Part One: The Place my Grandad Built

A house is a blank document. It is what this page looked like in the seconds between it being created and before I started typing. Just then, I changed the font to Palatino Linotype, point twelve. A title just appeared above this meagre chunk of text. This developing paragraph.

Indent, now – a new idea. This page is filling with strange memory. It’s knitting together, it has purpose. These words belong. These words are stitches sewn into this strange page. This block of white has patterns, now. This block of white is building a home.

What is a home?

If you pull an animal out of its native home and put it in a totally different environment, chances are, it will die – or find its way back. For humans, moving is often a strange process, almost unnatural. It wasn’t so long ago that people would live and die in the same house. Now, it’s normal to pack up and disappear off to another town, or state, or country. We all have different reactions to moving house. For some, it’s almost as if our DNA hasn’t yet caught up with coping with such big changes. It’s not easy to be pulled from a place you’ve been sewn in to.

Home is an ideal. It is something we dream of when we haven’t found it and are nostalgic about when we have lost it. My mother’s childhood home is her ideal, and represents a life she could have had but was pulled away from. It’s an in between here and there kind of place: between Mount Barker and Denmark. A name split between three daughters. Today, it’s a land divided by a thousand rows of Eucalypt trees, in between the earth and sky.
It’s a between here and there kind of place but, half a century ago, it was transforming into a home.

My mother was six years old when she came to this place. She remembers her house before this one, but this spreading acreage with its new cottage and shed and shearer’s quarters becomes her definition of home.

Her father had come back from the Second World War and met Muriel, and they married and had their children; Janet, Linda and Evelyn. Janalyn. Two of the daughters were born in Carnarvon, and the other in Albany; already their personal geographies stretched far and wide, and this farm in Denbarker was the first place they all stuck to. So, the place had a name and a purpose – packaged up as a parcel of thanks for going to war, please take this parcel of land as a symbol of our appreciation. Do something with it.

My mother remembers helping to construct fences around all of the paddocks to keep the dairy process running the right lines, and to define the borders of barley and oats and wheat. She helped to build a chook yard from wire and wood. She trudged around in bare feet in summer and wellington boots in winter.

She left this place when she was twelve. Her parents moved her and her two sisters to Geraldton – a place wildly different from the tall trees and wet ground of Denbarker. Over the years, she has always called this piece of land her home, and has come to know it as her home by its absence. Her memories fill the void that was once something real. Forty-six years later – September 2012 - I ask her to draw a map.

‘Just draw what you can remember’ I say.

‘I can remember everything.’

She sits in a chair, warm spring light filtering through the windows, pencil in hand and paper on her lap. First, she draws the farm. Her hand moves in sure lines
across the blank page, and soon the blank rectangle is filling with grey memory: her home.

The drive way brings her to an asbestos cottage, painted white with a galvanised tin roof that glints in the light. Her domain, though, was the yard. At one point, all three sisters had their own flower garden at the back of the house, shaded on one side by a wisteria that dripped violet petals in the spring, and a row of poplars. The other two, though, soon gave up on their flower plots, and my mother took over. Her zinnia’s were a raging success and painted the garden red, yellow, orange and white.

Past the flower plots, the lemon tree and the row of boobialla trees stood a forlorn figure: the dunny. It was never a welcoming prospect on a frigid winter night, and so the girls each had a ‘potty’ that was emptied every morning. It wasn’t until 1965 that an indoor toilet was installed.

Next to the outhouse was the generator shed. Mum tells me, as she draws her map, that the generator shed was where their dog, Lassie, liked to have her pups, and that was the only time you could get near her. The rest of the time, she was evasive– she was a farm dog. Motherhood, though, seemed to soften her.

The front of the house was a patchwork of flowers. Violets and primroses wavered in the breeze at the foot of the front step. A pathway extended into the yard, with a rose garden on either side. Large yellow and pink dahlia’s whispered to each other across the divide. A pergola shaded the walkway, and Mum giggles as she tells me about three kookaburras that would sit atop it and gurgle and laugh the dawn away in their strange language.

