

Michael Meehan grew up in north-west Victoria. His first novel, *The Salt of Broken Tears*, won the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the 2000 New South Wales Premier's Awards. He lives in Melbourne. This is his third novel.

MICHAEL MEEHAN
DECEPTION


ALLEN & UNWIN

For Michele Sommer

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He wrote of stones. Sebastien Rouvel. In one fragment after another he wrote of stones drawn deeply from a country of felled walls and scattered rocks. He wrote of how he walked hand in hand with another across fields of broken stones and fresh growths of crumbling rock, stooping now and then to break bright flowers from fragile stems, handing as a bouquet to the one who walked beside him nothing but sharp stalks, thrust like jagged spikes from a burning fist, the stone petals breaking into dust upon the touch.

From the earth they drew a harvest. There being once a presence in that place and a voice which told of order. All these stones they now discovered just fragments of that image, shattered wreckage from the fall. Believing that if the stones were put together they might again make the image, and that the voice might speak again . . .

It was in the dust at Mount Deception and across these scattered stones that the children played for that last time, the dust coursing in the confused winds that skipped about them as they arrayed their final ring of stones. So it was, as Agnes later told, on that day when her mother and her sisters,

Colette, Geneviève and Clémentine vanished in the storm. She spoke of the children gathering the stones, of a dying lizard and a circle of bright rocks, of how the wind blew up and the earth began to run and the fire flickered and died and then flared again.

She told of the lizard clinging in terror to the end of a stick, the pup yelping and snapping, the children shrieking through the wind. She watched the three of them playing in the dust, a half-grown girl with two younger children, struggling to light a fire in the heat of a windy February day, the fire and the dust running about them not in steady sheets before the wind but in circles which chopped this way and that amid the flaking trees, the fire struggling to take hold and the lizard still clinging desperately, its jaws clamped to the far end of the stick.

Then fifteen and always a reckless tomboy of a girl, Agnes had ridden out along the creek bed on her horse, a biting hard-mouthed brute misnamed Princess, scaring rabbits with the gun, the rusting relic of a police pistol her father mostly used for scaring crows. So hot and blistering a day it was, with the sounds of doors crashing in the wind and windows slamming shut, the sky darkening against the flying dust and the loose iron beginning to flap and shriek. She soon brought Princess back, nostrils flared, neck arched as always against the dragging of the bit, back through the wind and shrieks and laughter and the yelping of the pup, to be tethered at the garden gate. She took the pistol to its place behind the kitchen door. In the distance she could see the smaller girls still trying to feed the fire, their pinafores dragged and tossed about them as they picked up sticks and tufts of withered grass, with Colette gone off perhaps to fetch some larger wood. Agnes knew the fire would never catch because the wind was far too strong, and the little ones, Geneviève and Clémentine, were now giving their attention to the stick and to the lizard, and the circling yelping pup.

Then it was that something happened.

This, so many years after, was what old Agnes told. There was the sound of a door crashing violently in the wind, and the sight of Monsieur Rouvel

breaking from the house. In blurred and moving shapes, obscured by the wind, she saw him stumble, crouching and limping as he always did, but this time almost falling from one verandah post to the next, staggering out across the stonewalled garden, steadying himself for a moment on the far gatepost. The children stopped tormenting the poor lizard, and all began to watch him as he peered across the yard. As though trying, through his one unshattered lens, to make some sense of what he saw through the wind and dust and debris. Then he stumbled through the gate and began to untie the pony, pulling and tearing and cursing at the tangled reins, shaking his head and shouting something to them that they couldn't hear.

All things became uncertain in the storm, and even more uncertain in the long tracts of time that ran between that time and the time of telling. Princess began to rear and sought to bite as he struggled with blinded awkward fingers to release her from the post. Agnes saw him move in front of the plunging horse and then to the wrong side, hopping and straining for a stirrup that was far too short, the saddle straining perilously against the girth, the unwilling pony twisting and stooping into the weight of his foot so that he was forced to turn within the arc of the straining horse, her eyes rolling in dread and anger as she twisted and plunged about him in this wheeling and ridiculous cursing coil of man and horse and dust.

