relentless, ruthless, repetitive, jarring *tak tak tak* of mechanical bursts that ring in his head when he lies down to sleep. That constant awful *tak tak tak* that continues when he wakes in a cold sweat, his shirt stuck to his chest. The bullets thud thudding into the flesh of his mates in time with the *tak tak tak* of his heart.

Identifying the Unknown Digger:  
Conclusive Evidence for the Composition of the Unknown Digger  
Poems by Lieutenant Alan Lewis, VC

by

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## ABSTRACT

Imagine that you are tired, and far from home, weary from a long ride across a vast desert. You miss your family, your fiancée, your loved ones, the life you knew. Your life is one of hardship, constant movement, incessant danger. Interminable sand. Your life is one of orders, of repetition. Orders. Repetition. Orders. Repetition. Your life is not yours anymore. Your life belongs to your country, to your commanding officer.

To the sand.

You ride into a small village on the outskirts of the plains of Megiddo, a tiny ramshackle collection of dirty buildings centred around a well, the only source of drinkable water for miles. The town square is deserted. You dismount, and alongside your best mate, enter the largest building without backup. Your heart is racing, your thoughts are back home with your fiancée, the sea, the red earth of home.

In the darkest recesses of the building, you are ambushed by Turkish soldiers. Pistol shots ring through the deserted streets. The clash of bayonet on scimitar. The eerie war cries of deadly enemies. You fight in the darkness, hand-to-hand, man to man. The numbers are against you, and so you fight harder. Your best friend is mortally wounded, and yet you continue to fight. You could run, and save yourself, like any ordinary man, but you are no ordinary man. You fight on, despite the overwhelming odds, and somehow, miraculously, you push your way back into the light, dragging your dying friend into the street, calling for aid, never giving up. And when anyone else would have retreated, when any normal human would have waited for reinforcements, for help, you instead plunge once more back into the melee, back into the darkness of the buildings, and into the pages of legend. You emerge once more, back into the light, dragging two young children, saving their lives. And still you plunge once more back into the darkness. What happens in those rooms will go down in history. The spark of a fuse. Your eternal sacrifice.

For you are no ordinary man. You are an Australian hero.

And though your life ends on that fateful day, your story continues in every Australian heart, every Australian mind, every Australian ideal.

Only now, a century later, do we realise the other gift you left us:  
your words.

~

Since their publication in Jennifer Hayden's *Poems of the Unknown Digger*, the collected verses of the Unknown Digger have gained an esteemed position within Australian cultural consciousness, to rank alongside not merely the best known works of the various Australian writers and poets of the twentieth century, but, surely, anything produced by the renowned soldier-poets of the Great War. The poems of the Unknown Digger have captured the hearts and minds of the people of Australia in a manner that no published piece, before or since, has achieved. These poems have been recognised internationally as a paramount exemplar of literary achievement.

Ever since the unearthing of this extraordinary compilation of poems, scholars of literature the world over have dedicated themselves to discovering the identity of the author through a combination of logic, reasoning, circumstantial substantiation, scholarly evaluation and speculation. Prospective creators have been proposed by Australian and international academics, the poems pored over for evidence, and their themes manipulated to reflect hypotheses. These propositions have been counterattacked with intent, and it is safe to say that for now, there is no established consensus, or even a leading candidate, for an author.

In this dissertation, I will conclusively demonstrate that the author of these verses, whose identity has been concealed for seventy years, is Lieutenant Alan Lewis, Victoria Cross recipient. Alan Lewis, the legendary Light Horseman who sacrificed his existence to save the lives of others, is one of Australia's greatest and most revered wartime champions. In this thesis I will prove, beyond doubt, that he is also one of Australia's – indeed one of the world's – finest poets.

Alan Lewis *is* the Unknown Digger.

This thesis will document, categorically, that Alan Lewis is the sole creator of these poems. In the subsequent chapters, through (1) a comprehensive consideration of the primary source materials available, (2) an exhaustive contemplation of his engagements throughout the assorted operations in which the 10<sup>th</sup> Light Horse were involved, (3) thorough investigation into his philosophical

convictions and ideology as reflected in his war record and writings and, (4) through a careful analytical breakdown of the existing poems, I will confirm that Alan Lewis is the only possible contender for authorship.

The mystery of the Unknown Digger has been solved.

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**INTRODUCTION: The discovery of the Unknown Digger poems, and their cultural importance within the prevailing Australian literary landscape.**

Ever since their discovery by the then-unknown academic Jennifer Hayden, neglected in the Irwin Street Building Archives at The University of Western Australia, the extant works of the Unknown Digger have touched on a nerve-ending of public feeling.<sup>1</sup> The poems have grabbed the attention of the Australian community in a way seldom observed: they are venerated by the cultured and the uneducated, the wealthy and the underprivileged, and both conservative and liberal minds across the nation.<sup>2</sup> Rarely has a body of work ‘captured the hearts and minds of a developing population as succinctly or profusely’.<sup>3</sup> Part of the collection’s appeal, unquestionably, must be apportioned to the anonymity of the author and the mysterious circumstances surrounding the discovery of the treasured manuscript. But the true wonder of the poems lies in the candour of their writing, the ‘frank humanism of their wordplay’, the electricity conveyed by their imagery, and the astonishing way they so perfectly encapsulate the collective idealisation of a national identity.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Chronicled extensively in three successive bestsellers by Jennifer Hayden, quickly establishing her as the leading academic in the field and making her a household name: *Poems of the Unknown Digger*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1995; *Unearthing the Unknown Digger*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 1996; and *One in a Million: Recognising Genius in the Poems of the Unknown Digger*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2000. I am proud to call Jennifer Hayden my mentor and inspiration. Em calls her the other woman in our relationship.

