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*The poems quoted throughout this book
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Details of these publications and the original
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DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER

The Time it Rained Fish is a work of fiction and all the characters are fictional. Historical events and some names have been used only as a context for the story and as an inspiration for the author who has created all else from imagination.

This is the start of the novel 'The Time It Rained Fish'

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Dead Women

*return
to brush
their hair.*

*They use our combs,
careful not to break
the teeth.*

*They borrow our brushes,
leaving a trace of hair
in the bristles.*

*They enter our beds
to feel the warmth of a man
they have almost forgotten,*

*but not forgotten.
They try on our gloves and soft
scarves.*

*They try on our nightgowns
and turn slowly
in front of the mirror.*

*In the morning we wake,
smooth out the gowns and scarves
in the drawer, sit in front*

*of the mirror.
We raise the brush or comb to our heads,
stop, notice the hair,*

continue.

-(Siv Cedering Fox)

Prologue

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it.

-(Seamus Heaney b.1939)

It was New Year's Day, exactly one year before the turn of this familiar century. The lilac hills of Keerrong in northern New South Wales scooped themselves upward, crowned and creviced with clumps of lean and ropy gum. There was a storm coming, and so the afternoon had weighed itself down with a silty sweetness and a tingling of the tongue. The scattered wives of the Richmond River timbercutters opened skewed doors and tentflaps to let in the pregnant air. Thunder grumbled inside a belly of granite somewhere in the far far distance, and globs of rain as thick as bantam eggs dropped into the leather and resin of the gully floor.

A woman and her two children huddled, deafened, inside one of those tents, while a debris-crusting pool swilled in under the stormward wall. The ashes in the cooking-place took on a bitter stink and the taut skin of the woman's cheekbones was damp to her own touch. The storm finished as brazenly as it had come. The last fat drops slid from vertical gumleaves, and the spongy bark of the trees was now darkened and velvet. Out on the hills, black and white cattle huddled, seemingly amazed by the pungency of those renewed slopes.

Black and white cows, electrified paddocks, a sharpish current in the air. And an infant girl, Wilhelmina, bunched and squalling wetly on a grey blanket and not yet one hour old.

George Fielding liked to remind Miney that the first face she ever laid eyes on was the broad glistening one of Lucy, wife of the Bandjalang King Billy. The old Queen had arrived with half a dozen almost-wild kelpies soon after the storm and had attended to the woman and children in the tent. Meanwhile, the dogs had trod and devoured a large bowl of bread left to rise on a slab of granite under the gums.

At the end of that week, George walked the nine long miles from the Richmond River to Keerrong to discover his third child and he set about building the first home. It was a stringybark hut with two rooms and an earth floor and a solid chimney built from creekstone. By the time it was finished there was another addition to the family and Miney was old enough to watch the way the steam lifted up off the hummocks of paspalum grass in the early mornings, and to listen to the lonely calls of the men, the way they vanished down the gullies on the cold air.

Constance had taught the older children to say their prayers each night, kneeling by the sides of the hessian cots that they shared, and it seemed to them that they might be speaking to a larger God than did the children in the town. A man sitting at the foot of a cedar with a pipeful might be a much smaller man than his cousin at the Lismore timberyard, and a woman boiling the sheets in the copper out the back was a smaller woman, made insubstantial and alone by the fading procession of hills, and those final rugged scarps to the west that up close were brutal surfaces of purple basalt with a desperate covering of ti-tree and saltbush.

When Miney squatted down the back in the dark each night, she heard fat grey kangaroos booming off up the slopes, and she would sink under the weight of the great dense sky, some stars so close you could touch them with the tip of your finger, feel the burning green iciness of them fizzing under your touch, while others sank back, and yet others swept the night with a trail of lonely vapour.

Later, tucked up in bed with Olive and Mary, Miney would watch the tall taper stretching and squatting. She watched the doubled shadow of her mother swaying on the wall as she nodded over the darning mushroom or reread a letter from Melbourne. The boys would be snoring and mumbling in their cot at the foot of Miney's and her sisters' bed when Father arrived and crowded the doorway with an armload of gum or bunyah, and sparks would flit and spiral upward from the hearth as he banked them carefully for the long night. When Miney was very small, she thought her father so magnificent that she wondered whether he might himself be the large God who had created this large place. A towering land that those faraway city people called the Big Scrub.