He managed at last to rise into the saddle, with a last look to the girls, to Agnes with the pup now squirming in her arms, to the two younger children standing by their ring of stones and to their wretched captive lizard still clinging to its stick. He dragged Princess's head around, half falling in the saddle, his feet not yet in the stirrups, cantering at first towards them and then down into the bed of the creek, which led off towards the north and to the west.

Some fragment of a hand, a shattered shoulder, some edge or chisel's mark, as the pilgrims came to scour the deserts for these

scattered scraps of stone. All knowing in rage and sadness that the more they picked and foraged, the more fragments they discovered, the less truth they would find . . .

He rode out into the desert. Into the emptiness. His bones at last to join the scattered rocks. The remains discovered, 'disturbed by native dogs', months later. There being no-one to go after him, no-one to look for him, with all others soon vanished in a rush of baggage and the gig brought to the front, her mother's cheek wet with tears in a last rushed kiss, the gig then beating out and over the toppled gate, and off towards the south.

One

JUST OUTSIDE THE LONG grey walls of the old Bibliothèque Nationale, there is a little garden. The square Louvois. A place of refuge and fresh air for weary scholars, of gravel paths and flowerbeds, shaded by giant chestnut trees. There is a large and ugly fountain at the centre, with four half-clothed amazons in stone, the Loire, Garonne, Saone and Seine, holding the waters aloft. Within days of my arrival, I'd set up a routine, taking something from a patisserie in the colonnades of the Palais Royal, and coming back to eat alone and watch the old women—war widows, I was told—shuffling about and feeding the sparrows. The iron benches were mostly occupied by readers taking a few minutes of air. There was the odd *clochard*, those scrounging tramps in dark and ragged clothing, a few local workers, van drivers, local shop assistants and staff from the Bibliothèque, lazing over their lunch. Summer. Nineteen sixty-eight. The square Louvois, still a tranquil refuge from the rage, the stones, the burning in the streets.

Nick Lethbridge. Lawyer. From the far side of the world. A student now, in England, putting together a thesis on international conventions, in the first days of what I planned as a summer spent in France. Already rattled from misunderstandings in shops. Already exhausted from edging

my old right-hand-drive Renault through the streets, and hunting for spots to park. Already upset from a sorry battle with the library, a misunderstanding over my application for a reader's ticket, and I with scarcely enough language to sort it out, much less—it was tersely pointed out, as tempers frayed—take up scarce space in the Bibliothèque.

My arrival was soon noticed. A bundle of rags from an iron bench on the far side struggled up and began to trudge towards me. I judged what loose change I had, what fumbling would be needed to separate out a couple of francs. The rags, though, did not ask for money. He flopped beside me in an outrageous stench, and cleared his throat in a harsh roar of mucus.

—*Salut.*

I knew the stench of bodies long unwashed, how it invades the nostrils, the mouth, in too-familiar ways. How it clings to the hair and clothing and runs about the body, expelling other smells, all pleasing inhuman distant things like perfume or soap or flowers. How it assaults all the deep commandments of childhood, all the dictates of social life, carrying dread reminders of the club and bearskin, the fire and ring of stones.

The rags grinned. There was a cheeky tongue just visible, quivering between yellowed and broken teeth. Eyes peered out at me through a ragged thatch of hair. The rags moved and parted, and disgorged a grubby hand.

—*Monsieur.*

And that was how I first met Lucien.

I'd seen plenty of *clochards* around the streets before. There are thousands of them in Paris, begging in doorways, sleeping over the pavement grilles and stretched out along the benches in the metro, catching a few hours' sleep during the daylight hours, roaming the city at night to prey on the tourists and scavenge in the bins.

—What are you doing, in the library?

I had expected him to ask for money. My scruffy jeans, my straggling hair, my student air made me an easy target. I'd once been told I had a hungry look myself, with my dark hair and pale skin and hollow cheeks. A look to draw on the blind, the halt, the lame.

