

A translation of *Down Under*, by Bill Bryson



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Introduction

“Listening to cricket on the radio is like having a nap without losing consciousness.” Reading a travelogue by Bill Bryson is also like having a nap without losing consciousness. A very funny nap. One of the things I enjoy about Bryson’s travelogues, besides the humor, is their unhurried pace. One can perfectly imagine him meandering his way across, in this case, the vast continent of Australia, stopping along the way to drink in the sights and travelling along the roads less traveled. Combined with witty observations of local customs and characters, often amusing facts about the history of the country and his light-hearted cynicism, his books make for excellent light reading. A critic from a Melbourne paper called *The Age* sums it up beautifully: “He arrives at his destination, finds a hotel, checks in, meanders around the neighbourhood, visits any museums or public monuments he happens to encounter, has a couple of drinks, eavesdrops on a conversation or two, then goes to bed. A year later, people on three continents are hospitalised as a result of ruptures caused by laughing so hard at his account of the experience”.

Down *Under* was the first book by Bryson I ever read, and it made me hungry for more. It is part of a series of travelogues, some of which have been translated already. I was rereading *Down Under* for the third time when I needed to choose a source text for my Bachelor thesis, and after quickly checking whether it had been translated yet, thought it would make a nice challenge. Too quickly, it seemed, because at the time of writing it has come to my attention that a translation of *Down Under* already existed. Not having read this, it has had no influence on my translation.

The focus of this thesis is on a translation of a ten-page excerpt from *Down Under*. I will also discuss some characteristics of the author’s writing style and several problems which are inherent to an accurate translation of said writing style.

Furthermore, I will focus on other problems which arose during the translation and my solutions to them. First, however, I will tell you something about the author and his intended audience.

Bill Bryson

Bill Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1951. After dropping out of Drake University in 1972, he went backpacking to Europe for four months and returned with a friend a year later. He settled in the UK for a few years, and returned to the United States in 1975 to complete his college degree. Afterwards, he and his wife went back to England where he worked as a journalist, and eventually became chief copy editor of the business section of *The Times*, and then deputy national news editor of the business section of *The Independent*. He left journalism in 1987. Living in Kirkby Malham, North Yorkshire, Bryson started writing independently, and has published such books as *Notes from a Big Country*, *A Walk in the Woods*, *Neither Here nor There*, which are travelogues, and *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, in which he explores not only the histories and current statuses of the sciences, but also reveals their humble and often humorous beginnings. He has also written two books on the history of the English language, *Mother Tongue*, and *Made in America*.

Audience

It's hard to say who exactly Bryson's intended audience is. His books are popular with anyone wanting to read a funny but informative novel, regardless of age, class, or level of education. He doesn't have a real message to convey, and he certainly isn't some rebel, he's from Iowa. He's not a big fan of dogs, but that's mainly because they don't seem to like him, and somewhat of a sentimentalist when it

comes to nature. He is just a guy who likes to go places, visit museums and have a few beers. His vocabulary is quite simple, and readers will rarely have to resort to their dictionaries, making his books easily accessible. The unhurried pace of the books may be a little too slow for the taste of younger readers, though. Therefore I would say his target audience, thus the target audience of the translation, is pretty much everyone over the age of eighteen. The problem this presents in the translation is that I will need to keep the language understandable.

Writing style

Perhaps the most important part of any literary translation is matching the writing style of the author. In order to be able to do that, one must of course know what his or her writing style is. His works are essentially travelogues. *Down Under* certainly is one. Apart from being somewhat instructive, his books are of course also meant to be funny. What sets them apart from other travelogues is the ironic way in which he comments on the things he has seen and experienced. This ironic and tongue-in-cheek tone is sometimes referred to as Brysonesque by fans of his work. When one's writing style has a name and when this term is sometimes used in comparison by book-critics to praise the work of other, less known, writers, you know it's pretty specific. This is what characterises his style the most, and as such, must be preserved.

Bill Bryson also has a penchant for using long sentences, which often do not translate well into Dutch. His sentences often meander on, like himself, covering multiple subjects and can therefore be quite lengthy. For example:

“I wandered up and down both sides of Lachlan Street, the main drag, and then some way out into the country to enjoy the sunset – an event always of calm and

golden glory in the bush – and in the hope, ever unfulfilled, of seeing some kangaroos hopping picturesquely into frame”. (Bryson, 2000, page160)

Translating these without having to chop them up into little pieces and still being comprehensible was no easy task. I will now discuss the various aspects of Bryson’s writing style, and some of the difficulties in translating them, in some detail.

