



ANDREW BOVELL has written extensively for theatre, film, radio and television. His stage plays include *Holy Day*, winner of the Victorian and Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and AWGIE for Best Play 2002; *Who's Afraid of the Working Class* (with Patricia Cornelius, Melissa Reeves, Christos Tsiolkas and Irine Vela), winner of the Queensland Premier's Literary Award, Jill Blewitt Award and AWGIE for Best Play 1999; and *Speaking in Tongues*, winner of the AWGIE for Best Play 1997. *Speaking in Tongues* has been produced widely throughout Australia, Europe and America. Earlier plays include *The Ballad of Lois Ryan*, *After Dinner*, *Ship of Fools*, *Shades of Blue*, *Distant Lights from Dark Places*, *Like Whiskey on the Breath of a Drunk You Love* and *Scenes from a Separation* (with Hannie Rayson). Screenplays include *Blessed* (with Cornelius, Reeves and Tsiolkas; winner of Best Screenplay at the San Sebastian Film Festival), *Edge of Darkness*, *The Book of Revelation*, *Head On*, *The Fisherman's Wake*, *Strictly Ballroom* (with Baz Luhrmann and Craig Pearce) and the multi-award winning *Lantana*.

When the Rain Stops Falling, commissioned by Brink Productions, premiered at the 2008 Adelaide Festival of the Arts before touring to Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra and Alice Springs. A new production opened at Perth's Black Swan Theatre in October 2011. The play has won Victorian and Queensland Premier's Literary Awards for Best Play, Adelaide Critics Circle Individual Award, AWGIE for Best Stage Play 2009, Best New Australian Work at the Sydney Theatre Awards and the Victorian Green Room Award for Best New Play. In 2010 it was produced in New York where it received five Lucille Lortell Awards and was named Best New Play of 2010 by *Time Magazine*. It has also been produced in London, Canada, Germany and Japan.

When the Rain Stops Falling

Andrew Bovell



Currency Press, Sydney

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Front cover: Seated from left: Carmel Johnson as Elizabeth Law (older), Yalin Ozucelik as Gabriel Law. Standing from left: Neil Pigot as Henry Law (partially obscured), Kris McQuade as Gabrielle York (older), Paul Blackwell as Joe Ryan and Michaela Cantwell as Elizabeth Law (younger) in the 2008 Brink Productions, State Theatre Company of SA and Adelaide Bank Festival of the Arts production. (Photo: Wend Lear)

Contents

<i>Finding the Life in the Stone</i>	
<i>Chris Drummond</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Weathering the Past and Reconciling the Future</i>	
<i>Murray Bramwell</i>	<i>xiii</i>
WHEN THE RAIN STOPS FALLING	1

Finding the Life in the Stone

Chris Drummond

Andrew Bovell's *When the Rain Stops Falling* is a play born of collaboration. It is also a work that mirrors, in the urgency of its themes, the very impulse that fuelled its creation.

It started, for me, in 2004 when I was at a very low ebb for a number of reasons. Every night, with the news full of war and global warming, I was searching for ideas to develop in my first year at Brink... but inspiration wasn't coming my way. It was a bleak time for a lot of people, post-9/11, with the US war on terror and Australia's membership in the coalition of the willing, the looming catastrophe of global warming being ignored (or worse, denied), the continuing refusal to say sorry to the stolen generation, the ongoing mistreatment of asylum seekers, the inexorable spread of fundamentalism, absolutism, nihilism... so many people seemed to be asking the same questions: What to believe in... to hope for? What faith could we hold for humanity...or, *in* humanity? I'd never felt such a shared sense of despair, such emptiness. Out of the convoluted processes of my thinking I found myself reading *The Future Eaters* by Tim Flannery and started to get an idea about using the book as an allegory for the way we live our lives. While thinking about these ideas I remembered an exhibition of Hossein Valamanesh's work and his extraordinary images (which seemed like theatrical spaces waiting to be inhabited) and felt he would be a brilliant artist with whom to collaborate. As soon as Hossein came to mind, I realised that Andrew Bovell, whom I'd long admired, might respond to something in this emerging idea as well. The union between Hossein's installation work and Andrew's writing was one of those wonderful epiphanies: the spare elegance, melancholia and elemental Australianness of their aesthetics would combine with the contrasting qualities of Hossein's lyricism and Andrew's hard-edged dramatism to create a rich theatrical dialogue on which to found the ambitious new work that was forming in my mind. Quincy Grant, a great composer, musician and long-term collaborator,

completed the picture. Under the working title *The Extinction Project*, we began a conversation about a piece of theatre that could explore humanity's relationship to the planet, to the unknown and to one another.