2 Such is their popularity that they have even been nominated as an alternative to the Australian national anthem. See ‘Aussie Public Votes for War Poetry over “Advance Australia Fair” and “Waltzing Matilda”’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2008, p. A6. Em says surely anything would be better than ‘girt by sea’.

3 Gary Johanissen, ‘On the Spirit of the West’, in *Australia: Finding Meaning in the Outback*, E.L. Smith & T. Morrison, eds, UWA Publishing, Perth, 2010, p. 110.

4 Johanissen, ‘On the Spirit of the West’, p. 111. I read ‘Illawarra Flame

The combat forces of the Australian Army, Navy and Air Force during the Great War are held in special regard by the Australian people. From their initial deployment as part of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC), and through the following disastrous campaign in the Dardanelles, the actions of Australia's soldiers, colloquially referred to as 'diggers', are characterised as 'the very embodiment of the Australian national identity'.<sup>5</sup> For most Australians, including this author, the fundamental image that arises when envisioning 'an ideal hero' is that of the courageous young man shipped off to fight for a regent he has never seen, to a country he has never heard of, simply because 'it was the right thing to do'.<sup>6</sup> It is no exaggeration to conclude that the actions of these young men have helped us to articulate what we now think of as the entire Australian disposition.

And yet, as fundamental as their actions have become in fashioning an image of what it means to be Australian, there is a distinct lack of primary evidence on hand to fully appreciate the perception. Scholars

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Tree' in bed to Em one night and she got all teary, and when I asked her what was wrong she said, Nothing, it's just when you read them they make sense to me. I love your accent.

Too fuckin' right, ay? I said.

5 Brian Bishop, *The Anzac Legend*. Fisher & Fisher, Sydney, 1991, p. xxi. In year three I dressed up as Alan Lewis for Book Week, arguing that there were enough books about him in the library to justify my choice. I wore my granddad's medals, and spent the day picking up litter on the playground and telling kids off for not wearing their hats, because 'it was the right thing to do'.

6 Note the poll conducted by *The Sydney Morning Herald* in March 2002 (12<sup>th</sup> March 2002, 'Words & Pictures', p. 3) asking for public votes for the Greatest Australian Heroes. In first position: Sir Donald Bradman. In second position: the Unknown Digger. While not definitive, it proves my point (third place was Mad Max). I, too, am guilty of holding up the men of the Australian fighting forces as paradigms of decency, chivalry and heroism. Both my grandfathers fought in the Second World War, and I grew up with an unhealthy predilection for the bellicose. As a child, I collected model airplanes, in particular, Second World War-era fighter planes. Perfect scale replicas of Spitfires hung above my bed, a Messerschmitt Bf 109 sat on the landing strip that ran across the top of my wardrobe.

have scrutinised the letters and writings of the Anzacs, examining battle reports and injury lists, but the Australian wartime experience has always lacked the singular artistic representations of the British war experience.<sup>7</sup> ‘War poetry’, those poems and dramatic writings written by the soldiers and civilian bystanders, actively romanticised the heroic actions of its participants and simultaneously disclosed the horrors of the conflict through British First World War poets Owen, Sassoon, Thomas, Rosenberg, Brooke, et al.<sup>8</sup> There were a few bright lights when it came to defining the Anzac experience: C.J. Dennis with his ‘Ginger Mick’ poems, Leon Gellert, perhaps a few poems by Lawson and Paterson, but the list was short, and there was no poet to match or define the Anzac experience.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Em was in the middle of writing her own thesis, before she got headhunted by the Prof and had to put it on the backburner – Vestigial Paraforms in the Early Prodigean Eco-Languages – so she knows her stuff. I asked her if she knew any war poets, and she rattled off the big names, but no Australians.

Notice anyone missing from that list? I said, nuzzling into the warm space between her legs. This would have been in the first few weeks we got together. Post-coital small talk about all the big things.

Women?

I smiled up at her. Zero Australians. How can that be?

Any South Africans?

The Unknown Digger is the most important poet of the twentieth century – I nibbled the inside of her thigh and smiled as she wriggled away from me – and I want to be the person to unmask him.

8 *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, George Walter, ed., Penguin Classics, Sydney, 2007, comprehensively catalogues the finest examples of the genre. All the major names are represented, sometimes multiple times, alongside lyrics to various soldier songs written by anonymous larrikins, ready to inspire the next generation of war-obsessed young children. I remember how exciting it was, in those first years after Jennifer Hayden’s discovery, to read Australian poems in front of the class – war poems that sounded like we sounded – and not just ‘Clancy of the Overflow’ for the umpteenth time. I imagined an author that looked like the soldiers I knew, like the photo that hangs in the drawing room at my grandparents’ house: slouch hat, slight smile, the grainy blur of time. Grandad looks like me in that photo.

9 I heartily recommend finding a copy of *The Moods of Ginger Mick* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1916) – and no Australian library worth its salt is complete without a copy of Leon Gellert’s *Songs of a Campaign*.