I replied tartly, before I'd properly heard. I scanned the square for some escape, my nostrils narrowing against the stinks that rose about us.

—But what is it that you are studying, exactly?

I looked at him more closely. I couldn't guess how old he was. Somewhere between thirty and fifty. Much of his face was covered by hair, a thick, uncut and uncombed tangle that had hardened into spikes; hair that had probably once been light brown but which had darkened in grime and oil into a dark and knotted mass. The part of his face that was not covered in hair was seamed and blurred with ingrained filth. I expected to see the red and weepy eyes of the helpless drunk. Instead, the eyes were bright, inquisitive, insistent.

—Are you an historian?

—Not really. I'm a lawyer. A sort of lawyer. A student.

The rags was still unsatisfied. I tried to pass him off with a few more hazy details, about my doing a bit of special research in Paris. The nineteenth century. Politics.

The rags asked for names, dates, further places. Pressing always closer. Reeking with intent.

I mentioned the Paris Commune and my interest in the fighting in Paris. I talked about the thousands of exiles who were sent out to the South Pacific and my part of the world in the years that followed.

—But who, exactly?

—My great-grandfather. It's a family thing. He was there. He was deported.

—A name, a name!

—His name was Duvernois.

The *clochard* edged even closer, the smells thickening with excitement.

—Duvernois. Duvernois? That tells me something, that does tell me something!

He scratched at his hair, his hands in fraying mittens. He started to scrape fearfully at his face, as though in search of something there.

—*Australie*, you say?

And at length, he offered a triumphant sigh.

—I know this Duvernois. I know about this great-grandfather. Duvernois. I've read things. He was a writer. Not an important writer, but a good one. Very young. Rochefort found him, building barricades. Had him write pieces for *Le Mot d'Ordre*, as I recall. Good pieces. He was an engineer—an architect? He might have been very good, had he not been shot. No, of course Duvernois was not shot. Of course—or you would not be here, no? Deportation. He was, of course, deported. Do you know much about the deportations? The thousands of political prisoners, after the fall of Paris, that were sent out to rot in New Caledonia? There's more, there's more.

His eyes were tightly closed. He ran his fingers even more fiercely through his awful thatch of hair, mumbling to himself, as though sifting through a set of files.

—New Caledonia. The Isle of Pines? Probably the Ducos Peninsula. If he had once been sentenced to death, it was most likely he was sent to Ducos. *L'enceinte fortifiée*. Not that Ducos was really fortified. Sharks, and tales of cannibals. That was all that was needed. Young Duvernois. Who was imprisoned and exiled, and escaped from New Caledonia with Henri Rochefort and the others. The one important escape. Duvernois was the silent one on the boat, the one we don't know much about. He was the one who did not come back, with Grousset and Ballière and Jourde and the others, to fight for the amnesty. He simply disappeared. The others were all famous in some way. They all wrote

books, when they got back. Histories. Even novels. But no-one ever asked what happened to poor young Duvernois.

He shuffled closer and put his hand on my arm.

—Why didn't he come back with the others, with Rochefort and Jourde? They all came home to France. Why didn't he come home?

—This is what I'm trying to find out. Why he stayed.

Duvernois, young Duvernois. Ballière and Jourde. The famous Rochefort escape. The ragged bundle shook with enthusiasm. He said he would soon tell me more. Mumbling, more to himself than to me, that he would have to go away and think about it, and that soon he would be able to tell me much, much more. That he had read everything written by Duvernois. Everything they had in there. He gestured across the road, to the Bibliothèque. The famous escape. The famous Marquis de Rochefort, who wrote a book about it. Three books.

—*Australie*, you say?

He chewed excitedly on the filthy rats' tails of his hair.

He would soon tell me all that I could wish to know. His name, he said, was Lucien. *Enchanté*. He grinned, and offered me, again, a filthy hand.