Irony:

A major challenge was the overall tone of his writing. Bryson has a way of infusing his comments with a dry wit, and he uses a fair amount of irony in his writing. One of the many definitions of irony is: The use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning. (Merriam-Webster) You can almost see him winking at you when you read the text, and it is of the utmost importance that the readers of the Dutch translation get the same feeling. For example, in a passage where he describes watching a cricket game on TV, he comments on the actions of the players on the field:

“An official in a white coat was chasing after a blown piece of paper and several of the players were examining the ground by the stumps, evidently looking for something. I couldn’t think what, but then one of the commentators noted that England had just lost a wicket, so I supposed it was that.” (Bryson, page 160)

Of course, without knowing what a wicket is, this sentence might seem straightforward enough. However, the audience knows that Bill Bryson knows what a wicket is, and his feigned ignorance is what makes the sentence humorous, because losing a wicket is of course not the same as misplacing it. This sentence, though, is easily translated and the ironic tone is fairly easily maintained. It is merely a question of meticulously translating all the different elements from the sentence:

“Een official in een witte jas was een stukje papier aan het achtervolgen en een aantal spelers was de grond bij de *stumps* aan het bekijken. Ze zochten blijkbaar iets. Ik kon zo gauw niet bedenken wat, maar toen meldde één van de commentatoren dat Engeland zojuist een wicket had verloren, dus dat zal het dan wel zijn geweest.”

Christiane Nord identifies this translating problem in her essay as being a text-specific problem; it is not a pragmatic problem, as it does not arise out of any communicative differences between the source and target audiences, nor is it a culturally-specific problem, as there are no differences in culture between the source and target audiences, nor is it a language-specific problem, as there is no question of incompatibility between English and Dutch. In English and Dutch, as in most world languages, irony is known and commonly used. It is up to the translator in this case to try and replicate the exact ironic tone of the source text.

Long Sentences:

According to a study by Tavecchio (Tavecchio, 2010), longer sentences are significantly more common in English than they are in Dutch. It also states that another feature that is less common in Dutch sentences is the interrupting of a sentence to present a satellite message, or subclause. This presents the translator with a problem on the linguistic level, because there is a difference between the linguistic systems of the source text and the target text (Nord). Although there is no grammatical rule which says that Dutch sentences cannot be longer than say, x words, there is a difference between what Dutch readers are used to, compared to English-speaking readers. With this information at the back of my mind, I looked at several of the long sentences in the text, and whether or not they should remain intact. I also looked at the function of these long sentences, and why they are as long as they are.

Looking at the sentences, it seems that there is no real reason that they are long, except for maybe a preference on Bryson's part. They serve no stylistic function in the story, and they do not add any sense of atmosphere to it. Therefore, the only thing that kept me from dividing them into smaller sections was the desire to adhere to Bryson's writing style as much as possible. It did mean, however, that should I choose to break up a long sentence, this would not greatly affect the feel of the text. For example:

“As I pushed on, the balance between orchards and vineyards tipped increasingly in favour of the latter until eventually there was nothing but vineyards and I realized I had reached the Barossa Valley, a quite spectacularly pretty corner of South Australia, with rolling hills of abundant green that gave it, literally and metaphorically, a Mediterranean air.” (Bryson, page 165)

Although this sentence is still fairly readable in English, in Dutch it is a little longer than most people are comfortable with:

“Hoe verder ik ging, des te schever de balans werd tussen fruitgaarden en wijngaarden, in het voordeel van de laatste, totdat er op een gegeven moment alleen nog maar wijngaarden waren en ik me besepte dat ik in de Barossa Vallei was aangekomen, een erg spectaculair mooi stukje Zuid Australië met weelderig groene, glooiende heuvels die het een Mediterraan gevoel geven, zowel wat betreft uitstraling als klimaat.”

This Dutch sentence, in all its glory and subclauses, could be a bit confusing for Dutch readers, so I decided to divide it into two sentences:

“Des te verder ik ging, des te schever de verhoudingen werden tussen fruitgaarden en wijngaarden, in het voordeel van de tweede, totdat er op een gegeven moment alleen nog maar wijngaarden waren. Ik besepte me dat ik in de Barossa Vallei

was aangekomen, een erg spectaculair stukje van Zuid Australië met weelderig groene, glooiende heuvels die het een Mediterraan gevoel geven, zowel wat betreft uitstraling als klimaat.”

This way, the style of the piece is not compromised, but it is a lot more readable. I did this in some instances where it seemed logical and necessary, while I left others intact.

Realia

Most, if not all, translators of literary texts are at times confronted with realia. These concepts, which are unique to a certain language or culture area and which have no or only a partial equivalent anywhere else (Grit, de vertaling van realia), present significant challenges to the translator on a socio-cultural level (Nord). The translator will have to decide whether to keep the original term, or to change it into something more easily recognisable in Dutch. For example, in the source text, a little girl receives a “half crown” as payment for doing some odd jobs around a building site. Most Dutch readers will have no idea what a half crown is, although from the text it is obvious that it is a coin of some sort. After some research it seems that a half crown is worth 30 pence. Converted into today’s money, with the exchange rate as it is now, this would translate into roughly 33 eurocents. However, since the anecdote in question takes place in Australia in the 1950s, translating it as 33 eurocents would seem a bit strange at best, seeing as there was no euro coin back then. So what would be the best denomination to translate it into? In the Netherlands in the 1950s, we had guilders, but it is hard to say what the exchange rates were back then, but in any case the conversion would make little sense, as it is just as odd to give an Australian girl a *guilder* as it is to give her 33 eurocents. This could perhaps be an option in other

novels, where the location is not as well established, but in an anecdote specifically about Australia it would just seem out of place. Another option would be to change the coin from a half crown to a pound or a shilling, which most readers will probably know of. However, I decided that the best thing to do would be to leave the coin as it is, but in italics, to signify its foreignness.