In October 1993, Jennifer Hayden found the poems that would swiftly come to define the 'Anzac spirit' and what it meant to be Australian. Hayden recognised the importance of her discovery immediately:

*... in the bottom of one of the last boxes in the archive, secured by a leather tie and covered in dust, I pulled forth a bundle of papers, faded by the sun, written in a stuttering, hurried hand. Imagine my surprise when, upon examination, I discovered I held in my hand the most beautiful, most touching, and – perhaps astonishingly – the most Australian poetry I'd ever read.*<sup>10</sup>

Regrettably, the author of Hayden's collection of writing was unidentifiable. The poet she presented to the world was a hero without a face or name.

It is the purpose of this thesis to definitively reveal the Unknown Digger to be Alan Lewis, VC. Unknown no more.<sup>11</sup>

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10 Hayden, *Poems of the Unknown Digger*, p. ix.

11 Sometimes things become so obvious, all at once, like puzzle pieces when you finally make out the budgerigar or the steamboat or whatever it is you're making. You think your life is all set out, that you can see straight down the path laid out before you and all you need to do is take one step after another, hunker down at the library and chip away at your thesis and come home each night and microwave pasta and sleep and wake and repeat. That easy. Then you start to notice the way the South African girl putting books away in the aisle next to you keeps glancing sideways, so you make a stupid joke and she laughs, then you eat lunch together, and she tells you about the thesis she's writing, about her home in Cape Town, the beach and her dogs, about London and the university.

You ask yourself, what would Alan do? And you pluck up your courage and ask her out for a drink. Then you spend six hours downing margaritas at that little tequila place you know in Soho, until it's three in the morning and they close at four. Your foot is resting on the bar of her stool, and her leg is rubbing against yours, little black ankle boots turning slow circles. You lean in so you can hear her over the sound of the band in the corner, the twang of the guitar and the low throbbing of the double bass, and the way your head is turned to hear her you're staring at the soft skin of her neck, the vein pulsing. She tells you about her boyfriend of five years, how they've been having troubles recently, how he's ready to start a family but she's not. And

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she isn't ready, the way she looks into your eyes while she's saying it, saying she wants something more than that, someone more. She says something you don't catch, so you lean in closer, until you can feel her breath on your ear, and you're painfully aware of where your bodies touch, your arm on the back of her stool, and her hand, slowly, like snow falling, resting on your leg. Turning your head a quarter inch will be the greatest thing you ever do. And then it's late-late, or way too early, and you're stumbling the dark streets towards the night bus that will take her home, and she's kissing you outside a strip club, the bouncers laughing at the way she fumbles with your belt, and down a moonlit alley you slip your hand down the front of her jeans, feel her knickers lacy wet under your clumsy fingers, and the warmth between her legs, and you pull your fingers from inside and taste, lick your fingers and smile at her, at the green dye in her hair, at the self-conscious tilt of her head, and you raise her chin and kiss her beside the bins.

What would Alan do? Retreat back down the line, or charge in and damn the consequences? A night later you are lying in her bed, with his winter coat hung up behind the door, and every crunch of leaf and twig beneath the feet of the people walking by her front window sends your heart racing because she jumps at every little judder the house makes – every neighbour turning keys in their front door might be the jangle of keys in her front door that would spell the end of this world. But that makes you both bolder, makes it all more concrete, maybe, and you couldn't leave anyway, not when she's holding your wrists down beside your head, not when she's planting kisses down your stomach and the streetlights on her face are like tiger stripes when she closes her eyes, and you put your hand on her back, on the curve of her spine as she pulls closer to you, and the tattoo of the rose on her hip, in its simple black lines, rises and falls in time, and the sheets that smell like him will smell like you tonight, when he is lying here instead, and her fingers and toes curl into fists, like she is trying to hate you and herself for what you're doing. Her nails sink into your back like she wants to rip you apart.

You kiss her by the front door when she gets the message saying he's on his way home, and you say your goodnight, and let that be the end of it, and you walk down the street in the dark and you catch the night bus home halfway across London to sleep in your single bed alone while she curls up with him and tries to convince herself it's just a fling.

Like nothing is growing, deep within the ground, that will redefine the boundaries of the world you both knew, that will send the tube lines scattering in all directions as it bursts forth through the sewers and pipes and rat-strewn dark beginnings, and bloom forth into glorious, artistic, blue-skied perfect London.

## HOME. FEBRUARY 1915.

The pub is heaving.

Alan is unsteady on his feet. He avoids the puddles of piss out by the trees and pushes his way back inside, through the crowd to where he left Rose and Red.

He spots them leaning on the bar, a dark stain of beer sloshed down Red's newly tailored breeches, off his chops. Absolutely fuck-eyed.

Not that anyone else notices. They're all as drunk as Red. The room is a swirling mass of sweaty, uniformed men.

Rose smiles at him as he emerges from the crowd, and beckons him into their little circle. She says something, but he can't hear her over the din of the crowd.

'What?'

She leans in, her breath hot on his ear. Her dress is lacy white, but he can't make out the pattern.

'Red has very kindly offered to marry me.'

'He what?' Alan spins to his best mate, who is grinning manically on the bar. 'You what?'

'Relax,' Rose places a hand on his arm. 'I turned him down.'

'She turned me down.' Red is in his other ear, too close, too loud. 'Said she's waiting for the right man.'