The process of creating new work is a bit like Inuit carving, at least as I understand it. You do not simply take a piece of stone and say, 'I will carve this into a bear'. First you must search. Going out each day and searching and gathering pieces of stone of varying sizes and shapes, always looking for that special one. This searching goes on for as long as is necessary. There may be times when you revisit a particular stone, turning it this way and that, before setting it aside and heading back out. Then one day you pick up a stone, perhaps for the umpteenth time, turn it over and there you see it: a bear jutting out of the rock, waiting to be discovered. After the searching, all that remains is to carve away what isn't needed. Of course this, in itself, is another kind of search: a slow and delicate process in which the stone's inherent qualities, its grains and sedimentary lines, dictate and shape the figure that will eventually emerge. The Inuit call this 'finding the life in the stone'—drawing forth the figure that has been there since the dawn of creation.

With a similar understanding, Brink seeks, always, to cast as wide a net as possible in its search for a richness in theatre. To do this we bring together like-minded artists, from different disciplines and backgrounds, at the earliest possible moment—writers, actors, composers, designers—everyone responding equally to the initial idea. The crucial aspect of our approach is that we ask the artists to come with nothing prepared: to come with minimal research, with no preconceptions, no decisions and no solutions ready. We ask them to begin in a kind of emptiness. It is a daunting thing, to accept an invitation to begin a collaboration with so little momentum and so many questions: not just about the ideas, but about the process itself.

But there is a purpose to beginning in 'emptiness'. It requires both confidence in your fellow artists and, more importantly, it requires a deep sense of self-confidence in your own capacity and a lack of ego—both essential qualities for this kind of work. It is a testament to the generosity and openness of Andrew, Hossein and Quincy that they accepted Brink's invitation, and that *The Extinction Project* even made it to that first meeting. By committing to coming together in emptiness, a profound openness, trust and urgency were generated that sustained the artists throughout the project.

And so the searching began.

Early on, our conversations were broad and freewheeling. Andrew in particular worked hard *not* to have ideas, which, as he said himself, was difficult given that he is usually asked to do the opposite as a writer. In those early sessions, the thing that struck and inspired me was everyone's willingness to listen, reflect and wait, absorbing and learning how each other worked. Everyone was committed to finding the life in the stone together. We slowly developed a shared language and a unity of vision. As time passed and the searching continued, certain discoveries came to shift the direction of the work. One major turning point came nearly twelve months after our first conversations, via an email from Andrew:

Have just returned from Paris, which was so beautiful! Saw an exhibition there devoted entirely to the state of melancholy, which brought up so many thoughts about where I would like to go with *The Extinction Project*.

It defined melancholy not as a state of sadness but as state of deep reflection from which new thinking will arise.

It gave me a way of seeing the postmodern period or rather the post postmodern period as a time of great reflection from which we will emerge regenerated. And having been in Paris Chris, I am naturally drawn to the Enlightenment. What if it is not an age of despair that we are confronting but a new age of enlightenment?

Also have you ever come across the description 'The Children of Saturn'? It is a medieval reference to those who sit outside the mainstream and was generally used to describe those of a melancholy disposition.

It describes the emotional state I'm trying to capture.

This email inspired, infused and informed the work from that point forward. The notion of melancholy as a state of deep reflection out of which new thinking arises was a wonderful response to the personal and global despair that had originally fuelled the project. As well as this, the allusion to Saturn offered another thread that would have a major impact on the work. Seeing Goya's 'Saturn Devouring his Children' as part of the exhibition gave Andrew an image of 'eating the future'—a metaphor for humanity's relationship to the planet that referenced Flannery's

evocative title—while pointing to the human scale of the ideas we were exploring, the horrors visited upon children by their parents. The discovery of this image, which would eventually sit at the heart of the work, was a crucial turning point and yet just one example of countless such shared discoveries.

All in all, with everyone's schedules, it took nearly two years before we finally came together for a sustained period of work on the floor. Together—with seven wonderful actors: William Allert, Paul Blackwell, Michaela Cantwell, Elena Carapetis, Cameron Goodall, Carmel Johnson and Rory Walker; choreographer Rowan Marchingo; and designers Geoff Cobham and Gaelle Mellis—we set about generating as many images and ideas as we could during those crucial three weeks. Performance images, installation images, choreographic ideas, songs and musical ideas, narrative possibilities... it was open-ended and exhilarating work. Andrew was the driver of the narrative search and it became clear as we worked that he was reaching forward trying to put some flesh onto the bone of the emerging images in front of him... trying to find the order, the pattern that could bring it all together. Meanwhile, Hossein, Quincy and the actors, day after day, continued to infuse the room with images and atmospheres, embedding them into Andrew's imagination, tugging at him to continue to see things in a different light.