Another problem was the conversion of square miles to square kilometers. This was necessary, because *vierkante mijlen* would seem odd, in comparison to the *vierkante kilometers* that we are used to. The conversion alone wasn't the problem, because a quick google search yielded many imperial-metric converters. The problem was that the punchline of a joke depended on the number of people living in a square mile being six, instead of two, when converted to km². So the options were to leave the square miles, and leave an awkward sounding statistic in a Dutch text, or to convert it, and somehow altering the joke. I chose the second option, translating this sentence: "Out here if you found six people occupying the same square mile it would be either a family reunion or an Aum Shinrikyo planning session."

Into:

"Als zich hier in de outback twee mensen in dezelfde vierkante kilometer bevinden dan is het óf een stelletje op avontuur, óf een paar leden van Aum Shinrikyo met kwaad in de zin." I would rather not have altered the punchline, however I felt that I had little choice.

Adjectives

The use of adjectives also posed some tricky situations. Single adjectives usually present little difficulty, but combined ones are harder to translate, as we often don't have an equivalent in Dutch. "Well-touristed", from "...Tanunda, a handsome

and well-touristed little town...”, is one of those adjectives that doesn't have a Dutch equivalent. Lacking a single adjective to translate this, the translator must resort to using several words to describe it. The problem with this particular case is how to translate “well”. The obvious answer would be “goed”. However, this does not combine well with the also obvious translation “toeristisch”. In order to know what the correct adjective should be, it's important to know what the author meant with “well-touristed”. Clearly he didn't mean that the town hardly gets any tourists, and if the town was positively overrun with tourists he probably would have used a different adjective, such as “over”, or “very”. I think it is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the answer lies somewhere in between. I think that what the author is trying to convey is that the town has enough tourists to make it neither too crowded nor too desolate. In this case, I decided on “redelijk toeristisch”, because ”vrij toeristisch” leaned a bit too much towards the too crowded interpretation.

Curse words and slang

Bill Bryson doesn't often need to resort to cursing in his books, but occasionally a curse word slips in. In the ten paged that I translated, the only ones I encountered were: “poof”, “extremely pissed off” and “assholes”. Admittedly these are still pretty tame in comparison to curse words that can be found in works by other authors, but I wanted to mention the translation of assholes. The van Dale online dictionary gave “klootzak”, “hufter” and “lul” as the only possible translations (apart from the literal translation of course), but given the context, these seemed too strong to me. It appeared to me that while Bryson thought they were mildly unpleasant people to be around, they were not that bad as to merit a “hufter” or “klootzak” in Dutch. The connotation that I have with a “hufter” is someone who is decidedly anti-

social, and I think that most people would only call anyone a “klootzak” if they had wronged them in any way personally, which isn’t the case here. “Eikels” seemed to fit here nicely, partly because it is used in Dutch (by me anyway) to refer to someone that you don’t especially like but who hasn’t necessarily hurt you in any way, and also because it sounds mildly insulting, and less harsh than the other terms. I thought that this tone would be more appropriate and more in tune with Bryson’s writing style and character.

Bryson hardly uses any slang in his works either, but in one case I stumbled upon “fair dinkum”, which is Australian slang for genuine, or real. If this had been American slang, I probably would have sought for its equivalent in Dutch, but as this is a book about Australia and his choice of words was most likely intentional, this presented me with a problem. One option would be to translate it into Dutch, into something like “authentiek”, or “echt”. Another option would be to simply leave it as it is, and put it into italics to signify its foreignness, as I have done with other typically Australian terms, like outback and bush. The problem was that most Dutch readers, who might recognize outback and bush, would not know what “fair dinkum” means. However, I imagine that most English-speaking readers, aside from the Australians themselves of course, wouldn’t know what it means either. In the end, I decided to put it in italics.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, translating *Down Under*, or probably any other work by Bill Bryson, presents the translator with some challenges: Whether to keep the long, rambling sentences or divide them into more manageable chunks, how to deal with those pesky realia, and what to make of those adjectives. However, the biggest

challenge to the translator is preserving Bryson's writing style. I have tried to retain his tone of light-hearted cynicism throughout the text, to keep the tone as close to the original as possible.