Rose hasn't removed her hand from his arm. He can feel it, hot through his shirt.

'I told her, I said, Rose, with a war on, you could be waiting an awful long time. We'd hate you to turn out an old maid.'

Alan catches Rose's eye and feels his cheeks redden. His hand creeps along the bar, closer to Rose's fingers.

'I need to piss.' Red announces to the bar. 'Think about it, Rose.' He leaves with what he must think is a roguish wink.

'We'll be here,' Alan says. Rose waves as Red elbows his way through the troopers. Once Red has disappeared into the mob, Rose turns to Alan and then looks towards the door.

‘Would you care for some fresh air?’

‘Shouldn’t we tell him?’ Alan cocks his head toward the mass of uniforms.

But she’s already pulling him towards the bright light of the street.

Her white dress gleams in the failing light, vanishing around the corner with her breathless laughter. The roar of the pub recedes. The evening breeze off the ocean makes the shadows cold.

Alan turns the corner and almost bowls her over, gathering her up in his arms and spinning. They fall against the wall, the breath knocked from his chest making them laugh harder. A cry from the bar. Rose’s tiny hand clamps over his laughing mouth. Again, the faint cry of their names. He’s holding her, frozen in time down a darkened alleyway a few shops up from the crowded pub.

His hands relax, and he lowers Rose to her feet. She peels her hand back from his mouth with care.

‘Freedom.’ He sings the word, rolling it around in his mouth, sending inquisitive fingers down her spine.

‘For twelve more hours.’

He pulls the sides of his mouth down in a mock frown, then grabs Rose’s hand and pirouettes her, flaring her dress out in a perfect circle – a blur of white in the gloom.

‘So, what to do with twelve hours?’

He stops the spin with a little more force than necessary.

Rose pokes a small pink tongue at him, and squeezes his hand. ‘Remember when we met?’

‘The Hat-Trick?’

‘Seems like a lifetime ago.’

He grins. ‘Pav’ll be empty.’

The offer hangs in the air.

‘Mr Lewis, without a chaperone, we would be completely alone. The very thought is scandalous.’

He runs his tongue over his teeth. ‘I’ll race you.’

He’s off before she can react, tossing a stack of empty wooden crates in her path and glancing back to see her smile.

No doubt the whole town remembers the Hat-Trick, the first, and for now, only time the Under Sixteens had topped the league. He

had been fifteen at the time, fielding at square leg late on the final day, the sun in his eyes, praying the ball wouldn't find him. Sweat rolled down his nose. His muscles ached. The old foe – Marybrook High – needed three hundred to win and were sitting pretty at four for two-hundred-odd thanks to a captain's knock from their bull of a senior.

And then Red had come on to bowl his big loopy finger spinners, and all the fielders had taken a step or two back, expecting fireworks. Thing is, Red lived for those moments. He could always be counted on to make things happen, and as soon as the batsman attempted to lose it over the crowded pavilion it looped off the bat and landed easy as you like in the wicketkeeper's gloves.

Next batsman in was a scrawny little weed, looking to plant himself in the crease for the remainder of the afternoon. From Alan's position in the outfield, Red was a lanky beanpole approaching the wickets with a lolling gait. He grunted as he sent the ball down the pitch. For Alan, in the outfield, the ball looked to be moving through molasses. It spun around the half-hearted defence the batsman threw out, and clattered into off stump.

Next man in was their star all-rounder, the same kid who bowled Red in the first innings. Alan knew what would happen before it happened; knew he needed to be five metres to his left, to shield his eyes against the lowering sun, adjust for the afternoon breeze, soften his hands to account for the bounce. A wild swing, top-edged towards him on the boundary. Planted in the short grass, all he had to do was watch as the ball miraculously fell from the sky into his waiting, cupped hands.

The heart fell out of the opposition, and the fast bowlers mopped up the tail, but it was Red's hat-trick that they remembered.

Afterward, gathered in the pavilion, the older boys sneaking beers from the bar, Alan and Red were speechless, soaking it all in. A young girl approached, dressed in her Sunday best, golden waves of hair tumbling down her shoulders. Alan and Red were speechless all over again. She walked right up to them, laughing in the face of their obvious discomfort.

'Great catching out there.'

He glanced across at Red, couldn't read the expression on his face, fumbled his words. Butterfingers. 'Thanks. Red got the hat-trick, but.'

She looked over at Red, as if noticing him for the first time and offered him a delicate hand.

‘Pleased to meet you, I’m Rose. Rose Porter.’

‘I’m Red.’

‘I gathered. And you are?’ She swung the hand his way.

‘Yes. I am,’ he said.

She cracked up. A loud, rolling peal of unabashed laughter. His nostrils burned and he wished for instant death. She took his hand, her skin warm, and he could breathe again.

‘I’m Alan. Everyone calls me Al.’

‘I bet they do.’ She laughed again, and his cheeks hurt from the strain of smiling. ‘My father’s club treasurer,’ she said, indicating the white walls. ‘I’m down here quite regularly.’

He couldn’t look away from the shimmer of hair held back by her ear, the perfect arch of gold. Red broke the silence.

‘Hope you enjoyed the game, Rose.’

Rose nodded, her eyes glowing.

‘I did. Well played, Red,’ she turned to leave. ‘Hopefully I’ll see you soon, Alan.’