One example of the powerful nature of the collaboration was how Hossein's eye lifted the intensity of the actors' improvisations from the very beginning. I remember on the first day asking for tables and chairs to be put into the space for an improvisation exploring dual-realities. We were about to begin the first task when Hossein stopped me, walked forward and made a few adjustments to the placement of the tables and the chairs. Instantly there was a clarity to the space, a power to the configuration and everyone laughed in delight at seeing such beauty in the simple repositioning of rehearsal room furniture. The effect on the actors' work was extraordinary... there was such economy in Hossein's sense of space, so distilled and energised did it seem, that it immediately informed the tone and precision of the actors' work. It was an event that suited perfectly Andrew's detailed eye and over the course of the workshop this sense of distilled power continued to grow within every element of the work.

By the end of the three weeks Andrew came saying he felt he had found the pattern he was searching for, the framework of the piece. He

proceeded to lay out a series of interconnected narratives that were the first draft of the stories now contained in *When the Rain Stops Falling*. As he recalls it,

It wasn't the stories that mattered. I knew they would change and they did. It was the principle of how narrative would be organised... that the stories would unfold across generations and time periods and that they would be told simultaneously and in parallel... we knew or discovered that the work needed to reach back into the past and deep into the future... and on top of that I had this rich source of story, character and image that had been generated in the workshop.

The wonder of the collaboration for all of us was the way that so many of our shared discoveries were woven into the tapestry of those narratives. At the end of the work, with one last morning together, almost as an afterthought, we asked the actors to share one more personal story, this time of an incident of travelling with friends, from their teenage years—a way of exploring an emerging narrative about the journey of Gabriel and Gabrielle. The power and vulnerability of the stories shared that day was unexpected and deeply moving—all the more extraordinary, given the emotional exhaustion of the actors after three weeks of intense and confronting work. It was the final gift of the workshop, setting the compass for Andrew, and for the play, to speak of the unseen universes that lie, beneath the daily surface, in each of us.

Finally, Andrew entered the commission phase of the work and for quite some months there was silence until one day I received an email which said in part: '... the play is like pissing glass... I keep thinking that something is going to shift and that I will see the light but the thinking is turgid.' And here is the painful truth of the creative experience. Despite the enormous journey already undertaken, and the knowledge that there was real substance in his thinking and ideas, once alone, Andrew *had* to begin a new search that would prove just as long and difficult as the first. From this very dark place Andrew edged his way forward through the stories and characters, piecing the work together fragment by fragment. Slowly the play started to reveal itself to him through hard labour and a steadily growing stream of epiphanies. It was as if the work was demanding that he reach and reach before it would reveal itself to him.

But what he was carving was extraordinary.

When the Rain Stops Falling is a world eked out of a desire to understand the destructive nature of humanity and its capacity for compassion, transformation and survival. Through this collaboration, which often at the darkest moments led one artist to help reopen the imagination of another, an expansive canvas has been opened up, revealing a clarity of vision that is a testament to the power of the shared journey. For his part, Andrew Bovell, through his openness and skill as a writer and collaborator, has taken the threads and echoes of so many conversations and ideas and woven them into a story of his own making, but one that captures the collective dreaming of a group of artists and profoundly communicates that dream to its audience.

Adelaide

January 2009

*Chris Drummond directed the world premiere season of
When the Rain Stops Falling in February 2008.*

Weathering the Past and Reconciling the Future: Andrew Bovell's *When the Rain Stops Falling*

Murray Bramwell

It is not often we see a play that has its first scene set in 2039 and features a fish falling from the sky. But *When the Rain Stops Falling* is no ordinary play. Its genesis has been gradual, philosophically discursive and dramatically exploratory—and the result, in its voice, focus and form, is quite extraordinary.

This work had its origins some five years before its premiere at the 2008 Adelaide Festival. It began as a project based around discussions of *The Future Eaters*, Tim Flannery's book on environmental crisis, and involved a collaboration between Chris Drummond's company Brink Productions, the visual artist Hossein Valamanesh and the playwright Andrew Bovell.

The venture was well-timed for Bovell. As he recalls, it came at a time he was:

exploring this idea of superimposition to find a theatrical language that goes beyond naturalism, and that allowed me to tell more than one story by layering things on top of each other. I still wanted to tell a good story but I wanted the way it was told to be intellectually engaging.

(Personal Interview, Adelaide, 23/12/08.

All subsequent details and quotations used here are from this source.)