The farm was used to raise sheep and cattle. Out the back of the family house stood the shearers’ quarters. It doubled as a playhouse for my mother and her sister, Evelyn. Behind the quarters were the sheep dip and shower, shearing shed and sheep and cattle yards. Despite the serious business of farming, the two youngest
girls would find plenty of places to play. Mum tells me that she and her younger sister would often practise circus acts on metal bars and wooden frames. ‘Never broke a bone, though’ Mum says. I seemed to have shared that luck in my own upbringing. As time progressed, though, the youngest sister spent more time indoors helping their mother, and as Jan, the eldest, reached high school, she spent her time locked away in her room, studying. My mother stuck to the outside, often at her father’s side.

2007. There’s nothing here. Not in my memory and not on the ground. There’s a sign at the front gate that says ‘McMahon’s Plantation’ as if the logging company is tying together the future and the past as a point of reconciliation. Jim McMahon made this place and raised three daughters here, but it’s trees now. Just trees: rows of them, like silver sentinels that reach into the blue expanse above us.

This strange place stitched on paper...

My Mum has wandered off into the bush, searching the ground for signs that she had a childhood here. Are there bricks? Pieces of tile? A button? She has always told me that this place was her home, but the photographs she’d shown me of my Nanna standing outside a quaint country cottage looks nothing like this place now.

Mum sees it, though. Here, a row of boobialla trees still grow that she helped her Dad plant when they first arrived. They’re huge, now, left to grow unchecked by human hands for almost half a century. There, the creek, no longer lined by maroon and gold Boronia, where she and her sisters used to play and catch gilgies.

One of the boys the three sisters grew up playing with, Phil, lives on the farm opposite. He farms marron and grows garlic and limes and oranges, now. He and his wife are firm friends with my parents, and we often go down south to stay in the shearer’s quarters on his farm. They talk about the old times like they were
yesterday – the trips to Mount Barker on the old school bus, the expeditions through the bush in search of secret places. The boozy nights their fathers enjoyed and their mothers endured.

One day, he takes us for a short drive to a rubbish tip that’s been frozen in time. The virgin scrub hides glass bottles and containers and kitchenware straight out of the 1950s. There is even the rusted body of an old truck. I am fascinated because of how foreign the objects are. My mother is fascinated because they are so familiar. I ask Mum what it’s like to go back and see the place it is now, forty-six years after she left it.

‘It was peculiar to find nothing up at the house block,’ she says, ‘like a piece of my life had been erased.’

The house itself, though, hasn’t been destroyed. It has a new life. According to Phil, it has been relocated to Rocky Gully. My mother is far from reassured by the fact that the house, at least, still stands:

‘Bloody cheek’ she says, ‘that was my house.’

Despite her annoyance, though, she always lapses back into the memories that bind her to her childhood home. She talks about visits from her cousins, who they would teach to drive the tractor, milk the cows and go gilgaying.

‘They thought it was really funny to pick up the piglets by the ears and make them squeal’ she says in disdain. She recalls feeling out of sorts when they returned to the city to visit family – she wasn’t used to the bustle and haste, and missed the farm.

When she was on the farm, there was plenty to do. If she wasn’t helping her mother bake morning tea and taking it up to the shed for smoko, she was building tunnels through the hay bales, pretending she was a Rat of Tobruk, like her father in the Second World War. Like any little girl, she loved to have tea parties, but unlike
other little girls, she didn’t mind sharing a cup with the crawly creatures that inhabited the hay bales. She was lucky, ‘I never came face to face with a snake.’

Having to leave the farm, for my mother, was a wrench. The family moved to Geraldton due to my grandfather’s ill health – he needed more sunshine. Mum resented the move.

‘The decision was never mine to make. I was quite prepared to go to Agriculture School and learn how to run the farm.’ It wasn’t to be, though. Little girls didn’t grow up to run farms in the 1960s.