It was the sound of the rooster crowing in the morning that made the place civilised. Mother always said that if there was no crowing, then they may as well be in deepest heathenish Africa. It was the crowing that made a woman belong to her home. And the kerosene tins for washing out the back, the lacy newspaper devices on the kitchen shelf, the jam tin of parsley on the window and the framed photograph on the mantelpiece that showed a young woman resting an arm lightly on a squat Corinthian column, an elegant urn in the background and an oriental carpet rucked around her feet. An uncompromising wide mouth, she had, deep eyes and a dress of some dark heavy stuff, well-cut.

Olive and Arnold, being the eldest, could not be spared to go to the school at Keerrong, but Miney and Mary walked there and back each day. Father had said many times that walking down the gully was like being inside a big Cathedral. Miney always thought about the Cathedral on her way to school along the wide bullock road. The great trees lit up showing buttery and purpled flesh, and the day sat cool between those silent trunks. The two children breathed a vapour from their mouths, and when they spoke to each other, they whispered. The ridge of the Bunya Mountains in the distance still slept half in its own shadow, and the white farmhouses on the hills squatted in the dark. Threads of violet smoke filtered from stone chimneys to collect in pads over hollows. The voices of men and dogs would sound hopeful and lonely in the breathy expanse of the morning.

The small settlement of Keerrong finally appeared with its haze hanging over the grey roofs of a handful of cottages and sheds. There was the screeching and the whining from the timber yard, the steaming of the piles left by the meatcart horse, the scrambling of children in big leather boots, and the slopping of a bucket of bleaching-lye from a front step. Sharp-boned dogs sniffed and pondered, and burr-fleeced sheep wailed in untidy paddocks. The sisters would sit on a slab of rock to eat a piece of fatbread and rosella jam from a flourbag before leaning off down the hill to that not-real world of slate-pencil and gritty floorboards.

The dust of the bullock road tasted best in summer. Miney would part her lips to savour the sweet powderiness. She had sometimes driven along the road in her father's cart, but from way up there, it was not the same road. With your old boots scuffing the dirt, you saw other things...the tan of shiny pebbles, the coarseness of the seedy grasses that clung to the slopes, the dip of dried-out puddles, or a trail of ants like blackmen carrying teachests

behind English explorers. You saw the places where other children had slid down the banks, but you knew you mustn't because you would go home with your thick stockings full of spikes.

The German school-teacher was a stiffish ginger-haired man in a shiny dark blue suit.

- Birds of a fedder, he used to warn the children....vill flock mit each udder!

He seemed to be continually swallowing his spit, and in winter he wore fingerless mittens on his chillblained hands. He taught the children about Sheffield and Birmingham, the Yangtze River and the Tsetse fly. Miney loved the taste of the words, the awful dry feel of the dusty quince-skin pages. The school-teacher's small stern wife taught Miney to embroider a kookaburra onto a d'oily and to crochet a strip of banksia and gumnut lace for the edge of a calico tablecloth.

On their way home, the children could skirt the town by following the levee bank along the side of the river. It was a fat, dark and sluggish body of water, but despite its seeming docility, there were unexpected whirlpools and eddies near the banks, where huge negrohead beech leaned over, and where town children checked their wicker putchers for old granddaddy eels. They scrambled through the old quarry, where the big boys smoked amongst the chalky yellow hummocks, and began the climb back up to the bullock road.

In winter, Miney woke to a coldness on her nose and in her mouth, and the cows lowed solemnly out on the frost. In winter you left for school in the dark. The frozen tussocks shattered under your boots, and the legs of the black and white cows were coated in layers of mud, their soiled tails swinging as though they'd been dipped in lead. The dairy smelt sickly-sweet with

the meaty, steaming stench of the cows, high-hipped madams that swayed and clopped like the cocky's wives striding smugly up the aisle of the make-shift Church on a Sunday. Their udders were strained and pendulous from the long wet grasses, and their big greedy calves kicked and bolted on the mud-greased slopes.