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Appendix A: Translation

(Blz 160-169)

Hay was een warm en stoffig, maar verrassend leuk stadje aan de Sturt Highway aan de andere kant van een oude brug over de modderige Murrumbidgee. In het motel gooide ik mijn tas op bed en zette ik zonder nadenken de tv aan. Het eerste wat in beeld kwam was de cricketwedstrijd. Ik ging op het voeteneind van mijn bed zitten en heb een paar minuten bijzonder¹ geboeid zitten kijken. Er gebeurde uiteraard erg weinig op het veld. Een official in een witte jas was een stukje papier aan het achtervolgen en een aantal spelers was de grond bij de stumps² aan het bekijken. Ze zochten blijkbaar iets. Ik kon zo gauw niet bedenken wat, maar toen meldde een van de commentatoren dat Engeland zojuist een wicket² had verloren, dus dat zal het dan wel zijn geweest. Na een tijdje begon een slungelachtige jongeman in het buitenveld, die tot voor kort een bal aan zijn broekspijp aan het oppoetsen was alsof hij er een hap uit wilde gaan nemen, ineens³ te rennen. Uiteindelijk slingerde hij de bal naar de slagman in de verte, die zijn slaghout nonchalant een centimeter of twee van de grond tilde en de bal netjes terug tikte. Deze bewegingen werden drie keer zorgvuldig herhaald, waarna de commentator zei: “En dus aan het einde van de vierhonderdvijftigste over, nu we even gaan pauzeren voor het middagdutje, heeft Engeland haar score tot zeventien runs weten uit te breiden. Ze hebben dus nog aardig wat werk te verzetten als ze Australië willen inhalen voor het vierde tussendoortje.”

1. “Unwonted” is usually translated with “ongewoon” or “ongebruikelijk”, however in this context I chose to translate it into “bijzonder”, which has about the same meaning and fits into the sentence better.

2. Most cricket-terms have no Dutch equivalent, so I just left the English terms. I put the lesser known terms in italics, and left the more widely known terms as they were.

3. I have omitted the word “loping”, which is a verb and means “met lange, soepele stappen voortbewegen” but is used here as an adverb. I did this because inserting it would mean that the sentence would not flow as easily, as it already is quite a long sentence.

Ik ging naar buiten om een wandeling te maken over de aardse kookplaat die het binnenland van New South Wales in de zomer is. De dag was buitensporig warm. Alle bladeren⁴ aan de bomen langs de straat hingen slap, als tongen die naar buiten hangen. Ik kuierde door Lachlan Street, de hoofdstraat, en vervolgens een eindje de stad uit om van de zonsondergang te genieten – altijd een moment van verstillings en gouden glorie in de bush⁵ – en in de ijdele hoop om wat kangoeroes op schilderachtige wijze in beeld te zien huppelen. Er komen tegenwoordig meer kangoeroes in Australië voor dan voordat de Europeanen arriveerden, omdat alle ontwikkelingen op het platteland - het stimuleren van grasland, het aanleggen van vijvers, enzovoorts – hen net zo veel goed deden als schapen en vee. Niemand weet precies hoeveel kangoeroes er precies in Australië rondlopen, maar over het algemeen wordt aangenomen dat het er meer dan 100 miljoen zijn. Dit maakt ze niet veel minder talrijk dan schapen. Maar kon ik er hier ook maar eentje vinden? Nee hoor.⁶

Dus wandelde ik het stadje weer in en bracht de avond door op mijn gebruikelijke, verfijnde manier: met biercocktails in een troosteloze en vrijwel lege pub, een diner van steak en salade in het restaurant ernaast, en nogmaals een wandeling naar de rand van het stadje om, tevergeefs, in het maanlicht naar kangoeroes te zoeken. Ik was rond half tien weer terug in mijn kamer. Ik zette de tv aan en zag tot mijn verbazing dat de wedstrijd nog steeds bezig was. Ere wie ere toekomt: de cricketers verrichten dan wel geen zwaar werk, maar ze houden het wel lang vol. De man in de witte jas zat nog steeds achter een stukje papier aan, maar het was onmogelijk om te zien of het nog om hetzelfde stukje ging. Volgens de

4. I translated "Every leaf" into "Alle bladeren", because "Elk blad" sounded a bit odd.

5. Typically Australian terms, such as "bush" and "outback" have no Dutch equivalents so I chose to leave them in. However, to signify their foreignness, I put them in italics.

6. "I could not", is translated here as "Nee hoor", to capture the tone of the author. "Ik kon het niet" lacks the defeated tone.

commentator had Engeland nóg drie wickets verloren, wat me nogal slordig van ze leek. Als ze zo doorgingen zouden ze spoedig helemaal zonder spullen komen te zitten en er een eind aan moeten maken.

Maar misschien, dacht ik toen ik de tv uitzette, was dat wel precies de bedoeling.