Over the years, resentment has dulled to nostalgia, ‘In hindsight, I’m glad things happened as they did. I always loathed Geraldton, though. I am still not fussed on it now.’

Nostalgia is a funny feeling. It’s a sadness and a happiness all at once, and it swells and abates, like a tide. Nostalgia bears its roots in the ancient Greek word nostos: "return home.” It’s not the fabric of a house that makes it a home, though, but the memories and experiences that reside in that fabric, and it’s not easy to be pulled from something you’ve been sewn in to. The childhood home my mother knew is gone now – it lives only in her memory, and the memories of her sisters and mother.

So, years later, we fill these pages with strange memories. It knits together, it has purpose. The words belong. The words are stitches sewn into strange pages. Blocks of white develop patterns and build a home, but it won’t be the same upon return. History, though, has a mind to repeat itself. It breaks and reforms, year after year, like a fragile memory from the distant past that crops up in a daydream on a breezy September afternoon. History whistles and hums, and sometimes we don’t hear the echoes until years later, when we ourselves have become a victim of those breaks and reforms: those repeats.
My own experience of childhood home mirrors my mothers’. The place my Dad built holds similar experiences and memories, and feelings of resentment and loss when I moved away. I can see the parallels, now, a decade later.
Part Two: The Place my Dad Built

A decade ago, a place existed that can’t anymore.

Ink seeps into paper like people sink into place. We work hard to make somewhere our home, whether consciously or not. It’s how we define ourselves: via the world around us, like a membrane between ourselves and other people. Place is how we fill up a blank document and print ourselves out and hand ourselves to family and friends – to strangers. It is how we say here, this is who I am. This is why I think this way, because I was here, and I had a home that this place let me build into it, like a tree whose branch was just right for a nest. I just had to find the right materials and learn how to weave them together. I am this way because the home I once knew now only lives in my memory.

Place changes, and memories change. Both diverge and evolve, together or apart. Memory is never frozen. There is no such thing as the perfectly remembered moment or time or place. There is familiarity with an instant, but never true knowing.

I remember my childhood home in uncertain detail: in circles that break and reform. They blur and consolidate into strange masses of space and time. Moments and memories link and break. Cracks are appearing and air is escaping and prizing the details apart and moving them to places they were never meant to be.

These white blocks, then, will be a new home for an old home: worthless pieces of paper for a place that no longer exists. I can’t trust my memory to keep it intact.

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Queensland: the state name. That’s where it was, this precious place. Four thousand kilometres from where I sit now, printing ink onto blocks of white like empty clouds.

We’re going home. It’s a long drive, but we’ve done it before, countless times. The Nullarbor seems to go on forever, but four hours of straight driving and it’s over. Wedge tail eagles flank the soft shoulders of the road as tyres hum along burnt bitumen. An emu, hit by a semi-trailer, sends clouds of grey-brown plumes spiralling into a feathered cloud. As always, we are greeted by an endless parade of road kill. The truckies tell us there’s a long way to go, but only a few more days and we’re almost there. Eat a grilled cheese sandwich, stretch stiff legs and keep following the highway east. Where we’re going, the sun rises above the ocean.

We stop every few hours. I try to eat a banana at a resting-bay near Broken Hill, but a sand storm whips up and covers us in grit. The thermometer on the dash reads over fifty degrees Celsius. Thank God for the air-conditioning. Just keep driving – Cobar, Bourke, Moree.

We cross the border – the third for this trip. Trees start to replace the scraggy bush of outback New South Wales. Almost home.