And every school morning there was that long long walk along a road that seemed every step to get closer to a faraway world of utter silence, and you breathed the fragrance off the black soil deeply to absorb some of its goodness.

The Catholic music teacher came visiting the Parish from the Convent at Grafton. Sister Mary Agatha was a stern Irishwoman with a high colour and a wide face that bulged forward like a squeeze-box from her coif. Her collar sat rigid and inflexible over an unmoving breast, and her red-knuckled hands clenched rawly above a wide leather belt. How many times had Miney's breakfast plummeted at the sound of those enormous wooden rosary beads jangling up behind her? One day Doreen Curran, a pale and bruised-looking child, made a puddle under her high desk and Sister Agatha decided to make an example of the child, working herself up into hysterical rage and forcing the child to wipe the mess up with her long insipid hair. Miney wept on her way home that evening, and vowed to be a friend to the girl who smelt of urine and spat-on hair every morning and whose nails were chewed down so far that they bled at the quick.

That year Miney learnt from the ginger-haired teacher that there had once been another Queen besides that black face that had peered down on her in her birth-blanket, and ominously enough, the old Bandjalang Queen had had a bad turn one morning when she'd gone up the ridge looking for bunyah nuts.

-You shoulda seen my old lady, King Billy had said to George...she come 'ome white as a ghost.

The other Irishmen from the bush said it would be bad luck for everyone if the old Queen died in the middle of bunyah season, but George was cut from a different cloth, and he said luck was just hard work and stubbornness, so he was ill-prepared for the disaster that exploded up the gully one afternoon in the middle of a dry pensive summer.

George had driven in to town, leaving Constance, Olive and Arnold with the younger children. There had been smoke accumulating over the hills for most of the morning, but Constance had watched and put it down to the smouldering of stumps in the long valley that ran down to the swampy banks of the Richmond River. About midday, an orange stillness came over the gully. The very tips of the branches of those huge pines held themselves motionless, and even the shadowed floor stopped its eternal ticking and crackling. Where had the currawongs gone? The fowls had disappeared into the scrub to perch. The sun became flat and large and livid and a hot dry wind sprang up from under the hoop-pines where the cattle had gathered to worry, hip to hip.

The small children, the blankets and the two photographs from the mantel-piece were collected and the family headed for the sapling bridge over and down the next hill. All that dark afternoon they waited on the rounded stones below the bridge with wet blankets ready, until the fire belted out a horizontal blast of flame above the hollow where they lay in the shallows sucking for air.

When the worst had passed, Constance left Arnold and Olive with the children and searched in the smoke for the unrecognisable track up and over

the hill. She hunkered on the crest of a foreign slope heaving for the sake of her charred lungs, surrounded by still-burning patches of grass and by scorched and amputated trunks, and saw the queer silhouette of a creekstone chimney surrounded by a mat of white ash.

The fright of the fire was too much for the old Queen. King Billy and his family buried her up the bush in a clearing of bracken and blady grass and encircled by seventeen big pines. And George Fielding, even more resolved in his dedication to his own version of Luck, set about building another house - a big fine farmhouse with eight bedrooms and a sewing room and a pantry the same size. He planted Irish trees to further make his point; a row of chestnuts between the house and the cowyard, and rows of citrons and shaddocks along the fenceline. By the time Miney turned sixteen she lived in a big house with a wide polished hallway and a Church just across the paddocks. There was a good fine dairy and a proper dirt road past the front gate. Her mother, Constance, had given birth to her tenth child and the determined creases at the corners of her mouth had grown deeper. Those shadowed eyes recorded in the photograph on the mantelpiece now appeared bruised, and Miney dreamt that she was reaching out for something that kept slipping between her fingers.

No matter what Father Reilly said at her mother's funeral, Miney knew that this should not have happened, that God could never be forgiven for this injustice. Standing by the edge of her mother's grave, she felt something come into her. A hardness. A stubbornness. She felt the corners of her own young mouth tighten.

