

YOU CAN'T
OUTRUN
YOUR PAST

THE CURLEW'S EYE

KAREN
MANTON

'powerful and evocative . . . Manton understands instinctively what haunts us, and why'

Cate Kennedy, author of *The World Beneath*

‘Every secret and spirit, uneasily buried in memory but refusing to stay dead, rises up to be reckoned with in this powerful and evocative debut. A young couple returns to the ruins of a family homestead in the outback of the far north and need to grapple with the ghosts of the past, and their separate legacies of childhood and orphanhood. Manton understands instinctively what haunts us, and why, and her rich prose, threaded with powerful metaphors and images, brings the remote and beautiful landscape and the spirit of the unquiet past to life.’

Cate Kennedy, author of *The World Beneath*

‘*The Curlew’s Eye* is a story of loss, hope, family and the secrets we carry wherever we go. In the ancient landscape of far northern Australia, two young parents try to make a home away from their traumatic pasts. The narrative builds like the oppressive tropical wet season. I could feel the heat, smell the dirt and rain and storms, sense the aura of the remote property: the restless dread and unease. I could also see and hear the birds, especially the haunting cry of the curlew. A promising debut that weaves together memory, grief, fear and truth with magical realism.’

Karen Viggers, author of *The Lightkeeper’s Wife*

‘With prose both lyrical and minimalist, Manton conjures Australia’s remote Top End in all its magnificent starkness. A page-turning debut as unsettling as it is compelling—be prepared to burn the midnight oil.’

Fiona Higgins, author of *The Mother’s Group*

Karen Manton lives in Darwin and Batchelor in the Northern Territory. Her short stories have won five NT Literary Awards and are published in various anthologies, including *Best Australian Stories*, *Award Winning Australian Writing*, *Review Australian Fiction* and *Landmarks*. She has been awarded the Eleanor Dark Flagship Fellowship at Varuna Writers' House, the NT Writers Centre Hachette Mentorship and the Arts NT Varuna Residential Fellowship. *The Curlew's Eye* is her first novel.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
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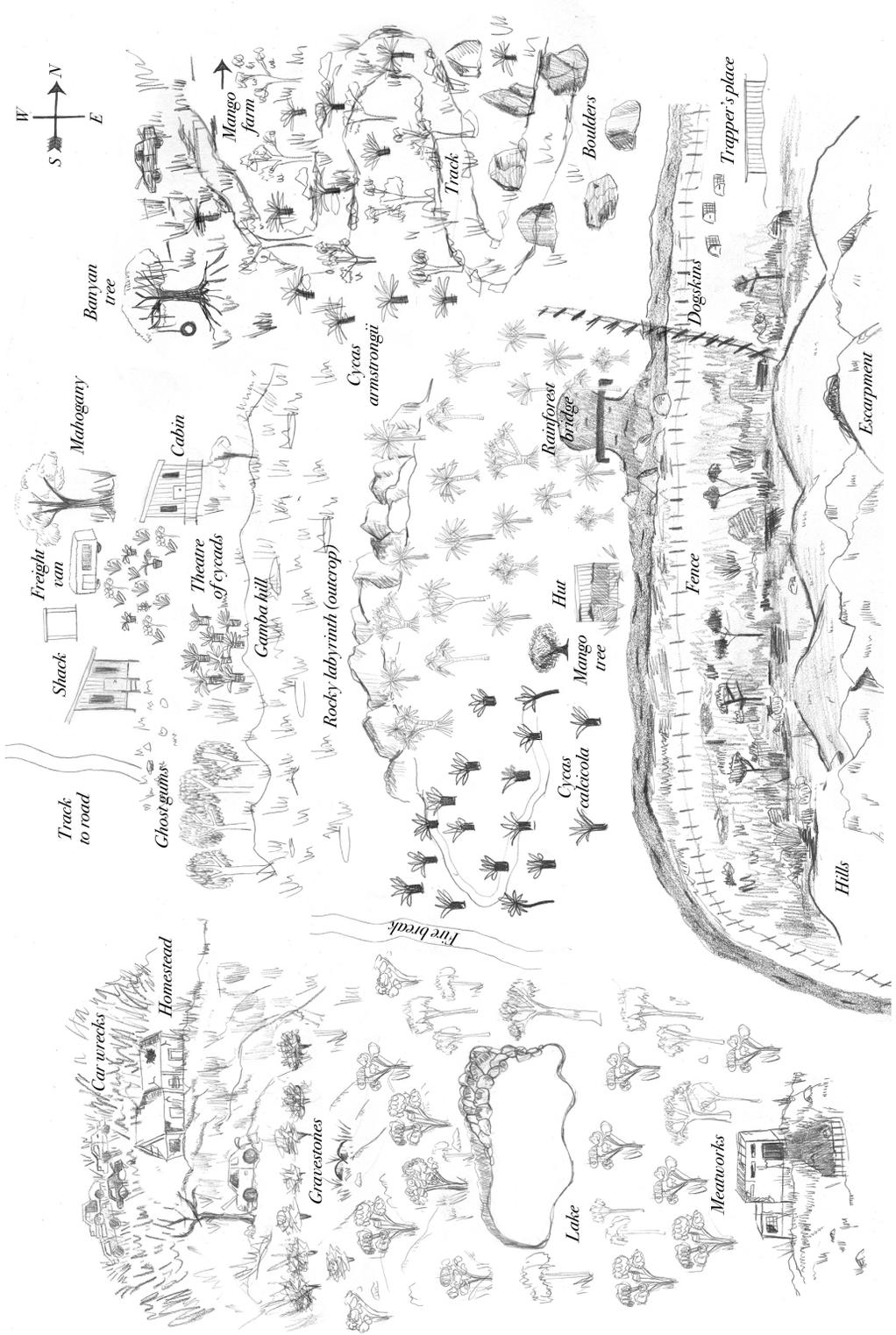
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For my family