The project was slow to generate, going through extended periods of workshops and discussion. Part of Bovell's task was to find a focus for what was a very large and amorphous theme based around notions of the human species and extinction. He explains:

Climate change itself was never the theme. In fact we tried to avoid talking about the play as being about climate change.

The idea of extinction was the starting thematic point and this naturally led to a conversation around global warming and the potential ramifications of a changing climate. More importantly, it led to the use of the weather as a metaphor for the emotional state of the characters and the background to the playing out of their stories. The weather stood for something that was shared across the generations.

There was also the intrinsically pessimistic nature of the task.

The question we were considering was how were we as a species going to face the changes that were clearly coming? What is the value of life, and what if we lose life? There was a sense of helplessness, that it was too late, too difficult and that ordinary society lacked the capability to make these changes.

I was also looking at the Gaia Theory—the idea that the earth will survive whilst human beings may not, because the earth will adapt and change to get rid of whatever threatens it, including human beings. This was an idea I was simultaneously exploring in my screen adaptation of *Edge of Darkness* [the 1985 BBC-TV series about a privatised plutonium proliferation crisis, written by Troy Kennedy Martin. At the time of writing, the film, which stars Mel Gibson and Ray Winstone, is in post-production].

At the time, Bovell was living in Paris. It was here that he saw an exhibition on Melancholy and Madness which provided further inspiration for the playtext:

I saw that melancholy is not the point at which we become inactive, but the very opposite. It actually describes the deep thinking we need to do that precedes change. And I suddenly thought: ‘OK, we are feeling very melancholy about the world we actually live in, but what we are doing is thinking and imagining what the world must become, if we are to survive.

That brought a shift in the way I was looking at this work because it was no longer about warning and doom. This was going to be a play about the necessity to change, and the ability to change for the better. And that led me to look at the Enlightenment, another period of human transformation, if

you like, a huge and significant shift in the way human beings thought about themselves.

Another connection that Bovell makes—and it is part of the dark and problematic fabric of the play—is manifest in the secret and destructive perversity in Henry Law, a man untrue to his name and the most basic human precepts of parenthood. As the playwright explains:

I had decided I would use pedophilia as some kind of metaphor for our relationship with the planet. There was somehow a parallel—that what a man does when he treats a child in that way, when he goes against nature to that degree, it says something about how we as a species have treated the planet since industrialization. I don't think that metaphor was specifically brought to bear in the final version but it served its purpose in shaping my thinking. It also led me to the exploration of the father-son relationship. And I was thinking that if children represent our future, and we abuse them both literally and emotionally, what exactly are we doing to our future?

There is an audacity in this play, set in London in the 1960s and 1988, in the Coorong and Uluru also in 1988, in Adelaide in 2013 and Alice Springs in 2039—and there is a powerful recognition by Andrew Bovell that actions have consequences, both in human experience and in nature. We take the weather with us, and, in the future, lie reckonings brought on by events and actions of an earlier time.

The characters are carefully and poignantly drawn. As Bovell himself observes: 'Something of the secret of this play is that it treats its characters with respect. They were written with great care and emotion and a sense of the depth of their tragedy.'

From Gabriel York's intriguing (and theatrically bold) opening monologue, much is communicated in the lightly-written, carefully-cadenced duets, the dialogue between people lost from each other and themselves. A mother, Elizabeth, with too much in her heart to tell her dutiful son, invariably just says nothing or, worse, is all irritation at his curiosity. A young woman, Gabrielle, traumatized by the suicides of her parents and the depraved murder of her little brother, is in retreat from her emotions. Others, like Joe and Gabriel, try to connect with these difficult, damaged women, armed only with their constancy and self-effacement.

The father-son relationships are a series of betrayals and abandonments and in the play it is the sons who show forbearance and almost heroic patience. The timing of the premiere was another example of the synchronicity and extreme timeliness of the project: it opened just fifteen days after Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's historic Sorry Speech. Bovell comments:

I don't know whether audiences can make that leap from the personal journey of reconciliation to larger political issues, but when Gabriel York sits down and says to his son 'I'm sorry' he is apologising, not only for himself, but for all the previous generations. The parallel to the Aboriginal question is really strong for me and it conveys the simple idea that forgiveness is a powerful tool and so is reconciliation.

In *When the Rain Stops Falling*, as in previous Bovell texts like *Speaking in Tongues* (and its film version *Lantana*), there are bold connections made. Coincidence is a magical expectation and predestination is the road most travelled. Gabriel meets Gabrielle, Diderot's dressing-gown is discussed in London and Alice Springs, the sacrament of fish soup and small talk about the weather in Bangladesh are both a continuity and a dreamy déjà vu. And the future—2039, on the twelfth floor in Alice Springs, where the rain is torrential and fish are extinct (unless they fall unexplained from the sky)—is not like something out of *The Jetsons*.