She walked away as Red’s parents and sister Laurie approached, and amid the backslapping and congratulations, he lost sight of her.

The pavilion is dark, the doors locked, and the sun has settled over the horizon as Rose and Alan, breathless from the run, cross the oval. Over the crest of the hill they can hear the waves crashing on the beach, the gulls screaming.

Rose shimmies one of the windows loose, and hops through the window with a dainty leap. He follows, two heavy boots knocking against the wooden frame.

The members room is huge and still, an empty cathedral. To the left are the change rooms and the slight whiff of stale sweat. Rose takes his hand and pulls him up the stairs, her free hand running over the polished grain of the oak rail. The top floor is taken up by long wooden pews, all facing the oval, and a large open balcony that they push out onto through an unlocked door. They take a front row seat, looking out over the brown patches of grass, the few streets and buildings that make up the town tinged pink. Over the beach the setting sun streaks the sky pink.

He laces his fingers between hers, and pulls her hand into his lap.

‘Rose Benedict Porter.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Rose Marjoram Porter.’

She raises an eyebrow.

‘Rose Penhaligon Stirling Lexington-Porter the Third, Wisest of Women, Keeper of my Heart.’

‘Yes?’

He closes his eyes, and then turns his head towards her, reopening them and loving the way the corners of her eyes crinkle as she waits for him.

‘You can do so much better than Red.’ Her face breaks into a smile, and he wants to cry. A breath, a blink, and she makes him brave enough to say what he has been afraid to say. ‘If I die –’

‘Alan.’

‘But if I do ...’

She squeezes his fingers tighter.

‘Alan Archimedes Ulysses Lewis.’ He can’t help but smile. ‘You’re coming home, to me.’

He can always talk to Rose.

‘Promise me this is real?’ He’s not sure if it’s a question, not entirely sure where it’s come from.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean home, the beach, the farm. You.’ He squeezes her hand, trying to disguise the way his fingers shake. ‘You promise it won’t all vanish? You won’t vanish, the moment I look away?’

She doesn’t speak, gazing out over the field. Her hair is flames, falling across her face in that way she hates but he loves. She burns.

‘I promise.’

When the letter came in offering him a spot in the first take-up of the new university, it was Rose who urged him to give it a shot. Rose who assured him it would be fine. Rose who eased his fears with her calm voice and her warm hands. And for the first time, he wasn’t just copying whatever Red was doing, but making his own way. Making that first long train trip to Perth, it was Rose who waved from the platform, and as the rest of the town faded in the distance, it was her he could still make out, that same flash of sun streaking on her hair.

Perth – a freedom Alan had never known before. The first-year lessons for his bachelor’s degree took place in a series of temporary

wooden huts in the city, the corrugated iron roofs creaking in the heat. They were the first to pass through those ramshackle walls – an experiment in free learning in a young country. They were the first to question everything. The first to take full advantage of the opportunity afforded them. Alan joined a local cricket club, worked in the city library, loved debating the rich boys fresh from private schools in the wealthy suburbs. He wrote letters to Red, who had been made manager of the local hardware store and spent his weekends playing cricket. At twenty-three, Alan was old enough to drink warm beer at the bars alongside the shiftworkers from the city in their ties, the sweat showing through their starched shirts, packing them away before the six o'clock swill. He fell in love with Perth: cycling around the river in the evening, the flies converging around his lips as soon as he stopped; the smell of leather-bound books they were forced to read for tutorials he hadn't studied for, the hours spent debating and arguing and learning, their professors making the units up as they went along; the cheap glue of the paperbacks they bought from the bookshop in Subiaco; the annual cricket club piss-up with the boys drinking long into the night, daring each other to run across the cricket oval naked, their arses shining white in the moonlight.

When Rose came up and moved into the nursing college in Fremantle, he figured he had it all. He cherished their long summer days at North Cott, reading paperbacks on their towels, the sand peppering their skin. The Freo Doctor rolled in each afternoon, windows and doors opened throughout the suburbs to its cooling breeze. He hung around the older boys, who, like himself, had been sent letters offering them positions in the first intake, some much older, some with wives and children waiting for them in the country towns where they lived. Men who seemed like they knew what they were doing, men who reminded him of Red. They'd make their way to the Cottesloe Beach Hotel, discussing literary theory, and cricket, and girls, three beers deep, with the sand crusting between their toes, and he listened intently to everything they had to say. He'd amble home in the dusk sporting a six-beer buzz, and lie awake with the windows open, mosquitoes whining round his ears.

One weekend, Red came through on a flying visit, buying an entire crate of mangoes from the European bloke who ran the stall at the markets on the way. All weekend they lay in the sun reading

second-hand books, mango juice dripping from their elbows, sticking pages together. Every so often they ran down to the waves to cool off, to wash the sweet liquid from their chins. By the Monday morning, when Red needed to hop a train back home, and he was due in class, they were both in and out of the toilet so often they were considering setting up camp in the bathroom. Rose, trainee nurse, and as always the voice of reason, said they had no-one to blame but themselves.

He would have been among the first contingent to graduate if the war hadn't come along like the rips at North Cott and swept him out to sea. Red sent him a letter saying he was signing up with the Light Horse. It didn't take much convincing to head down to the recruitment centre. There was more to life than black swans on the river each evening and the weekend football, and he signed up in a sweaty haze of patriotism and adventure.