Arnold left the farm and the older girls were left to run the big house and care for the children. Olive knew that she would never marry. By the time she was twenty-one, Miney was big-boned and strong. When Arnold's young

wife, Bertha, was about to give birth to her first child, they sent for Miney. In the early morning she caught a tiny girl, and then stayed for a week to watch the mother and baby become accustomed to each other before packing her bag and heading for the Lismore railway station. That night, she slept on a bench in the ladies' waiting-room, half-listening for the early morning train that would take her to Grafton. It was still dark the next day when she crossed the river in a punt to continue the long train journey to Sydney.

Doreen Curran had done well for herself since leaving the tiny Keerrong school. She was living in a nice street in Lidcombe with a husband who had a good job, and enough money for luxuries like bacon and coffee. Miney arrived on her old friend's doorstep the second day after her departure, having stopped at Central Railway Station first to ask for and to get a job at the Refreshment Rooms.

Lidcombe was a quiet, respectable place with palm trees in front gardens and white-washed footpaths. Miney did not see much of her neighbours, though she sometimes saw the Irishwoman nextdoor sitting on her verandah in the evening. She felt the woman's eyes on her back when she walked past, and it made her spine stiffen. She felt that necessary hardness in herself and recognised it in the wide dark eyes of that other cold and erect woman.

Miney was sick for the sight of her brothers and sisters, for the apish tang of the eucalypts and the sweetness of woodsmoke in the morning, but she was offered a good job as a midwife at the new Maternity Hospital just down the road, and so she stayed. Every morning and evening she walked past the house of the Irishwoman, and one afternoon she saw a bony young man in the front yard tinkering with a motorbike. He didn't look up when

she walked past, but she could feel the presence of the other woman from behind the white lace curtains.

Day after day the young man worked on his bike, removing parts, polishing parts, oiling others, his hands long and meticulous and always covered in grease, his brow heavy with concentration.

-One day he'll look up! Miney told herself. She knew that he intended to, that he waited for her every evening. By the time the days had started to shorten, it seemed that he could barely see his bike. Then, one evening, when there was a distinctly winterish snarl in the air and the wind was churning up the tops of the pines like Indian fanboys gone mad, Miney saw an addition to the motorbike - a shining black sidecar with a black leather apron. The young man was kneeling by the side of it, polishing it with a piece of chamois, his hands for once clean.

And something new arose in Miney. Not so much the stubbornness of her father, or the hardness that her mother had taught herself, but an unfamiliar thing ... perhaps the virtue that had made her mother pin on a white corsage for a Melbourne photographer before travelling for a week to the Big Scrub to live in a tent and to bear ten children.

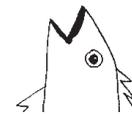
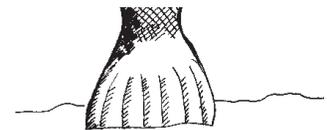
-Well...she said to the man, as she stepped up beside him...when are you taking me for a ride? As the Irishwoman, Maggie Groves, would not even speak to the brash young tenant from next door, it seemed that there was no other way than to go off to St.Patrick's in town, and marry on the quiet.

Miney loved her husband, James Ambrose, with such a fierceness that she wished she could have kept it a secret from God. That unjust God that she'd never yet forgiven. Jim was a good foot taller than her, and he had been a

stretcher-bearer at Ypres and Villers Brettoneux when she was still a girl in Keerrong, but there was a sadness in him that she wanted to ease. At night when he coughed and coughed she sat beside him and felt that she was drawing breath for him. When the pain of the shrapnel in his neck grew beyond a pain and became a terrible fear and darkness, she held him, and sometimes she felt that her awful strength and her fierce love were two inescapable burdens.

Miney continued to work at the Maternity Hospital and Jim for the New South Wales Railway, and they saved and bought a dark brick home at the edge of the bush north of Sydney. When the first child was born, the Irish-woman Maggie let Miney visit with Jim for the first time. In truth, the older woman had been wondering what sadness had created this proud and unbending young woman, and the younger woman had been wondering the same thing...

A Magic Cloud



*Ancestor...among sweet- and fruit-boxes.
Her black heart...
Was that a sigh?
-brushing by me in the shadows...
-(Thomas Kinsella b.1928)*

EVERY NIGHT AND MORNING Ellen has a shower in a white bathroom looking out on bare trees and a creek. She heats water from the mountain by burning damp gum in a slow-combustion stove. The cleansing is a routine, for she knows her body by heart. And when she steps out of the bath to dry herself, she waits to see another face in the nimbed mirror. Once there was another Ellen, living three miles out on the road from Skibbereen to Drimoleague ...and shhh! Ellen knows the old Ellen Barry sometimes watches her through the steam.