Don’t be tempted by the Bunya Mountains. You know the scrub turkeys still scramble in the undergrowth, building their giant mounded nests beneath a canopy of Bunya Pines. You know the Satin Bower Birds still scavenge for electric blue treasures. You know the kiosk still sells plastic cups of seed to excitable tourists, eager to feed the lorikeets that scratch the bare arms of children. The posh visitors, they will take a horse and cart ride through the park, pulled by Clydesdales that click-clack along the road. They still do that. Don’t they? It snowed there, in the mountains, last winter. Snow in the sub-tropics. Snow in a rainforest. I wish I’d seen it.
We drive through Kingaroy, now. Pass the shopping centre and the drive-in bottle shop and the peanut silos that stand like fat white sentinels above the town. I hold my nose when we hurry past Swickers on Barkers Creek Road. We’re following a pig truck. When the truck turns in, keep going. The navy bean and peanut fields start to unfurl around us and, as we descend into the valley, a patchwork of red and green and brown will open up.

Keep going.

Pass the road that leads to the rubbish dump. The ironbark trees start to close in and the car starts to climb. When we almost reach the top of the hill, Mum turns down Wattle Camp Road and plunges us back into the valley again. We drive straight for a few kilometres, and then take a left. One more kilometre – just one.

The place that my Dad built starts with a wire fence around the perimeter.

Here, time passes in heartbeats, not hours.

A green letterbox with a ‘no junk mail’ sign. A front gate, silver steel and hinged on the right.

Kilometres become inches.

A driveway running the length of the front paddock, pot-holed and rough from years of flooding.

Trees become fibre and leaf and sap.

A week of driving and we’ve made it home. It’s a small patch of land – eleven acres of Queensland, three hours from the sea, east of the Great Dividing Range. But what does it matter, the exact location. We’re here, home: a place that’s lost and found all at once, and measured in heartbeats, and broken in time.
Here, familiarity is woven together with uncertainty: opposite forces moving us forward. We had years of drought and flood, fire and frost. Equilibrium isn’t a word this place recognises. Still, we made our own patterns and adapted to this strange parcel of land. We had more than a decade of circles that would break and reform. Broken and reformed, year after year, until we were pulled away.

1992. There’s nothing here. Not in my memory, not on the ground. A wild block of bushland that knitted to the land around it until the council divided it off and sold it as a package. A rough parcel wrapped in the sparest of string.

Do something with it.

My Dad has a video camera. It becomes hard to separate memory from digital images when your actions are wound onto film. It helps here, though. We have video of bulldozers clearing trees to make way for a house plot and a dam and a vegetable patch. We have video of a team of men laying a cement pad for the shed, and of grandad welding steel frames. We have video of our temporary home – a caravan – a small patch of grass taking hold at the bottom step. Eventually, a green carpet will cover the bare dirt. There is video of my Grandma asking not to be filmed. ‘What do you want my picture for?’ she asks, time and time again, followed by an exasperated giggle. In each recording the thunk of hammers and the whistle of drills meld with the creak of tree branches and the never-ending ruckus of cicadas. We weren’t shattering the silence, just adding to the noise.

I have baths in a wheelbarrow that doubles as an outdoor cot and triples as a wheelbarrow. I eat eucalyptus leaves and my grandma pushes me around in a pram - according to film. At least these images can transform into certain memory. These memories of people and places that no longer exist.
Dad builds a house with a veranda running along three sides. The front is where we have our barbeques on Sunday afternoons after he gets home from rifle club. Right in the centre is the front door, which leads into the dining room and lounge and kitchen. In winter, life revolves around the Aga stove, which becomes a workbench in the summer.

Our television is an old box – the type that comes without a remote control and seems to have been around since the beginning of television itself. It has big silver metal buttons, a sliding mechanism for the volume and a thick, convex screen. We get the main stations, and spent countless evenings watching Better Homes and Gardens and Something in the Air. Every Saturday morning, I sit in my beige plastic swivel chair and watch cartoons: Cow and Chicken, Hey Arnold, Arthur, PB&J Otter, The Animals of Farthing Wood...

The hallway leads through to the laundry, bathroom, spare room, main bedroom, and my room. I lie in bed at night at stare at the sky through my big double windows, scared to close my eyes, scanning the darkness for asteroids. I stare for ages, gripped by some strange fascination and terror. The Unknown.