There's nothing in the lake, Magdalen.

There is, Joel—I can feel it.

You can see all the way to the bottom. There's nothing there.

I'm not seeing anything, says the girl.

The water is a breathing silence, its darkness a body. And all around the quiet earth, the listening stones. Above, the dome of night is stuck with pinpoint stars.

She is very still, his sister. Her stillness frightens him. But he says nothing. He waits, while the present and the past and the future mingle in the breathing silence, the breathing water.

I can feel it, she says again.

And her body shifts in the dark.

1

The fire burned in a wavering orange line by the road, flaring now and then as it devoured the head of a pandanus or licked its way along a dead branch. Above, kites circled through rusty clouds, waiting for a scurrying marsupial, a snake, to flee the flames.

Greta slowed and eased the four-wheel drive off the highway.

‘Is that a controlled burn?’ she asked as she pulled over.

There were no fire units in sight.

‘It’s pretty late in the season for that.’ Joel opened the door and got out.

The three boys crowded at Toby’s window to see.

Greta went to stand with Joel. As she rounded the bonnet an animal leaped out of the fire and stood on the edge of the road, disoriented. ‘Is that a dog?’ she asked.

She called out to it but Joel said, ‘Leave it.’

It was a dingo sniffing the air, snout raised to the gliding birds and strips of airborne ash.

A row of gamba grass ignited with a rush close to the road. The dingo was gone suddenly, streaking back into the very heart

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of the fire, through vivid flame to the darkness behind where the ground was already known and charred.

‘What are you doing?’ Greta breathed, trying to follow the animal’s shadow behind the shimmering light.

The sun dipped below the horizon. A restless call came from the car. Joel was buckling up, telling the boys to do the same. She returned to them, slipping behind the wheel.

‘How long till we get there?’ Raffy’s foot pressed into the back of her seat.

‘About eighty kilometres,’ replied Toby.

He had his own map across his lap with a texta line marking the few thousand kilometres they’d travelled from the south-eastern coast up through the red centre to the point where the desert gave way to the tropics.

Greta turned the key. The vehicle rumbled awake.

‘What’s up ahead?’ Joel asked Griffin, who was seated between his brothers with a pair of binoculars aimed at the windscreen.

‘I’ll keep you posted,’ the boy said.

Greta pulled back out onto the highway and they left the fire behind. Dusk moved in around them; the sky quickly deepened to night. A full moon rose directly ahead, as if the road were leading into it. The higher it rose the more silver it became, casting an eerie light over the land.

The children were asleep by the time Greta’s headlights lit up the sign: *Old Mine Rd, Lightstone 35 km*. This was the turn-off that would take them to the property; it had been part of the highway in the past.

Greta felt a shiver of excitement and fear. She had imagined it for so long, this return to the place where Joel grew up with five brothers, a sister, his parents and two uncles. The father running a small meatworks, his mother managing seven children and the

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garden that fed them. Greta gathered it hadn't been an easy ride. Every family has its troubles.