Returning from the recruitment centre, he jumped on his bicycle and rode down to the nursing college to tell Rose his good news. He expected her to join in his happiness, to swirl and dance in his joy. He hadn't expected silence. The way her face fell apart with each word he spoke. She begged him not to go. He tried his best to explain. He told her Red had signed up too, but she didn't listen. He couldn't put it into words – that she had inspired him, had pushed him, had given him the belief that he could do this. That he had signed up for her.

That she made him feel brave.

They lay on the foreshore and watched dolphins swimming in the bay, and he reached an arm around her shoulder, and she smiled a sad smile.

He glances down at his hands, calluses on his palms from the hours spent cradling the rough wood of his rifle. Sitting here, in his pressed and clean uniform, his hair parted, buttons polished, boots glossed, it doesn't feel real. He can't imagine a world where Rose isn't within his sight. But his kitbag is sitting packed in his room, and the bars on his sleeve burn into his arm, and there's an altogether different part of him itching to go, restless to test itself in a new world, but afraid of losing the old one. Scared of letting Rose down.

They sit for a moment in the last stretching fingers of daylight.

Rose shivers.

He removes his jacket and places it around her shoulders, the desert brown dull against the white of her dress, the bright gold of her hair. He turns her head and kisses her with his eyes closed, to hide the tears.

Rose has always had the taste of the sea on her lips, like she's run straight from the waves, her hair in long dark strands down her back, and water dripping from her nose. A sudden dark silhouette above him, blocking out his sun – cold drops on his face and her laughing, cold lips. Rose tastes like salty skin, stretched tight by sun.

He pulls her closer and lifts her onto his lap, her legs around him and dropping over the bench behind, her dress covering his khakis. When she sits on him they are the same height, and he can look straight into her green eyes. She smiles, her canines bared, and the animal inside him growls. His lips graze her neck, her earlobe, the perfect triangle of her collarbone. Beneath her thighs, he is stirring. His hands run up and down her back, restless. The shivering has stopped, the cold dread down his back, the heavy beat of his heart.

'Alan.'

But he doesn't stop kissing her, covering her skin with the lightest of touches. He makes a noise in the back of his throat as if to say 'Yes, my love?' and she smiles.

'Alan.'

He pauses, looks at her, her smile, her hands across his shoulders. He runs his wet tongue from the base of her neck all the way up to her lips, and he kisses her as that perfect rolling laughter floats away across the field, stopping and starting as their lips meet, lock, and part.

'Alan, stop.'

He stops. She sighs, and slides off his lap onto the pew next to him, rearranging her dress. They stare out at the patchwork grass in silence for a long minute.

'I'm scared.'

Her voice is small when she does speak. 'I'm scared too.'

He reaches for her hand, the familiar warmth. The cricket pitch in front of them is cracked and broken, dead grass. 'Who's meant to be looking after this place now, anyway?'

Two weeks after the Hat-Trick, desperate for a way to spend more time at the cricket club, and potentially run into Rose, he had

approached the groundsman's hut behind the pavilion, knocking at the flimsy wooden door, heart in his mouth. He'd never been as scared as he was at that moment. The door swung open and a mountain of a man emerged from the dark to regard the skinny kid standing in the doorway. His voice catching in his throat, he plucked up his courage.

For Rose. It had always been for Rose.

The next time she saw him he was drenched in sweat, pushing the heavy roller across the pitch, the back of his neck bright pink and his hands covered in blisters. She approached from the pavilion, and for half a second he thought she was a mirage, the way she floated across the trimmed grass.

'Father told me the club had hired a new groundsman.'

She brought him fresh lemonade, made it herself, and he was too worried about scaring her away to tell her it was far too sour. He finished the glass in one long gulp.

He spent the rest of the winter helping maintain the grass, each day after school, ensuring the pitch was protected, trimming the lawn. Hours spent walking around the oval, the smell of grass in his nose, on his clothes, in his dreams. When it rained (if it ever rained) they sat inside the shed and he would dip into the groundskeeper's endless well of stories, glued to his seat as the grizzled old-timer yabbered away about his days as a drover, crossing the Nullarbor, living under the stars. Red would ride down, and they'd bowl to each other in the nets.

And when the holidays came, and Rose returned from boarding school, they lay together on the raised grass banks eating lunch – Alan chewing his bread and cheese, or chomping his way, core and all, through an apple. The sound of her laugh, ringing out across the ground, made his cheeks ache.

He told her about his family, the farm and the harvest. The long days in the fields and the evenings spent exhausted. Dad and his eccentricities. Ma and the horses. His brothers, Tom and Robbie, grown men, and how he worried his hands would never grow as large or as hard as theirs. How Red was school prefect and head boy, but Alan was top of the class. About his small collection of books, the escape they gave him at the end of a long afternoon. He would open his mouth and all his worries would tumble out. He was scared she would crumble under the weight, but she never did.

For her part, Rose told him about her parents, her mum who was knitting her a muffler despite the weather never getting cold enough to wear it, and about her sisters, the Little Princesses, who stayed inside, their skin porcelain like the dolls they played with. She told him about her boarding school in Perth, spending half the time away from home, away from the family. She told him about Sister Mary, the English tutor, who brought her new books each week, whose eyes shone when she read Hardy. Rose filled his head with Conrad and Conan Doyle, Whitman and Kipling, laying the groundwork for the essays that would eventually lead him to university. He lay on the grass and closed his eyes while she read him Yeats. She loved the old poems. Their strength, their beauty.