As Andrew Bovell observes, 'If I wrote 2039 and tried to make it some kind of futuristic science fiction world, that would have been a mistake. I think an important meaning the play conveys is that our humanity will remain the same. We will be essentially the same human beings, preoccupied with the same sets of emotions we are trying to deal with now.'

In its understated way, *When the Rain Stops Falling* is a prophetic play, not in its insights about the future but, instead, into the present. It asks serious questions about how much we are in control of our destiny and how much responsibility we are willing to accept as members of our species. It also offers alternatives to pessimism. There is optimistic persistence in the young Andrew Price, even in the deluge of 2039. Bovell has said: 'Theatre can tell us hopeful stories, without avoiding the depth of difficulty. That's what I am trying to communicate—past

mistakes can be addressed in the future, and that must give us hope and a sense of purpose for why we are here.’

There will be other plays which explore these ideas and they are likely to come thick and fast as the global urgency of the subject keeps reasserting itself. But this Australian play must surely be acknowledged as a pioneering shift in our cultural and ecological consciousness. It is plainly written but it is also instinctive and subtly elliptical. It is tragic, and about betrayal and disgrace. It says people must change, and, by understanding their impediments and their unspoken history, they will. It says we must forget the chit-chat and really talk about our weather. For all these reasons, *When the Rain Stops Falling* is a watershed.

Adelaide

February 2009

Murray Bramwell teaches Drama at Flinders University and is a theatre reviewer for the Australian and the Adelaide Review.

When the Rain Stops Falling was commissioned and originally produced by Brink Productions in Australia, developed in collaboration with Hossein Valamanesh.

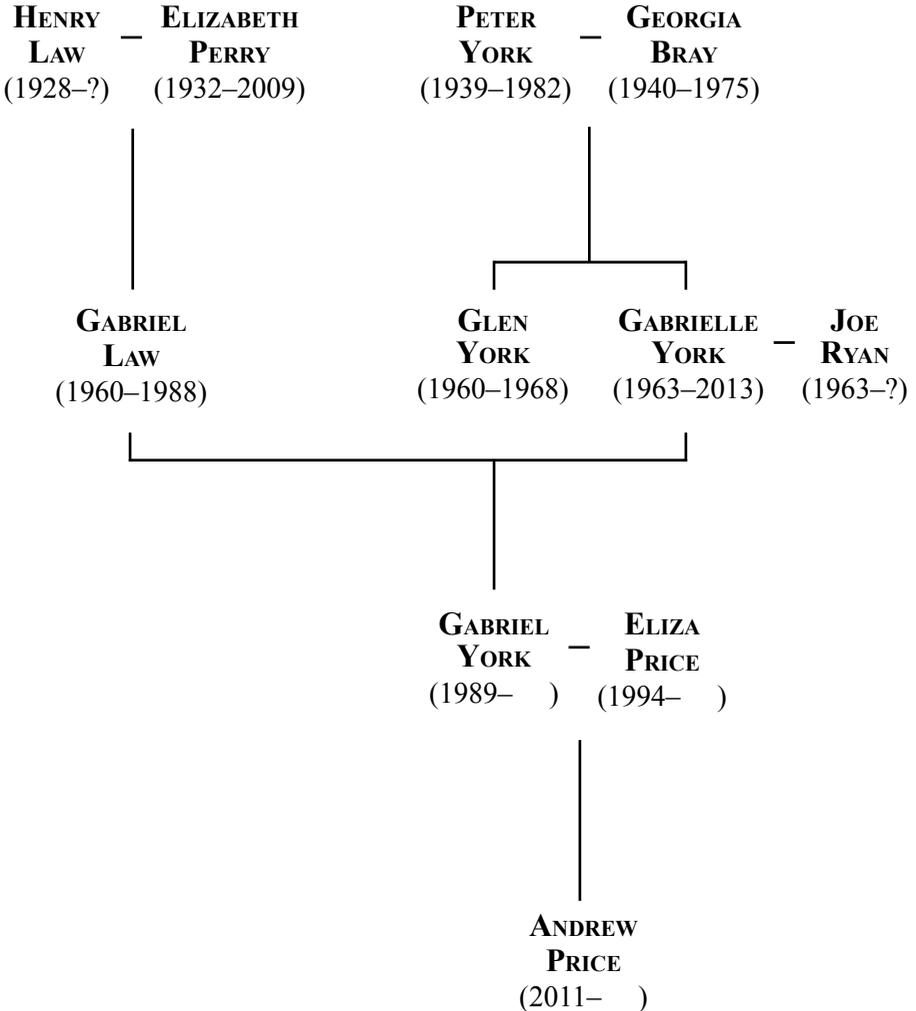
It premiered at the Scott Theatre, University of Adelaide, on 28 February 2008, co-presented by Brink Productions, State Theatre Company of South Australia and the 2008 Adelaide Bank Festival of Arts.