I often wake up to the sound of my Mum ditching pairs of socks at her window. I get up and hop into her bed, delighting in the anticipation. Soon enough, soaring down from the back paddock, comes a Peewee. They nest in the tall Ironbarks and, catching their reflections in our windows, mistake them for an enemy bird, coming to pillage and plunder their nests. Without fail, they put an end to Spring sleep-ins. When Mum’s sock drawer finally empties, we get up.

In the beginning, the air is cool and the breeze is stiff as it slaps the earth awake after a long winter. Our garden beds are lined with heavy shards of granite, rough like reptile skin. Quartz crystal tessellates with the black and grey and white surrounding it. In places, native pigface escapes these defined borders, and their hot-pink, spongy flowers look almost obscene against the burnished monochrome rock.
Native bees, black with glossy paper wings like pastry crumbs, buzz against the flowers and burrow deep into forests of stamen. They soon emerge, their tiny back legs weighed down with pollen in a neat yellow ball. Jonquils push their shining faces towards their hot twin, soaking up the early heat of spring sun. The fruit trees in our orchard, just beyond the clothes line, are starting to flower. The buds will be bitten off by frost a few times, before they’re allowed to take. The chickens hunt for worms after the rain showers have softened the ground. Roots and branches extend, stretching after a long rest.

After a few weeks, the butcherbirds arrive, bringing their new babies. They have nests in the vacant block next door, high in the canopy, out of the way of feral cats. Their whistles and calls bounce through the thickening air week after week, and every day we coax them down to our veranda for bread crumbs, or bacon rind, or lumps of fat. We cajole the small black and white birds into perching on our knees, but they sit there just long enough to pinch a morsel of food with a hooked beak before they dart away. They’re not afraid of our blue heeler, Molly, who’s always lazing at our feet.

I spend a lot of time outside playing with Molly or wandering around the gardens or riding my bike in well-worn circuits. There are no other kids, so I have to be happy with myself.

Most of my time is spent in the closest thing I have to a tree house: a tank stand. I spend hours gazing into the bush from the railings, or swinging about like some lunatic monkey with an Olympic dream. One day, early in the morning, I notice something odd. Our black and white cow is wandering towards me with something bobbing alongside her. She comes closer and I realise...she has a tiny brown calf. We didn’t even know she was pregnant. This was to be the first of her escapades into neighbouring paddocks for forays with (I assume) rugged and handsome bulls.
My first experience of death is part of the reality of life on a farm – they are always jammed together here. We keep our cows for meat, but I don’t think about that – we just have cows that wander around, enjoying themselves. One day, about mid afternoon, I hear a shot. The butcher had come. For the next week, we had a trailer-sized refrigerator in our front yard. I hoped that the kids on the bus wouldn’t know what was in it.

This happens several times, but I never get used to it. I watch, once, just to see what happens.

I sit on the trailer – after the shot has been fired – and watch as the butcher slits open the stomach to reveal a belly full of undigested grass. Intestines slide out and mingle with the blood and dirt on the hard ground. I watch as he ties the legs together. I watch as the carcass is winched onto a frame and hung upside-down.

Soon, the time comes for my little brown calf. I feed her corns plants through the fence and gaze at her big, doleful eyes as she munches away.

I don’t like steak. It sizzles and fizzes on our small gas barbeque on a Sunday afternoon, adding to the heaviness of a summer day.

The heat arrives before we can enjoy the comfort of spring. White blocks of cloud promise shade but can’t beat off the blinding heat of a too-close sun. Air sticks to skin and clings to pores. Storm clouds build up all through the day until the sky is filled with a bilious, grumbling mass of pressure and steam. Often, the clouds won’t break, and we’ll suffer the humidity through the night. This happens week after week, month after month: this promise of rain, this static tension that remains unbroken. Forks of lightning strip and stretch the atmosphere, but still no rain falls: a drought year, again.