The land was hilly, rising up above moonlit bushland and then dipping down to lower ground. She drove slowly to avoid potholes. A cattle truck loomed up ahead and she eased onto the dirt siding to let it pass. Eyes glinted at her through gaps in the trailer's slats. As the dust settled she moved on again.

They drove past farmland for quite a distance before reaching a T-intersection where Joel gestured left. 'Not far now,' he said as they crossed a floodway between tall markers and rainforest.

The road curved and narrowed to a single-lane bridge. The creek beneath flowed into a dark pond where slender paperbarks rose in the moonlight. As the car climbed to another crest Joel cautioned Greta to slow down.

'Here.' He pointed to a gravel track leading off to the right.

She pulled up to a rusted gate, chained shut. Joel got out to shove the gate open over stones. She drove through and waited for him, engine idling. In the rear-vision mirror he was red-tinged from the tail-lights, hooking the chain into place. He climbed back up into his seat and rested his elbow on the lowered window. His fingers tapped the roof.

Greta moved the vehicle on, glancing at Joel, thinking he might speak. But he was silent. Among the silhouettes of cycads and sand palms and eucalypts, the shadows of boulders loomed. They leaned in one to the other, a communion of stone. They knew who she was and watched her pass. But she did not know them. They were the stone strangers. Her foreign breath wavered. Loose rocks rattled under the wheels, the grasses swish-swished at the car door.

A piercing wail cut through the night. A woman, a child, a bird. 'Bush stone-curlew,' murmured Joel.

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Again the awful cry, once, twice, to end in a crescendo shriek. The night was scoured open. The stars quivered. A terrible loss, a terrible grief. Greta peered out for a glimpse of this feathered agony, but the shadow plants kept their secrets. She kept the car moving forward and the further she went, the more she felt the pull of a dreadful, echoing abandonment. The cry had gone right into her. And with it a question, *What is it? What is it?*

In the silence afterwards the memory of the wail went with her. The night was altered. A weight, a stone had dislodged.

The track went over a small rise. Ahead was the sudden glimmer of a corrugated-iron roof. The moon was a spotlight on it. This was the shack where they would live. Slowly the little house drew near, the ground was bringing it to them.

Greta pulled up by a water tank on stilts.

‘We’re here,’ said Joel quietly.

The car shuddered to silence.

Together they listened to the hiss and tick of the cooling engine, the chirp and rustle of creatures in the darkness. One of the children rattled in a breath. The driver’s door creaked as Greta opened it. She walked to the front of the shack her husband’s uncle Pavel had built years ago. For the most part the walls were not solid. They were flywire, tacked around the outside of the house frame. There was a row of louvres either side of the front door. The rear of the building was set close to the ground. The front stretched out over a slight incline, ending with a verandah that was roofless and missing most its boards.

Joel led the way up rickety wooden steps to a couple of planks laid like a bridge over gaps to a screen door. Greta looked out across the moonlit landscape. About twenty metres in front of the shack the ground dropped away. In the distance water gleamed silver. On her right, the land sloped up to the dark shape of another house. The old homestead where Joel grew up, she guessed.

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The door behind her scraped open. Joel stepped inside. 'Here it is.'

She followed him in. His torch shone around a single room, with a stone wall halfway across that had a pantry alcove behind it. A raggedy wicker couch was the only furniture. The kitchen bench was a wooden slab. Behind it was a sink but no stove, no oven. No cupboards either, just open shelves under the bench and in the pantry. Louvres above the sink looked onto a pokey back verandah and a concrete laundry trough.

Joel brought in a camping lantern from their trailer. The flame hissed alive. It was a lighthouse in the middle of the floor. Together Greta and Joel lugged in the swags and unrolled them. Then he carried in each sleeping child. They smelled of sweat and the hot chips they had eaten. She carefully removed Griffin's binoculars and dragged off his shirt, and wiped Raffy's face with a damp cloth. Toby she let be.

When Greta was done she lit another lantern and took it out the back to the shower, which had a corrugated-iron enclosure with no roof. There was only one tap. The pipes grunted and gave nothing at first. Joel came in and hung his clothes over the wall. She opened the tap further. A burst of warm water splattered her skin, the dirt at her feet. Joel pulled her in close. His heart was a muted beat against her ear. Softly her fingers pressed against his scars. The raised and tormented skin. Along his left arm, across his chest and reaching to his back. They were a comfort to her, the scars. His body was the only known thing.