The cast for this production, in order of appearance, was:

GABRIEL YORK	Neil Pigot
ELIZABETH LAW (OLDER)	Carmel Johnson
GABRIELLE YORK (YOUNGER)	Anna Lise Phillips
JOE RYAN	Paul Blackwell
GABRIELLE YORK (OLDER)	Kris McQuade
ELIZABETH LAW (YOUNGER)	Michaela Cantwell
GABRIEL LAW	Yalin Ozucelik
HENRY LAW	Neil Pigot
ANDREW PRICE	Yalin Ozucelik
MUSICIAN	Quentin Grant

Director/Dramaturg, Chris Drummond
Designer, Hossein Valamanesh
Composer, Quentin Grant
Lighting Designer, Niklas Pajanti
Video Design, TheimaGen
Producer, Kay Jamieson

A FAMILY TREE



CHARACTERS AND SETTINGS

The play takes place between 1959 and 2039.

1960s: A small flat in London.

HENRY LAW, 40s

ELIZABETH LAW, 30s

1988: The same flat in London.

ELIZABETH LAW, 60s

GABRIEL LAW, 28, her son

1988: The Coorong on the Southern coast of Australia and Uluru.

GABRIELLE YORK, 24

GABRIEL LAW, 28

2013: A small flat in Adelaide and a nearby park.

GABRIELLE YORK, 50

JOE RYAN, 50

2039: A small flat in Alice Springs.

GABRIEL YORK, 50, the son of Gabriel Law and Gabrielle York

ANDREW PRICE, 28, the son of Gabriel York

The original Brink production in Adelaide used seven actors. The roles of Henry Law and Gabriel York were played by the same actor as were the roles of Gabriel Law and Andrew Price. As a result Gabriel Law did not appear as one of the ancestors in the final scene of the play. The Almeida production in London used nine actors, allowing the character of Gabriel Law to appear in the final scene.

Let us begin with

A STEADY FALL OF RAIN

GABRIEL YORK *wears a raincoat and stands beneath a black umbrella. People pass him by. Back and forth. Back and forth. Like GABRIEL, they carry umbrellas and wear raincoats. Their heads are bent against the relentless weather and against their relentless lives. Back and forth. Back and forth. Until in unison they stop.*

And GABRIEL opens his mouth and screams.

And a woman falls to her knees in the street.

And a fish falls from the sky and lands at GABRIEL's feet.

Black.

ALICE SPRINGS 2039

GABRIEL YORK'S ROOM

GABRIEL *stands holding the fish.*

GABRIEL: I do not believe in God. I do not believe in miracles. I cannot explain this.

It began with a phone call. It was Friday evening. About ten p.m. Which was unusual. The phone rarely rings and never at that hour. I was reading. As I do before bed. A history. *The Decline and Fall of the American Empire 1975–2015*. I am fascinated by the past. Which may, at least in part, explain the fish.

I have not seen a fish like this for many years. Not since I was a boy. I mean I have seen pictures of them but not one in the flesh. They are, after all, or at least they are meant to be, extinct.

Though I have heard rumours that they are still occasionally caught and served, secretly, in the most exclusive of restaurants, but only for the select few and only for those who can pay. If I was to purchase such a fish, if purchasing such a fish as this was still possible for the man in the street, it would cost me a year's wages.

I could never dream of affording such a delicacy. If such a delicacy still existed.

He looks at the fish.

Which strangely, it seems to do.

I hesitated before answering the phone. Wrong number, I thought. Surely. Who would call me? Me? At this hour?

It was my son. Andrew.

The name was his mother's choice. I had wanted to call him Joe. After a man I once knew. Joe was my stepfather and he was a good man. He told me he only swore once in his life and that was the day he met my mother. And he was always losing his hat. He liked to walk and one day he went for a walk and never came back so it was probably better that it was Andrew and not Joe.

I haven't seen Andrew for many years. I left when he was a boy. It was cowardly of me, I know. But I was not the fathering type and to be perfectly honest I thought the boy had a better chance without me. I sent money, of course. When I could. And a card. Now and then. For the first few years. I'm not proud of it.