There is a further, a more distant beginning. The leather trunk. The trunk that my grandmother Agnes had kept up in a loft in the hayshed, on the far side of the world. Just outside Gladstone in the mid-north of South Australia, amid the flat and yellow wheatlands that ran down from the deserts in the north. The trunk that was brought down from the ruin of Mount Deception, up below the Flinders Ranges, many years before. It was full of dress-ups for me and my sisters when we were young: with high-heeled boots with long rows of buttons up the sides, leather leggings and wide straw hats with faded ribbons, dark floral dresses that smelled of must and damp, long coats with collars of fur gone stiff and rank, and piles of ancient yellowing underwear that had frayed and cracked along their folds and broke in pieces when we spread them

out. There were bags of trinkets, necklaces and bangles and medals and small metal caskets full of buttons and broken beads, ancient books with damaged spines and curling photographs and bundles of letters and small piles of documents all bound in strings and ribbons.

And with these things, the manuscript. In one of the large cotton drawstring bags were the bits and pieces left behind by the last visitor to Mount Deception, up beyond Quorn and Hawker and much further to the north, where our grandmother Agnes had spent her childhood. There was a long pipe with a broken stem, a folding knife with a wooden handle, a pair of spectacles with only one lens, and a tobacco pouch, long gone stiff and fissured, with a dry and hard-caked crumbling knob in it that might once have been tobacco. And with them, the yellowed pages, the hundreds of written pages of his manuscript, bound together with faded ribbon and stiffened lengths of string.

The paper was brittle with damp and age. Each page was covered with tiny handwriting, almost impossible to read, the writing running not just across the page but up and down the margin and sometimes in great circles that ran out from the centre, in widening loops that were finally lost at the far edge of the page. Stories there were, or poems perhaps, that filled the page and then continued in a thin and snaking scrawl that ran back to the top, turning upside down and then running in between the lines, so that you were forced to search between them for the way the story ran. And often, too, there was writing on the reverse, the ink seeping through to the first side, the jumble of letters then impossible to read and the writer seeming not to care but stabbing rather at his page, the nib dragging through the surface as he wrote.

He was a visitor from nowhere. Old Agnes told of how he stayed, of his writing in the half-darkness of his stone shelter down by the sheep-yards, the hessian curtains drawn against the light, with this Monsieur Rouvel, locked in with the heat and always working, as it seemed, on the same small piece of paper. Writing quickly, as though knowing his

time was short, with Agnes and her younger sisters watching sometimes from the window, his thick hair falling over his face as he sat scrawling away, squinting at the page, groaning and mumbling strange things under his breath.

The language had been lost, decades ago. The family kept a few familiar phrases, some letters, some old books. Agnes had once spoken a kind of French but had never learned to read it, and never passed it on. And even when I could read a little—schoolboy French, and not much more—I could make little sense of most of what he wrote. Even when I had worked out most of the words, the writings still held no kind of meaning, with each wild idea slipping off into another almost the moment it began. I read about silver obelisks of salt and iron, and voices crying from caverns or cellars far below the earth, about the partitions of the heart, and castles made of frozen tears.

While my sisters would play with the beads and buttons, the pipe and jewellery and old clothes, I used to take the papers to the shade of a pepper tree, and think of this visitor with the straggling hair, of the heat, the smells and hessian curtains. Unable to make much sense of the words, I'd explore the patterns, trace the jagged lines of thinking, hoping that these designs might hold some kind of meaning that was lacking in the tangled words themselves.

I felt always that the crumbling paper, the strange patterns on the page, the words that slipped and coiled and broke or seeped slowly into other words, must hold something that was closer, more like speaking flesh and blood, than the scattered stones far to the north at Mount Deception. An escape from all that was flat and empty, the dry rectangle wheatlands that were the lives of those to follow. The curiosity only grew with obstruction, the infection only spreading with each tangled fragment that I couldn't understand. Imagining, against all the protests of loving but puzzled parents, alarmed at these signs of deep distraction, that somewhere amid these shreds of yellow paper I would learn something of this family lost

to silence; something about a house that was quickly abandoned and a family divided, and then all gates shut on the past.