's Ochtends trakteerde ik mezelf op een flink ontbijt om mezelf te voor te bereiden op een volgende lange dag op de weg. Het ontbijt is natuurlijk de meest barbaarse gebeurtenis in onze westerse maatschappij (mocht je aarzelen om hier mee in te stemmen dan verzoek ik je dringend⁷ om me een andere gelegenheid te noemen – wat voor gelegenheid dan ook – waarop je met alle plezier een embryo verslindt), en de Australiërs lijken dit aardig in de smiezen te hebben. Het komt vooral neer op een perfecte baconbeheersing. In tegenstelling tot de gekrulde schoenzolen die in Engeland worden gegeten of de saaie, harde standaardstroken die we in Amerika naar binnen werken, heeft Australische bacon een grove, vlezige, fair dinkum⁸ hartigheid. Het ziet eruit alsof het van het varken is gehaald terwijl deze probeerde te ontsnappen. Je kunt hem bij elke hap nog bijna horen gillen. Heerlijk. Bovendien snijden ze hun geroosterd brood in dikke plakken. Kortom, Australiërs hebben goed ontbijten helemaal begrepen.

Zo keerde ik, stralend van de cholesterol en voldoening, terug op de eenzame weg. Na Hay was het landschap nog onvoorstelbaar veel platter, bruiner, leger en

7. To urge someone means “iemand dringend verzoeken”. As much as I would have liked to translate “urge” in this context with a single word, it would be impossible to capture the real meaning.

8. “Fair dinkum” is Australian slang for “true, real, or genuine”, but to translate it into Dutch would mean to lose the Australian connotation. However, leaving it would mean nothing to readers who aren't well versed in Australian slang. On the other hand, it probably meant little to most of the English audience either.

saaier. Het is niet eenvoudig om de gigantische leegheid van Australië over te brengen. Het is verreweg het dunst bevolkte land ter wereld. In Groot-Brittannië wonen gemiddeld 244 mensen per vierkante kilometer⁹. In de Verenigde Staten zijn dat er gemiddeld 29 en wereldwijd ligt het gemiddelde op 45 mensen per vierkante kilometer. (En mocht je het willen weten, in recordhouder Macau hebben we het over een behoorlijk knusse 26.640 mensen per vierkante kilometer.) In Australië daarentegen ligt het gemiddelde op twee mensen per vierkante kilometer. Maar zelfs dat bescheiden aantal geeft een compleet vertekend beeld, omdat de overgrote meerderheid van de Australiërs op een paar drukke plaatsen aan de kust woont en de rest van het land ongemoeid laten. Sterker nog, 86 procent van de Australiërs woont in stedelijke gebieden. Dat is net zo veel als in Nederland en bijna net zo veel als in Hong Kong. Als zich hier in de outback¹⁰ twee mensen in dezelfde vierkante kilometer bevinden dan is het óf een stelletje op avontuur, óf een paar leden van Aum Shinrikyo¹¹ met kwaad in de zin.¹²

Zo nu en dan reed ik tussen kilometerslange stukken mallee scrub door - laag kreupelhout dat nét ondoordringbaar genoeg en nét hoog genoeg is om elk uitzicht te verstikken¹³ –en heel af en toe zag ik over de open vlakten aan de horizon een lage strook groen, waarvan ik aannam dat het bevoeide stukken langs de Murrumbidgee waren. Verder niets. Slechts harde aarde die met grote moeite wat droog gras en een enkele doornige acacia of kromme eucalyptus in leven hield.

9. “Square miles”, or “vierkante mijlen”, would mean little to a Dutch audience, so I converted them into “vierkante kilometers”. Of course I also changed the number of people inhabiting them. Unfortunately this meant that I needed to drastically alter the punchline of a coming joke.

10. See footnote 5.

11. Aum Shinrikyo is a Japanese doomsday cult, described in the first chapter of the book.

12. When converting sq. miles into km², the average number of people drops from six to two. Family reunions and planning sessions that counted only two people were odd, so I changed the activities accordingly.

13. I decided to translate “strangle” into “verstikken”, because it sounds better than “om elk uitzicht te wurgen”, while keeping the violent connotation.

Maar zo is het niet altijd geweest. Hoewel het binnenland van Australië nou nooit echt bepaald groen is geweest, kende veel van het marginaal land perioden van relatieve weelderigheid die wel eens jaren en soms decennia konden duren. Streken als deze bezaten een natuurlijke veerkrachtigheid waardoor ze na droogtes gemakkelijk weer konden opbloeien. Totdat in 1859 een man genaamd Thomas Austin, een landeigenaar in Winchelsea, Victoria, iets ten zuiden van waar ik nu was, een grote fout maakte. Hij importeerde vierentwintig wilde konijnen vanuit Engeland en zette ze uit in de bush zodat hij erop kon jagen. Nou is het niet bepaald groot nieuws dat konijnen zich met een zeker enthousiasme voortplanten. Binnen een paar jaar hadden ze Austins land compleet veroverd en waren ze zich richting de omliggende districten aan het verspreiden. Vijftig miljoen jaar isolement had ervoor gezorgd dat Australië niet één roofdier of parasiet had dat konijn op het menu had staan, of überhaupt wist wat een konijn was¹⁴. En zodoende vermenigvuldigden ze zich razendsnel.