He wrote a poem, but never showed her.

He soon met her father, his voice always the first indication of his presence, booming across the oval, calling Rose to him. He imagined Mr Porter as a kookaburra, king of the bush, singing his song through the gums, Rose's replying laugh guiding her back to him. Alan would offer to ride Rose home on his bicycle, but she said no, the walk home with her father was their special time. The first time Mr Porter shook his hand he thought his own might be crushed. He tried to stand taller, puffed his chest out, lowered his voice. A grin spread across the big man's red cheeks, and father and daughter laughed their raucous laughs.

Mr Porter called him 'my boy', and winked at him behind Rose's back, brothers-in-arms. When Alan was invited around one Sunday for dinner, cleaned and polished, feeling out of place, dressed in his brother's hand-me-downs, Mr Porter made sure he sat by his right hand at the table.

'Us men have to stick together,' he said, doling out the potatoes.

The way Mr Porter rolled over and did anything his girls asked filled Alan with a sense of joy. The old lion, turning circles for his pretty cubs.

A few years later, at the start of his second year of university, when they were both living in Perth, Rose received an urgent telegram. They hopped the earliest train back home and spent a week haunting the rooms of their family homes like ghosts, and then, on the hottest day of the summer, Alan sweltered through the funeral service in one of Tom's suits, several sizes too big. When

they ate dinner, the chair at the head of the table sat empty. Alan pulled Rose close at every opportunity, trying his best to hold her together, until she pulled away, saying he was hurting her.

He tried to tell her how inadequate he felt, but the words wouldn't come out. They spent the rest of the week in a humid silence.

His own father never talked about his worries. Hid his thoughts behind a stony demeanour and his insecurities behind a heavy hand. Dad commanded respect through silence, distilling the words necessary to communicate a message into the shortest possible sentence. When Dad spoke, people hung on each word, breathing in the long gaps between them. He might not know a lot of Alan's 'facts' – never went to school, never studied – but he knew what he knew. His word was gospel.

When Alan first started at the university, he worried that if he had nothing to say in tutorials and lectures, people would think he was stupid. So he spoke up and asked questions. With Rose's family and down at the pub, he was the same, trying to mask his anxiety with talking. But when he sent letters home about the books he'd read, the Latin studies, the long lectures, it was always his mother who replied. Dad was busy. Dad was working hard.

When he arrived home in October for the harvest, and told his family that he had signed up, had quit university and spent the past few months in training, Dad didn't respond. Instead he took another sip from his beer and said, 'Early start tomorrow, Al.'

'I'm to be an officer. Thanks to the university.'

His father took another long sip. 'Lots of sleep tonight.'

As he walked to bed, his father called to him across the room. 'Alan?'

'Yeah, Dad?'

But somewhere between him turning around and the next sip of beer, the moment passed.

'G'night.'

They strode into the fields at sunrise, the father and his sons, and not one of them said a word. The sun baked the soil clay-hard, and the sweat dropped down the end of his nose, and looking up at the old man bent over the scythe, he thought he understood: there is a strength in silence. A safety there. He thought, the old man couldn't do it, but there's nothing stopping me. He thought, I am not my father.

The next day he returned to Perth for the last of his training.

Months later, with summer in full swing, the train pulled into town. He stopped at Rose's first, her sisters, the Princesses, crowing over him, tears in her mother's eyes. Then Red's house – the two boys standing side by side in their uniforms, competing, even now, with Red's mother and Laurie fussing around them – and then he walked the long dirt track out to the farm that didn't feel like home anymore. Ma cried. Dad went to the pub for a drink, and didn't come home until much later.

When he told them the next week that he'd be shipping out, off to Egypt for further training, and then on to an unknown battlefield, the silences became more pronounced; he felt he could curl up in them, great voids of the left-unsaid.

He should have sat down with Dad and said his piece, but he didn't. He chose silence. Safer that way.

Dad had never called him 'my boy'.

They sit and talk until the mosquitoes find them, and the spell is broken. The sun has plunged into the sea. Time to head back.

He rises, and runs a hand down the creases in his shirt. Rose swings her feet back and forth under the bench and reaches for his hand.

His voice, when he speaks, is a whisper, and he directs his words to the oval, rather than the woman at his side.

'I'm going to marry you, Rose.'

'Oh yes? And don't I get a say in that?'

He swings his head to look down at her. She always knows how to make him smile. He drops to one knee, throws his right hand behind him in a dramatic gesture and takes a deep breath.

'Yes. I will.'

Before he can utter a word, she's answered for him. She pulls him to his feet, and then on tiptoe reaches up to kiss the tip of his sunburnt nose.

The crickets chatter in the gloom. Across the oval, a kookaburra starts up his raucous laughter, watching their display.

'I'm just saying,' the large man in the blue suit is just saying, 'with you gone, who's gonna take all our wickets next season?'

Alan finds Red deep in conversation at the bar, cupping his chin

in his hand, trying to listen. His hand doesn't look like it will support the weight of his head. There's drool on his wrist. Australia's finest.

'Know what I mean?'

Red knows what he means.

Alan clamps his hand on Red's shoulder and dodges the wild punch Red swings at him, pulling him up before he falls off the chair.