One night, lightning strikes a tree not far from the house. My whole room lights up like daylight for seconds. I sneak outside and watch the storm. Dad had
taught me how to measure how close a storm was by counting the seconds between the lightning flash and the first rumble of thunder. Soon enough, the storm passes, and I crawl back into bed. During the day, the sights aren’t so spectacular.

The Rhodes Grass fades to a pale yellow, but still the tufted tops stand tall. Any water in the front dam soaks into the earth until all that remains is slick mud, and then cracked clay with a fine layer of dust. The cows wander across its bed, nibbling at any foliage that happens to grow. A pair of Willy-Wag Tail build their nest in the fork of a small sapling on the bank, twitching and twittering as they assemble twigs and leaf material. They’re joined by an orchestra of cicadas, so loud that we have to raise our voices to hear each other talk when we’re outside. In a dry year, only the crows find enough energy to gargle and croak in the branches above us.

The break happens. Eucalypt leaves, pale green-blue and slender, quiver under atmospheric strain. The crows are silent. The cows are not. Everything stops.

A raindrop. Another. In a matter of moments, the thunderheads have broken and water sheets down from its prison. Rivulets start to trickle through the cracks that had opened up after the first spring showers. A downpour that’s over in the time it takes to gather the washing off the line. Dad rushes around outside in his burgundy-coloured rain jacket and bare feet, clearing the drains blocked with leaf litter and debris. For a while, it stops, and then starts again. A few days of this, and the Willy-Wag Tail’s nest is inundated with flood water swirling with branches and foam.

After the days of rain, the cane toads, in a united frenzy, lay their eggs.

Droplets of water hang from the passionfruit vine, its fruit drooping like golden orbs from the vine-smothered pergola. A green tree snake, bright and alert, hides in its twisting branches. A Coucal Pheasant perches in the mulberry tree and haunts the flattened air with its cries. Green tree frogs croak in endless circles, soon
to be outdone by the rivers of baby toads that will grow into swarms of hump-skinned adults. The whistling ducks arrive, their flared plumage catching the light that breaks through thick layers of cloud. They feast on insects, but give the toads a wide berth.

In the steamy aftermath of flood, for a while, the ground is soaked. Trees and plants grow in a desperate fury. The vegetable patch springs to life, and we have fresh food every night for dinner: squash, silverbeet, broadbeans, pumpkin.

One afternoon, I find a sugar glider tangled in our fence. It struggles as I step near it, and bears a set of tiny teeth. I fetch Mum, and she brings a pair of scissors and a cloth. Once the glider’s face is covered, he calms down a little, and Mum cuts his tangled fur from the barbed wire. We take him to the shed, and put him in a cardboard box, wrapped in a towel. He seems okay, though, just a little shaken up. We let him go.

Dad’s shed is a treasure trove – sacred ground. My dad has his fiftieth birthday party here, when I was three years old. My earliest memory: wandering around in our shed filled with strange faces sitting on camp chairs, drinking home brew and laughing and trying to coax me into their laps.

The shed is huge. It doubles as a garage for our little blue Holden and Tojo, Dad’s truck. It has a workbench and a lathe for woodturning. It has an industrial-sized drill and tools that can do any job.

I love to help Dad pop bottle caps on to a new batch of beer bottles. He makes ginger beer, too – for me. He spends hours at his lathe, turning wooden cups and bowls and clock faces. It’s my job to vacuum up the shavings. The dust and sweet smell of camphor laurel makes me sneeze.

Dad plays music as he works. Country and Western tunes that echo around us: Slim Dusty, Roy Orbison, John Williamson. The place around us listens too,
hearing music for the first time since Aboriginal people disappeared from here. I often wonder about them – how they lived here, on this land. I wonder if they delighted in the tiny orchids that appeared in Spring, or discovered the giant cracked boulders not far from our back fence. I wonder if the father’s taught their children to suck on a rock if they felt thirsty or not to grab at the sharp leaves of a grass tree. I wonder if they ever sat and watched a cicada crawl out of its tired brown shell, revelling in its new wings that shimmer in pastels. I wonder if they watched a sugar glider building its winter home before the chill comes, high up in the branches of a Eucalupt tree.