Hun gezamenlijke eetlust was zo goed als onverzadigbaar. Rond 1880 was 800.000 hectare van Victoria kaalgevreten. Al snel trokken ze Zuid Australië en New South Wales binnen, zich met 120 kilometer per jaar door het landschap voortbewegend. Voor de konijnen arriveerden was het gebied waar ik nu doorheen reed gekenmerkt door weelderige bosschages van emu bush, een struik van zeven meter hoog, die het grootste deel van het jaar in bloei stond. Het was ontegenzeggelijk een prachtstruik en haar bladeren waren een zegen voor knabbelende dieren. Maar konijnen daalden als sprinkhanen op de emu bush neer en verslonden ze volledig – bladeren, bloemen, bast en stam – tot ze nergens meer te vinden waren. De konijnen

14. I changed the structure of this sentence, because it flows better this way, without changing the meaning.

aten overal zó veel van dat schapen en ander vee gedwongen waren om zowel hun graasgebied als hun dieet uit te breiden, waardoor nog grotere stukken land het zwaar te verduren kregen. Toen de opbrengsten van de schapen daalde, compenseerden de boeren dit op tegennatuurlijke manier¹⁵ door hun veestapels uit te breiden, waardoor de verwoesting alleen nog maar erger werd.

Het probleem zou al ernstig genoeg zijn geweest, maar in de jaren negentig van de negentiende eeuw werd Australië, na veertig uitzonderlijk groene jaren, getroffen door een gruwelijke, tien jaar lange droogte – voor zover bekend de ergste in haar geschiedenis. Terwijl de aarde barstte en alles tot stof verging werd de deklaag – toen al de dunste ter wereld – weggeblazen, om nooit meer te worden hernieuwd. In de loop van dat decennium stierven ongeveer 35 miljoen schapen, meer dan de helft van alle schapen in Australië. Zestien miljoen daarvan stierven in één enkel meedogenloos jaar, 1902.

Ondertussen huppelden de konijnen vrolijk verder. Tegen de tijd dat de wetenschap eindelijk een met oplossing kwam, was er een eeuw voorbij gegaan sinds Thomas Austin zijn vierentwintig konijntjes uit de zak kieperde. Het nieuwe wapen in de strijd tegen konijnen was een Zuid-Amerikaans wondervirus genaamd myxomatose. Het virus was ongevaarlijk voor mensen en andere dieren, maar had een ongelooflijk verwoestend effect op¹⁶ konijnen, die een sterftecijfer van 99,9 procent te verduren kregen. Vrijwel meteen was het platteland bezaaid met stuiptrekkende, voortstrompelende, doodzieke konijnen, en vervolgens met tientallen miljoenen konijnenlijkjes. Hoewel slechts één op de duizend konijnen het overleefde, hadden

15. I took “perversely” in this context to mean “tegnatuurlijk”. By adding the mention of “tegnatuurlijk”, the sentence does not flow as well, but I didn’t want to leave it out entirely, and “op tegennatuurlijke manier” seemed the best solution to me.

16. “devastating” means “verwoestend”, or “vernietigend”. I chose “verwoestend”, and added the necessary “effect”.

deze overlevenden wel een natuurlijk immuniteit voor myxomatose en gaven hun resistente genen door toen ze zich weer gingen voortplanten. Het duurde even voordat ze weer op dreef waren, maar vandaag de dag telt Australië weer 300 miljoen konijnen, en het worden er elke dag meer.

Hoe dan ook, de schade aan het landschap¹⁷ was al aangericht en veel ervan is onherroepelijk. En dat allemaal omdat één of andere idioot vanaf zijn veranda iets af te knallen wilde hebben.

Net zo verrassend abrupt als je de leegte in Australië binnenvalt, net zo abrupt val je er weer uit. Kort nadat ik halverwege de middag Zuid Australië binnen was gereden bevond ik me ineens tussen glooiende heuvels met sinaasappelgaarden. Ik was zó verrast dat ik uit de auto stapte en om me heen keek. Aan één kant lag de dorre droogte – een vlakte van uitgerekte jute, met hier en daar groepjes mallee scrub. Maar vóór me, mijn gezichtsveld vullend tot aan de verre horizon, was een bijbels uitziend beloofde land – citrusgaarden en wijngaarden en moestuinen in elke weelderige kleur groen.