Anyway there he was... this Andrew, this son of mine, on the phone at ten p.m. on a Friday night. 'Hello? Is this Gabriel York? It's Andrew here. Your son. I hope you don't mind me calling you like this. I hope you don't mind. It's just that I'm in Alice. And I was wondering if I could see you. Dad?' Only it went more like. 'Hello?... Is this... Gabriel York?... It's Andrew here... Your son... I hope you don't mind me calling you like this... I hope you don't mind... It's just that... I'm in Alice... And ... I was wondering if I could see you?... .. Dad?'

And my mind was racing, trying to stay calm, trying to take each piece of information in and just as I came to terms with one extraordinary fact, such as 'It's Andrew', he would say something else, like 'Your son', until I felt unable to reply and the longer I said nothing the harder it became to say anything at all and so I hung up. And returned to my book. *The Decline and Fall of the...*

I can't imagine what he thought of me.

I tried to concentrate on the page I was reading but found myself re-reading the same line over and over again, its meaning escaping me, when I tasted something salty in the corner of my mouth and

realised that I was crying. The tears were falling from my eyes, rolling across my cheeks and gathering in the corners of my mouth. And of course I knew I was crying because of him, hearing his voice, the voice of an adult now when I could only remember the child but it also felt like I was crying for so much more.

So I lifted the receiver and recalled the last number. ‘Andrew?... I’m sorry. That was unforgivable of me.’ And he didn’t say anything and I realised that he was crying too and I wondered whether his tears tasted as bitter as mine. I hoped not... ‘I’m so sorry,’ I said... ‘I’d like to see you very much. Why don’t you come for lunch tomorrow?’

And as soon as I had given him my address and hung up I knew it was a mistake. Lunch? What was I thinking? What would I give him? I can hardly feed myself let alone a son I haven’t seen for what... twenty years? What do you serve for lunch in circumstances like that? I mean lunch hardly seems the point.

And besides what will he think of me? Me? I mean what will he think of the clothes I wear? My suit? Which looks alright from a distance but up close is quite shabby and old-fashioned. Second-hand. Or third perhaps. But certainly not purchased new. And my shoes, worn at the toes and down at the heel. And will he notice that I don’t wear socks? Not if I don’t sit down or cross my legs. If I remain standing my son won’t know that I don’t wear socks.

And what will he think of my room? It isn’t much. It isn’t anything at all. A one-room bed-sit on the twelfth floor. Not the kind of place a father should live. Surely. And it needs a paint and the carpets are worn. And it’s dirty. To be perfectly honest, it’s filthy. In the corners and on the window sills and the ceilings. Layers of dust and dirt and grime and dead insects. Years of neglect. And will he notice the smell? Of a man who lives alone. I mean I wash. Of course I wash. But not often. There hasn’t been the need. Until now.

And so I began to clean it. The room. That night. A bucket of hot water and soap suds. I washed the walls, the ceilings, even the light fittings were scrubbed. I washed the door handles and the light switches and the dark corners behind the furniture. I scrubbed the table and the floor and polished the windows. I dusted the books and the lampshade and even took to the grouting between the tiles

with a toothbrush. And by morning, when I had finally finished I looked around and it looked exactly the same. So I found an old tin of leftover paint in the cupboard. White. Or off-white. Pure white being too stark. Like a hospital. And I pulled the furniture to the centre of the room and covered it with sheets. I took the pictures off the walls. I took the books from the bookcases. And I painted. And I painted. And I painted. And when I finished I looked around and it still looked exactly the same. Only whiter.

And I began to feel angry. Why did he call? Why is he doing this? What does he want from me? Money? Is that it? Does he think I'm worth something? Does he think I owe him something? And as I'm thinking these thoughts I'm also thinking how terrible, how irrational, how baseless, how shameful it was to have these thoughts. How shameful I am. How appalling I am.

What kind of man am I?

And then I realised that it was Saturday. He would be here in an hour and there was nothing to eat. I wanted it to be special. I wanted to feed my son something substantial. Something nourishing. Something to make up for all those meals I failed to provide. And there was nothing in the cupboard. So I went out. And it was raining. Pouring. It has been for days. Still is. The river is swollen and threatening to break its banks. Two of the bridges have already been closed. And I didn't know whether I would make the shops or even what I would buy if I got there. And it was too much. I just couldn't manage it. I couldn't look after him then. And I still can't. I just can't. And I screamed. I just screamed. I opened my mouth and screamed and a fish fell out of the sky and landed at my feet.

And it still smelt of the sea.

I don't believe in God. I don't believe in miracles. I cannot begin to explain how a fish can fall from the sky in a town surrounded by desert. I cannot begin to explain this... But now all that is left for me to do is to put the fish in the oven and wait for the knock on the door.