When she was a young child, Ellen would take an old copper spoon out of the kitchen drawer and sit under the swing in the backyard to eat dirt. She still remembers the taste, like blood. And the texture, fine and coarse, bonded together by stickiness. She used to daydream living inside a sand-dune and eating nothing but bowls of clean dry sand. Sometimes small pink worms would visit. And the smell of the black soil and cow paddocks could be breathed from the window of the school bus, and sometimes so could the cabbage fields that had been powdered with pulverised bone and desiccated blood. Barred train carriages packed full of greasy-woolled sheep stood outside the railway station at Flemington, and she watched handful after handful of tarry black pellets falling beside the rails. Plum puddings lay prostrate in the dry backyard, and embryonic leafbuds sprouted from oiled whips of the willow. At the end of summer days, the washing came in from

the line with the sunshine still in it, and she felt the earth flying under the magical soles of her feet.

So! She has always felt it within her. The burden and the lust.

*I that brought winter in
And the windy glistening sky,
I that brought sorrow and sin,
Hell and pain and terror, I.*

-(from The Song of Crede; Version: Thomas MacDonough)

AND THAT OTHER ELLEN FROM SKIBBEREEN? Did she lie in the shadows under the cypress and watch the sky make a puzzle out of the leaves? In that dismal famine house, did she watch from the windows, hoping for a glimpse of some slope on the other side of the world? Was there ever a lightness or magic in her bare feet, or were they always heavy?

When the small dark Crowley girl married the big fine Barry son she did not foresee the bargain she would strike with the devil. Now, the Barry family were proud descendants of a former Landlord who had, through his influence, had the original Crowley family transferred to Druminda, and had taken possession of the Land himself. As far as Ellen Crowley could see it, her young husband's grandfather had stolen the fertile farmland that had been owned by her own family for generations. The Crowleys were a very religious family, besides being coarse and dark. Perhaps they had a need to be, knowing the strength of their own hatred?

Ellen's birth was a struggle. Some of the coarser women said that, out of human kindness, you would not put such a big-boned dog to such a small bitch. And the young Barry wife did a queer thing after the birth of her third child, when the midwife had gone and the Barry husband back to the field to chase some stray Crowley heifers. The baby was asleep in the

The Time It Rained Fish

old oak cradle and most of the cleaning had been done: bloody towels taken away with the rags and strips of linen. But by the side of the high bed, covered by a blue and white towel, was an enamel bowl holding the child's afterbirth.

A rush of blood wet the inside of the woman's thighs and pooled on the floor as she stood. She made a bunch of rags to put between her legs and wiped at the mess, almost passing out with the effort. She carried the bowl down the narrow stairs and through the big dark kitchen that smelt of cabbage and boiled bacon. It was a dull afternoon, and the back of the house was shadowed. Beyond the garden there was an old midden, covered now by a tangle of briar snags and whitethorn runners. The woman crawled to the centre of the pile, where potato peelings, tea leaves, bones and crockery made a sweet friable litter. She scraped with her hands at the pile, dug and dug, clawing fiercely as the hole grew deeper. The blood between her legs soaked the rags and her belly fell underneath her in a toneless mound. Finally, she slid the glossy weight into the bottom of the hole, and scuffed the soil back in on top of it. Pressing at the sodden rags, she walked, heavy-limbed, back to the dark kitchen.

-Where have you been? demanded Mrs O'Brien, bouncing the squalling infant. The woman put the child to her breast and drank a cup of sweet cold tea.

-You mustn't tell Mister, she said to the old woman.

Maybe that was the beginning of the terrible bargain. Isn't it true that when you think that you have finally claimed something for yourself, then the time has come when it can own you? Perhaps that birthblood that seeped into the fertile mound in the shadowed garden at Bauravilla also made the soil seep into the child's blood, so that the land she was born to would always be a joy to her, but would also be a terrible burden.