Against the ruin of Deception and Agnes's stubborn silence, against all the dry unpeopled country to the north, the vast plains of time and distance that now stretched between me and Mount Deception, I imagined that these shreds of yellow paper would one day help me put it all together. Thinking always, and against my solid and steady flatland childhood, that there couldn't be such wealth of mystery without some kind of meaning. That the less the bits and pieces seemed to hang together, the richer the whole pattern had to be. That one day when I'd gathered all the pieces, when I'd found out all there was to know, it would at last speak for itself. My world would then be whole, as solid and sure and seamless as it seemed to be for my parents, and for my sisters, climbing and shrieking and calling loudly to me to join them, in their gaudy fraying dress-ups from the trunk.

My new friend Lucien was a famous man. A famous scholar. Everyone who worked on French history found their way to the Bibliothèque Nationale, and everyone who worked at the Bibliothèque Nationale soon came to know of Lucien. In former times, they found themselves next to him under the huge cupolas of the *salle des lecteurs*, and were soon forced to move upwind. More recently, they would have seen him in the square Louvois, as they came out for air and exercise. And those who took the trouble to speak to him—those who clenched their nostrils and risked just the few short moments that it took to find out just who this Lucien was—would take back stories of him to others, who came in turn to the Bibliothèque and the square Louvois to keep an eye out for this tattered encyclopaedia expelled so roughly from the *salle*. Not that there was ever any move to have him reinstated. But popular indignation at what had happened had only added to his fame.

I was told the story of Lucien by another scholar, a foreign researcher I had met by chance, the day I got my reader's ticket at the Bibliothèque Nationale. I was working in the vast chamber where they brought you the old newspapers, turning the pages of the Marquis de Rochefort's *La Lanterne* as carefully as possible, when two pages stuck together. The deep silence of the room was broken by the sound of tearing paper. Across the table, another reader—the only other person working in the room—gave a loud and amused 'tsk, tsk,' and we began to talk. He was Canadian, a professor. His field, he said, was Condorcet.

He suggested coffee.

—Lucien? So you've met old Lucien? Well, perhaps he's not all that old, you know. They don't live long, these *clochards*. Lucien would not be forty. But he's an institution around here. I hope you didn't tell him that you thought he was a tramp?

I had not.

—Good. He calls himself a private scholar. But it's a long time now since he's been allowed in any library in Paris. He's living off the twenty years or so he spent here in the *salle des lecteurs*, reading every article, every piece of newsprint, every book in the whole goddamn library.

The Canadian was big and bluff, very formally dressed for library work in a grey business suit and escutcheoned tie.

—He used to be a scholar. In the normal sense, I mean. He wrote a doctorate for the Sorbonne. The big doctorate. On Auguste Blanqui, I think it was, and the Paris Commune. He became more and more involved in his work. Then he began to smell. It all got very difficult.

The Canadian paled at his own stinking memories of poor Lucien. He took a long gulp of coffee to steady himself.

—I should warn you, it can get on top of you, this sort of work. Month after month of it. It's a professional hazard. The boundaries get confused. You lose distance. Sometimes, he thinks he's back there, in

the thick of it, the barricades, the smell of cordite. Happens to all of us. Sometimes I think I'm more like Condorcet than myself.

He laughed heartily at his joke.

I looked at the Canadian, with all his comfortable distance, his suit and clean shirt, his insistent deodorant, his spotless tie. I thought of Lucien reeking on his bench, over in the square Louvois.

He sipped his coffee, and went on.

—One day, they told Lucien that too many readers were complaining. That he could clean up, or stay away. He chose to stay away. For a time, he was a kind of wandering scholar, moving around a shrinking stock of libraries that would let him in—the Bibliothèque Arsenal, Sainte Geneviève, the Comédie-Française, and finally the libraries of some of the religious houses, until he let them know his religious views. Lucien is one of your old republican anti-clericals. Have the heads off the lot of 'em in a trice.

When the Arsenal finally caved in to the protest and threw him out, he gave up altogether. He keeps up with things by picking the brains of people like you, over in the square Louvois. Out there, and in a dozen other spots all over Paris. Gives as good as he gets, too. Lately, the rough living has been catching up with him. People say he's getting a bit confused. One thing running into another.