Hoe verder ik ging, des te schever werd de balans tussen fruitgaarden en wijngaarden in het voordeel van de laatste, totdat er op een gegeven moment alleen nog maar wijngaarden te zien waren¹⁸. Ik besepte me dat ik in de Barossa Vallei was aangekomen, een erg spectaculair mooi stukje¹⁹ van Zuid-Australië met weelderig groene, glooiende heuvels die het een Mediterraan gevoel geven, zowel qua uitstraling

17. Although “landschap” has an aesthetic connotation, so does “landscape”, and so I decided not to change it into “platteland” or something similar.

18. I divided this sentence into two parts, to make it less confusing for the reader. The division doesn't change either the meaning of the sentence or the tone of the paragraph.

19. “corner” means “hoekje” of course, however I decided to go for “stukje” because in Dutch we don't really use “hoekje” to refer to a piece of land.

als klimaat²⁰.

Het gebied is destijds voornamelijk gekoloniseerd door Duitse boeren, die hier de Australische wijnindustrie zijn begonnen. Tegenwoordig zijn Australiërs rasechte wijnkenners, maar dit is een vrij recente ontwikkeling. Een verhaal dat vaak verteld wordt is dat van de Britse wijnexpert Len Evans, die, toen hij in de jaren vijftig een bezoek aan het land bracht, om een glas wijn vroeg in een plattelandshotel. De hotelier onderwierp hem even aan een onderzoekende blik en vroeg: ‘Ben je soms een nicht ofzo?’ Zelfs nu nog zijn de wijnen waar de Barossa geroemd om is – Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon en Shiraz – allemaal nieuwkomers in de streek. Tot en met de jaren tachtig betaalde de regering boeren om Shiraz-ranken uit de grond te trekken en mierzoete Rieslings te verbouwen. Ik heb nooit helemaal begrepen waarom toeristen uit het welvarende deel van het economisch spectrum zo aangetrokken worden door gebieden waar men wijn verbouwt. Ze willen (naar ik aanneem) toch ook niet gaan kijken naar katoen voordat het polo's²¹ zijn, of naar kaviaar terwijl het uit de steur wordt gesneden, maar zet ze in de buurt van wijnranken²² en ze lijken te denken dat ze de hemel hebben ontdekt. Maar ja, de Barossa Vallei is dan ook wel ontzettend aantrekkelijk, zeker na een paar dagen op de eenzame en afgelegen Sturt Highway.

Ik stopte 's avonds in Tanunda, een fraai en redelijk toeristisch²³ stadje dat grotendeels aan één erg lange straat ligt, met bomen die hem mooi van schaduw

20. I changed the mention of "literally and metaphorically", because this pun makes use of the words "Mediterranean air". The double meaning of "air" here is lost in translation, so I changed it into "gevoel" and added "zowel qua uitstraling als klimaat", preserving the meaning of the sentence.

21. Since "Gap slacks" have a yuppie connotation in English, but not in Dutch (as most people may not know what they are), I substituted them for "polo's", which have the same connotation in Dutch, and are also made of cotton.

22. "Give them a backdrop of vines" could have been translated into "Geef ze wat wijnranken op de achtergrond" seemed less ironic to me than "zet ze in de buurt van wat wijnranken".

23. "well touristed" is hard to translate into Dutch. The closest I could get was "redelijk toeristisch". It's not quite the same but I think that is what Bryson means.

voorzien²⁴. Gezien haar populariteit onder toeristen en haar Germaanse afkomst, vreesde ik dat dit thema de boventoon zou voeren in Tanunda, maar afgezien van één of twee restaurants met “Haus” in de naam en een enkele verdwaalde worst²⁵ in de etalages waren er gelukkig weinig pogingen gedaan om het erfgoed uit te buiten. Het was de dag voor Australia Day, de grote nationale feestdag, en een hoop mensen was naar Tanunda gekomen voor een korte vakantie.

Ik slaagde er met de nodige moeite in om een kamer te vinden, en kuierde richting de hoofdstraat voor een korte wandeling voor het avondeten. Het was er druk met mensen die, net als ik, het loze uurtje probeerden te vullen dat valt tussen het sluiten van de winkels en het moment waarop men redelijkerwijs mag beginnen met drinken. Ik liep tussen ze door, blij om weer terug in de beschaving te zijn – en al helemaal blij om gesprekken af te kunnen luisteren die niets te maken hadden met schapen, onberekenbare machines, nieuwe bronnen of veldwinning. (Of wol, wielen, wellen en weide, zoals ik erover was gaan denken). Aan de gesprekken te horen was het duidelijk dat ik in Yuppiesville²⁶ was aanbeland. De meeste mensen hielden zich bezig met het fascinerende tijdverdrijf van de middenklasse, namelijk dingen in etalages aanwijzen die lijken op dingen van mensen die ze kennen. Waar ik ook bleef hangen hoorde ik wel iemand observeren: “Oh kijk, Sarah heeft precies zo’n zelfde kom”, of “Jouw moeder had vroeger ook zulk servies. Ik vraag me af wat daar eigenlijk mee gebeurd is. Ze zal het toch niet aan Samantha hebben gegeven zeker?” Een paar stelletjes speelden een iets vinniger versie van dit spel, waarbij aanvullend commentaar werd gegeven zoals “Nee, die ene die jij kapot hebt laten vallen was

24. “fetchingly shadowed” is another problematic term and does not translate well into Dutch.