In the front garden, snow covers the ground, cool and papery. It’s easy to slip, here, if you’re not careful – but shoes aren’t essential, feet won’t get wet. The Cassia is seeding, leaving snowy flakes in a shining carpet on the cool ground. Autumn days are slow and breezy. I spend an afternoon with Dad in the shed. We have two thin, sturdy stems from a Eucalypt sapling, one a little shorter than the other. We make a cross with them, taping the shorter stem a third of the way from the top of the longer. I fetch a black plastic bag from the kitchen, and we cut it to size, stretching it over the wooden frame. Dad has an old fishing reel which I wind with kitchen string. We attach that to the frame, as well, and it’s ready. We trudge through our back paddock, all the way up to the back fence, and jump over. Our neighbours’ paddock grades up to a gentle hill, and we make our way to the top. I take the head of the kite, and run into the breeze.

The end of autumn comes fast, and we gather up fallen branches and leaves and heap them in a patch of dirt in the front paddock. Night falls and our neighbours come to enjoy the spectacle, beers in hand. The other kids and I, we rush around the paddock in our bare feet, seeing by the light of the bonfire. At first, a raging torrent of heat and gas and orange light hacks at the darkness, but it soon dies down and we can enjoy the gentle warmth. My Dad catches a cane toad that has ventured close to the light, and throws it in the fire. It pops.
Winter is a fast death here. Frost covers the ground, each blade of grass covered in a fine, white dust that cuts deep into its veins. By mid-morning, the sun has melted it away, but the ground stays cold. A few more mornings of this and the grass will be chipped and brown. Even the green ants shiver in their relentless march between their nest and our vegetable patch.

All through the day, a thick smoke drifts across the yard and disperses into the Ironbark trees in tendrils that wrap around corrugated bark. We keep the Aga stove stoked with wood that sits in a giant heap up near the chicken yard. In the afternoon, after he returns home from work, Dad trudges up to our wood heap with the wheelbarrow and spends an hour splitting huge hunks of eucalypt.

The sound of metal biting dry wood echoes down the valley, joining a chorus of black cockatoos as they, too, rip wood apart, although they search for grubs. Their echoes return and repeat, and the axe returns and repeats. This is a ritual that ruptures days into hours: the hour we spend splitting wood – an essential element in our winter lives that, year after year, transforms our place into our home. As the sun dives and the cold air gathers around us, I help Dad stack the splintered wood beside the house, careful not to draw blood against the already reddish timber.

Inside, life revolves around the Aga. The kettle sits on the cast-iron top, always ready to be boiled. School clothes are hung over the railing each morning to be warmed – a small comfort before the walk to the bus stop on Fridays. Back home in the afternoons, we brew hot cups of tea and wonder if the spring rains will come soon.

2003. These white blocks have meaning, now. These words I’ve printed on pieces of paper – do they have more or less worth than the paper itself? They are just uncertain memories, after all, that are broken and reformed, year after year.

Eleven years since we arrived here and now we are pulled away, and then a decade passes in a new place: Perth. A new house, a new life; new lessons in being lost. The experience of moving away from my childhood home has made me realise that the notion of home is an ideal. Some, like myself, have it in childhood, and hope
that one day that place will replicate in the feeling or look or meaning of another
place. Others rely on the idea that home will be found in death, or with the
culmination of different circumstances tying together at a specific time that is ‘meant
to be.’ Wherever we search for it, home is something that may be fleeting or
everlasting. It may be sought, or it may be evaded. The only thing we can be sure of
is that the notion of - and need for - home changes with each individual. Place
changes, and the memory of home never stays the same. I look back and see my own
memories: blocks of white filled with lines of text that only hold value to myself. I
look forward and see blank pages, and see places that don’t yet exist.