'How many have you had? You're a mess, mate.'

Red draws close and buries his head in Alan's shoulder and blows a blubbery nose into the clean linen. His eyes are hot and wet as he pulls away. He turns back to the large man.

'This is Alan. Al. Alan.' Red swats a hand in the direction of Alan's chest. 'Al, this is some bloke.'

He reaches out and shakes the man's hand, mouthing 'sorry' over Red's downturned head. 'Pleased to meet you. This is my fiancée, Rose.'

Red lifts his head. Fat tears roll down his cheeks, but there's a dumb smile on his mug.

'She ain't your fiancée, she's mine. Ain't that right, Rose?' Red glances between the two of them, looks down to take a sip from his long empty glass, and then back up. They're looking at him, waiting for the hammer to drop. 'Fuck off, really?'

Alan glances over to the love of his life, and then down at his best friend.

'Why do you always copy what I do?' The tears are streaming down Red's face.

Rose laughs.

Alan grins, 'You'll have to be best man. Ok?'

Red is sniffing and laughing and ordering a bottle of their most expensive whatever-you've-got from the bar. Alan pulls Rose to him, closes her hand in his and gives it a quick squeeze. This. The beginning.

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The town has one tiny station, and it's chockers, families from every part of the surrounding district crowded in to say goodbye to their boys. Alan has that rumbling in his stomach. Too many beers the night before. Too many thoughts to contain in his head, so they bubble in his gut. On the next seat Red groans, his slouch hat pulled low over his eyes.

‘You want to say goodbye?’ Alan says, but Red just grunts. ‘Aren’t you worried you might not make it back?’

Red lifts up his hat and looks up at him. ‘We’re both coming back.’

On the platform outside his window, Rose waits, radiant in white against the red bricks. He didn’t think it possible for one body to hold this many tears, but there are wet lines down her face. He pushes his face up against the window, squashing his nose flat on the smudged glass.

She laughs, a quick burst that fades among the general chatter. He reaches an arm out the thin window above his head. She moves closer to him, and takes his hand as it hovers above her. It’s an awkward position, the metal frame of the window cutting into his armpit, Rose clutching the solitary limb. His mother moves forward from the crowd behind Rose, and wraps an arm around her shoulder.

‘She’ll be right, Al. We’ll look after her.’

He grins against the pain shooting through his arm, the blood cut off by the frame, his hand turning red.

‘Thanks Ma.’

Rose kisses his hand.

‘Plan on giving that back anytime soon?’ he says.

She sniffs, a wet snivel that turns into a chuckle as she notices the colour of his fingers. She lets go, and he glides over her fingertips as he pulls his arm back in.

Behind Rose and Ma, a tall figure steps into view, and for a brief moment he thinks it might be Dad, until the tiny shape of his niece steps out of the shadow, and he can make out his brother Tom beneath the wide brim of the akubra. Tom lifts his daughter up by the underarms, and raises her up to the window. Her nose is freckled by the sun, her fingers brown with dirt.

‘Bye, Uncle Al. Don’t die.’

He laughs, and bops one finger on her spotted nose. ‘You know if you keep growing at this rate, by the time I get back you’ll be taller than me? Then you’ll be my uncle.’ Her tiny face crinkles in confusion, and turns to her father for confirmation. Tom smiles, then catches Alan’s eye through the glass and nods his head. Like they’re kids, playing cricket out back.

Ma has one arm around Rose, and puts the other around Tom.

‘Robbie said he’d write you. He reckons they’ll ship out within the month so he might catch you in Egypt.’

'I know, Ma.'

'And he said he's already beaten your record for the quarter-mile.'

'I know, Ma.'

Her voice is getting shakier with each word.

'And your Dad. He said to stay safe.' Sure he did. 'Said, he loves you.'

He nods. Better for them all to pretend.

A whistle blows, and the crowd on the platform surges forward with final goodbyes. Uniformed men clamber aboard and fill the corridors. Alan reaches up and out the window, taking Rose's hand as she sobs.

'You'll write?'

'Every day.'

In the vest pocket of his tunic, tucked away in the back of his notebook, he carries a photo of her, her raucous laugh threatening at the edges of her smile.

'Promise you'll come home to me, Alan Lewis.'

He considers her eyes through the smudged glass, the vivid green of an algal bloom, the eyelids red and swollen. Her white dress brushes against the side of the carriage.

'You'll ruin your dress.'

'Promise.'

'I promise.'

He mouths three words as a second whistle blows, white smoke drifting down the platform, the train lurching forward. At some point, Red has stood up by his side, slouch hat in hand, looking out at the families. He puts a warm arm round Alan's shoulder, and steadies him as the train sways.

Rose holds Alan's hand through the window, and as the train picks up speed, she walks alongside the carriage, watching her feet among the feet of the other young women trying to delay the moment of departure for as long as possible. The noise is getting louder, soot and dust and smoke blowing onto her dress.

They're running out of platform. Rose jogs beside the train, and he worries she won't let go, will keep running beside them, and trip, and fall beneath the heavy churning wheels and be crushed, that he'll lose her forever. She braces herself with her free hand on the window. Now it's him not wanting to let go. The train horn blows three times, loud and clear. He's not sure he can do this without her.

She lets go.

In the grime of the window, a perfect outline of her delicate fingers, a ghost wave.