I know why he is coming. My son. I know what he wants. He wants what all young men want from their fathers. He wants to know who he is. Where he comes from. Where he belongs. And for the life of me I don't know what I will tell him. For whilst I know a great

deal about the decline and fall of the American Empire, my own past escapes me. All I have are a few fragments, a few bits and pieces I found in an old suitcase after my mother's death. I don't know what they mean. I don't know how to make sense of them. I stopped trying to years ago.

The past is a mystery.

GABRIEL *looks at the fish.*

And yet, perhaps it will be easier to explain than the fish.

ROOMS

ELIZABETH LAW, 60s, *enters and shakes the water from her black umbrella. She is the woman who fell in the street. She closes her umbrella and hangs it on a hook. She removes her raincoat and hangs it beside the umbrella. She crosses to the window and stares down into the street as*

GABRIELLE YORK, 24, *enters and shakes the water from her umbrella. She closes it and hangs it on a hook. She removes her raincoat and hangs it beside the umbrella. She crosses to the window and stares down into the street as ELIZABETH moves from the window into an adjacent bathroom. We can hear her urinating as*

JOE RYAN, 50, *enters and shakes the water from his black umbrella. He closes it and hangs it on a hook. He removes his raincoat and hangs it beside the umbrella. He crosses to the window and stares down into the street as GABRIELLE moves from the window into an adjacent bathroom as ELIZABETH enters from the bathroom and stops, lost in a moment's thought. We can hear GABRIELLE urinating as*

GABRIELLE YORK, 50, *enters and shakes the water from her black umbrella. She closes it and hangs it on a hook. She removes her raincoat and hangs it beside the umbrella and moves to the window and stares down into the street as JOE moves from the window and enters the adjacent bathroom as the YOUNGER GABRIELLE enters from the bathroom and stops, lost in a moment's thought as ELIZABETH takes a bowl and a spoon and fills her bowl with soup from a large pot on the stove. We can hear JOE urinating as*

ELIZABETH LAW, 30s, *enters and shakes the water from her black umbrella. She closes it and hangs it on a hook. She removes her raincoat and hangs it beside the umbrella. She crosses to the window and stares down into*

the street as the OLDER GABRIELLE moves from the window into the adjacent bathroom as JOE enters from the bathroom and stops, lost in a moment's thought and then he touches his head as if he has lost his hat as the YOUNGER GABRIELLE takes a bowl and spoon and fills her bowl with soup as ELIZABETH takes a place at the table and proceeds to eat her soup alone. We can hear the OLDER GABRIELLE urinating as

GABRIEL LAW, 28, enters and shakes the water from his umbrella. He closes it and hangs it on a hook. He removes his raincoat and hangs it beside the umbrella. He crosses to the window and stares down into the street as the YOUNGER ELIZABETH moves from the window and enters the bathroom as the OLDER GABRIELLE enters from the bathroom and stops, lost in a moment's thought as JOE takes a bowl and spoon and fills his bowl with soup as the YOUNGER GABRIELLE takes a place at the table and proceeds to eat her soup alone as does ELIZABETH. We can hear the YOUNGER ELIZABETH urinating as

HENRY LAW, 40s, enters and shakes the water from his black umbrella. He closes it and hangs it on a hook. He removes his raincoat and hangs it beside the umbrella. Then he removes his hat and hangs it over the raincoat. He moves to the window and stares down into the street as GABRIEL moves from the window and enters the adjacent bathroom as the YOUNGER ELIZABETH enters from the bathroom and hesitates, lost in a moment's thought. She places her hand on her belly as the OLDER GABRIELLE takes a bowl and spoon and fills her bowl with soup as JOE takes his place at the table and eats his soup alone as do the YOUNGER GABRIELLE and the OLDER ELIZABETH. We can hear GABRIEL urinating.

HENRY moves from the window and enters the adjacent bathroom as GABRIEL enters from the bathroom and hesitates, lost in a moment's thought as the YOUNGER ELIZABETH takes a bowl and spoon and fills her bowl with soup as the OLDER GABRIELLE takes her place at the table and proceeds to eat her soup alone as do JOE, the YOUNGER GABRIELLE and the OLDER ELIZABETH. We can hear HENRY urinating.

Then HENRY enters from the bathroom and hesitates, lost in a moment's thought as GABRIEL takes a spoon and bowl and fills his bowl with soup as the YOUNGER ELIZABETH takes her place at the table and proceeds to eat her soup alone as do the OLDER GABRIELLE, JOE, the YOUNGER GABRIELLE and the OLDER ELIZABETH.