I told him of my talk with Lucien.

—The Commune. Eighteen forty-eight. The Prussians. Dreyfus. You try him on anything. He's told me things about Condorcet that I never knew. Way outside his period. Way outside his field. He'll pick up a hint of something, and a few days later he'll be back with a mine of information, just dredged out of some dusty corner of his own brain. Or maybe he's got it all filed away, in garbage bins all over Paris. Soon, he'll start asking you to read things for him. You just wait and see. Always interesting things. Articles in obscure political journals that ran for a few issues somewhere in the early 1830s or 1870s, and then simply ran out of ideas.

The Canadian was plump and rosy. His admiration for Lucien, though, was unbounded and sincere.

—Oh yes, our Lucien is quite a character. Has he told you about his trips up to Montmartre? To the Basilica? Usually, he begins by telling people that. Something he's now quite famous for, as well.

—To Montmartre? Does he go there to pray? Some kind of commemoration?

The Canadian went off in hoots of laughter, sending his coffee splashing and putting the fine tie at risk. He mopped up with his paper serviette.

—You could say that. Some kind of commemoration! Yes, I guess you really could say that.

He saw that I was getting annoyed.

—Look, I'll let him tell you about it. I'll leave it to him to explain.

I am, I think, an Ishmael. A bit like poor Lucien. A wanderer. Born of a stolid race of stayers, but with some remote infection, some taint of long meandering in the blood. Teased from contentment by the spaces left by my grandmother Agnes, the oldest of the girls, the one who was left behind. Drawn by the gaps, the sudden awkward endings in what she told of Deception. Wanting, from early childhood, to know what really happened. Wanting to understand, indeed, why I should be the one to care.

I spent a lot of time with Agnes. More than any of the others. We would sit out on her verandah. She would work with her needle, measuring each careful stitch, and I would sit alongside, just swapping yarns, as she would call it, she in her bagging orange chair and me chipping at the edge of the planks of the verandah with my pocket knife, or fooling with a kitten and a bit of string. Often, we said nothing. Agnes seemed to feel it was enough just to sit and watch the plants grow, to watch as, day after day, the tendrils from the mile-a-minute would swing and coil and

find their place—a branch, a nail, a string of wire—to twine and dry and harden, with another wandering tendril soon reaching out and searching for a hold. This, and watching the summer flowers, the geraniums, daisies and petunias turning to the sun, and the yellow patches slowly spreading in the lawn as the summer heat beat on, the sandy patches that always dried out in the summer, no matter how much she sprinkled and watered in the evening shade.

Her usual place was in her sagging canvas chair, sunning herself in company with the cats, often with Tinker, the big tortoiseshell, basking in her lap. She would stroke him with her old and mottled hands, the cat kneading in bliss the cushion of her heavy thighs, his claws breaking on occasion through the dark floral of her summer dress and the thick weave of her stockings, to score the skin and break the summer peace. After a fond scolding and a heavy shake, the old woman and the cat would rearrange themselves, with the cat beginning then to purr again. Thoughts turning upon little. The cat kneading her thighs.

There was a bond between us. Not one we ever talked about, but one that she acknowledged in the things she did not tell the others, of her riding out on Princess with the crow pistol and her times down at the camp, her secret places along the creek where there was almost always water that the others never knew about, and the big rock where it was said the blacks used to go to die, long before the white men came. At those moments, she would speak in a voice that was scarcely her own, a voice retrieved from long ago, and together we'd swap tales of nests and conquerable trees, and she'd tell me more of the hills around Deception, and her sisters and her father, and the droughts.