He left first, shaking the water from him. She listened to his feet shudder the steps on the back verandah. The flywire door slapped behind him. She ventured out naked to let the unfamiliar air dry her and the moon light her skin.

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Inside, Joel was already stretched out on the swag. It smelled of other places they'd been. She lay down beside him. He hooked his arm around her head and pinched her ear.

'Here we are again then,' she said. 'At the beginning.'

He drifted from her quickly into sleep. She could feel his body sinking into the swag, the floor, the ground beneath.

Greta scanned the dark room, the shadows of the children, the unknown land outside the see-through walls. Beyond the silence of the verandah, the world was brushed with silver-grey light. Every plant or tree was fixed in a night pose, cast in a paralysis of stiffened arms, spiked fingers, a fountain of hair. A termite mound gleamed its tower strength, pointing to the stars. The ground was a strange sea of ashen light and dark shapes. She felt herself hovering over it all. She might be in a dream, or she might be here for real. The boundaries were suddenly thin. Some part of her had travelled out and was wandering.

How far they had come. How distant from that morning, two months ago, when Joel's older brother Mick had phoned.

She remembered Joel's low voice in the dark, and branches scratching the window; the boys' soft breathing in the adjacent room, the shapes of them under the indigo blanket with its pattern of sprawling blue flowers and the tired satin edging; the sound of surf down on the shore.

After the call, Joel had explained that Mick and his new business partner up north wanted to fix up the old family property, buy out Joel and his brothers and build tourist cabins for backpackers and grey nomads, with a cattle agistment on the side. Mick would pay Joel up to the end of the year to finish the first cabin, put in fences and clean up the place. He wanted a garden too, for tourist appeal.

'What a nut,' Joel had laughed softly.

'It's an idea,' Greta replied.

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She saw a rambling vegetable garden, tropical fruits, bees and honey. A different experience for the children, a known income for a while.

‘The build-up is the worst time of year.’ Joel’s fist bumped a gentle rhythm against the wall behind him. ‘And it’ll be feral. Weeds, gamba, fallen-down buildings. No one’s been there for years except squatters, wild pigs and stray cattle. Mick won’t pay much either. I could go on my own maybe.’

‘I’m not letting you go without us.’ She kissed him fast.

A wave broke with a loud smack down on the rocks.

‘Lightstone’, she’d whispered over and over to herself. She liked the ring of the name.

Four to five months was longer than they usually stayed in one place but they would do the work and move on, as they always had these past twelve years. As Greta had for years before she met Joel. Before Toby took a hold in her womb and posed the question of a joint future.

‘We can give it a try,’ he’d replied to her misgivings. And his fingers had touched her belly where that little heartbeat sang on the other side.

‘Just as long as you don’t build me a white picket fence.’

‘Never. I’m strictly barbed wire.’

Fencing, bricklaying, bar work, cleaning. Farmhand, kitchen-hand, shop assistant. They found work wherever they landed. The children were homeschooled or did short stints at a local primary. It kept them out of the rat race. No long-term career, no mortgage or brick-veneer home.

It would be the same up north, she’d thought. But now, lying here, she was not so sure. It was different somehow, the stopping. Already she felt pegged to one place. There was a magnet under this little house. Beneath the swag, the floorboards. Even the soft

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rhythm of Joel's breath seemed drawn to it. He was recalibrating in his sleep.

The warm air pressed in; it was an atmosphere. And the moon had shifted, casting light on different shapes and lending a view uphill to where the shadow of Joel's childhood waited.

The child with the softly whistling nose tossed and turned. Greta rolled on her side to watch her three sleeping boys. She was overwhelmed with love for them. It struck her that in all these years, every highway and meandering track they'd taken together had been heading for this destination. A shack perched halfway up a hill in an other-world of bizarre shadow plants and dark sentinel trees, where the earth rose in sharp-pointed mounds and the rocks could see at night. It was true for Joel and herself and each child born along the way.

Every road had been leading here, to this place.



The girl's breath is quick, panicked. She's fleeing through a narrow passageway. On either side of her the walls are rock. They have a sound, a deep hum. Her fingertips brush against the stone, as light as passing feathers. Every turn becomes another corridor. Outside the cicadas chant their fever-pitched rhythm. She can see nothing of that world except for a sliver of sky above her, a wound of light. There's a shout behind her, footsteps thudding near. The rocks tilt, press close, suck her in.