Agnes's stories came in jagged fragments, rising out of nowhere and with no special end in view. In tales of how the sisters had played together in a barricaded yard, hemmed in by slabs of native pine. In stories of the old house at Deception, the shutters closed against the midday sunlight, and in the story of how she was once chased by a

wild cow she'd shot at with the crow pistol, the shot just angering it with all that noise and smoke, the sharp thump and the sting of the cardboard wadding. Agnes could tell a good yarn, giving you the yard itself, the rough bark on the slabs, the cranky cow with its wet nose and heaving flanks, her horse run off and she left hanging from the branches, scraping madly for a toehold on the trunk. It was always like that. She liked to keep things simple. She shied away from explanations. The pain of the family's sudden leaving was real enough, and she could talk about that. But she couldn't tell why it happened, or why she and her father were left behind.

Agnes's childhood had ended on that dusty day in February 1893. Waiting in an empty house for her father to return, with nothing to tell him other than that she had stood by the gate and watched them go. Just once, she told me something more about this leaving, of Monsieur Rouvel limping along the verandah and clambering awkwardly onto the sweating horse. It was something she saw through the dust, the biting sand that forces you to close your eyes or watch through slotted fingers. She remembered a door slamming, and her mother bursting from the house, striding over to where the younger children played. She saw the children called back to the house and, at last, her mother, her long dark hair unpinned and her burning cheeks striped by dust and tears, suddenly wet against her own in a last rushed kiss, telling her to wait, that she must tell Papa, that she must wait, and come with Papa. She saw a horse, strapped into the gig by Fritz and brought up to the front, the gig quickly loaded and the horse flogged on one flank and then the other with the loose lick of the rein, her mother standing unsteadily with the whip coiling and cracking high above her sisters' heads, the horse then twisting and stumbling its way over the toppled gate and out into the storm of whistling sand.

Within weeks of Marie-Josèphe's leaving Agnes was sent down to the nuns at Port Augusta, who began with strict determination to tame this

odd creature, wild as a young rabbit, her father a foreigner, and with a mother who'd committed the one sin that could not be forgiven: to run off in hard times. This was the end of childhood, with nothing left that you could call childhood, not the rapping of knuckles across the piano keys, the evening rosaries and the dressing screens, the white beds set out like slabs in a mortuary, and the hot tears going cold against the chill starch of the pillow. Wondering in the darkness where the others were and why she was not with them, what curse it was that had sent them away and what even greater curse had left her behind. Wondering about her sisters and Maman, about who was looking after Princess, and why Papa had sent her there at all, to learn things she would never need to know when everyone came back to Deception in the end.

I was the curious one. I've spoken of infection. Was it what Agnes told, or what Agnes failed to tell? I felt I'd spent my life as Agnes spent that lonely week after they left, moving through an abandoned house, following an absence that roamed from room to darkened room, peering into ransacked drawers and unmade beds, lying awake and listening in futile hope for the sounds of the travellers' return, as she must have stayed awake in the darkness of those seven uncertain nights, listening to the cracking of the cooling roof, hoping for the friendly sounds of dogs and harness, for some familiar form of movement at the door. Waiting in the empty house, with a saddled but riderless horse limping back from the west, and with no sign of Monsieur Rouvel. Waiting with all the windows closed and the shutters locked against the wind, the beds strewn with clothing and all the detritus of a rushed departure, the wardrobes gaping open and drawers dripping with abandoned clothes. Learning how to live without explanations, to concentrate on the things you could know and smell and touch, the banging shutters, the creaking iron, the horse with saddle twisted, its reins dragging, limping back into the yard.

A week it was before her father finally returned, making his way back with a hungry and depleted flock, threading his way back through

orchards of hot rocks that stretched for miles about them, making his way through wide and open fields that bloomed in red fragments, through broad paddocks richly sewn with stone. Back to the silent girl who waited in the shuttered darkness of the house, listening to the creaking iron, trying over and over the words which would tell of all that happened and still tell nothing, words which broke in pieces even as she spoke. Leaving me, so many decades later, still adrift among the fragments, amid the fag-ends of her stories, still struggling through a thousand further repetitions to peer more clearly through those cracks and broken edges. Leaving me to look again, from the very corner of Agnes's uncertain eye and through that one fraction of telling, towards the children and the lizard, the man struggling with that resisting horse, and the scattered ring of stones.