25. I changed “the odd mention of wurst” to “een enkele verdwaalde worst”, because it seemed to be more in tune with the ironic tone of the sentence.

26. I kept the English term “Yuppiesville”, because the term is recognisable enough to Dutch readers, and because “Yuppiedorp” or “Yuppiestad” just seems odd.

veel mooier” en “Maar wat moet je in godsnaam met nóg een paar oorbellen?” en “Nou, als ze het aan Samantha heeft gegeven dan ga ik eerlijk gezegd flink over de zeik, want ze had beloofd het aan mij te geven. Ga binnenkort maar eens even verhaal halen²⁷.” Ik gokte dat dit de mensen waren die het verst gereden hadden om hier te komen en die het hardst een borrel nodig hadden. Of mogelijk gewoon eikels²⁸ waren.

Tanunda beviel me wel²⁹ en ik bracht er een erg aangename avond door, maar verder heb ik er absoluut niets bijzonders of gedenkwaardigs ervaren. Dus in plaats daarvan zal ik je een anekdote vertellen die mij verteld is door een geweldige vrouw genaamd Catherine Veitch.

Catherine Veitch was mijn oudste vriendin in Australië, zowel in de zin dat ze mijn eerste maatje hier was en dat ze zo’n beetje oud genoeg was om mijn moeder te kunnen zijn. Ik heb haar ontmoet op het Melbourne Writers’ festival in 1992. Ik kan me de omstandigheden rondom onze ontmoeting niet meer precies voor de geest halen, ik weet alleen nog dat ze na een lezing naar me toe kwam, óf om me er op te wijzen dat ik ergens een fout had gemaakt in één van mijn boeken over taal – ze was academisch ingesteld en verdroeg geen slordigheid – óf om iets op te helderen³⁰ betreffende een aspect van het leven in Australië waarover ik tijdens het vragenuurtje ondoordacht een opmerking had gemaakt. Dit liep uit op een kopje thee in de kantine, en de volgende dag nam ik de tram naar haar huis in St. Kilda, waar ik bijna haar hele familie ontmoette. Haar kinderen, waar ze er een grote maar onbekende hoeveelheid

27. I changed this sentence dramatically in order to keep the tone of the speaker intact. “Je zult maar even met haar moeten gaan praten” does not have the same ring to it as “Ga binnenkort maar eens even verhaal halen.” I did this because I perceived the speaker to be the overbearing, dominant, nagging type, and the first option just sounds way too nice.

28. “klootzakken” in this context would be a little too strong, so I decided to go with “eikels”.

29. I added the pragmatic participle “wel”, because the sentence “Tanunda beviel me wel” sounds a little more natural than “Tanunda beviel me”.

30. I think that “enlighten me” in this context means “van misvattingen ontdoen”. However, there was no way in which I was able to crowbar that into the sentence, so I opted for the more naturally sounding “iets op te helderen”, which has almost the same meaning.

van scheen te hebben, waren allemaal al volwassen en het huis uit, maar de meeste kwamen in de loop van de middag even langs om wat gereedschap te lenen of om te kijken of er nog berichten voor ze waren, of om gewoon even de koelkast te plunderen. Dit was precies het soort huishouden waarin ik altijd had willen opgroeien - gelukkig, gezellig, lekker chaotisch, vol met luidkeelse gesprekken van het type “Kijk anders eens in het kastje bovenaan de trap!” En ik mocht Catherine erg graag. Ze was lief en grappig en wijs en direct.

En dus werden we enorm goede vrienden – hoewel het een vriendschap was die vrijwel volledig gebaseerd was op correspondentie. Ze was nog nooit in Amerika geweest, en ik ging maar eens in het jaar naar Australië, als ik geluk had, en zelfs dan niet altijd naar Melbourne. Maar drie of vier keer per jaar stuurde ze me een lange, heerlijk onsamenhangende³¹ brief die ze op haar prikkelbare en eigenzinnige typemachine uit had weten te rammen. Deze brieven had ik zelden binnen een uur uitgelezen. Ze konden op één enkele pagina gaan over een heel universum aan onderwerpen – haar jeugd in Adelaide, de ongeschiktheid van sommige politici (of eigenlijk de meeste), waarom Australiërs zelfvertrouwen tekort komen, wat haar kinderen allemaal uitspookten. Doorgaans deed ze er een stapel krantenknipsels uit de Age bij, de krant in Melbourne. Veel van wat ik over Australië weet, weet ik van haar.

Ik was dol op die brieven. Ze kwamen van zó ver weg – alleen al het binnenkrijgen van een envelop uit Australië bleef voor mij iets wonderbaarlijks – en omschreven gebeurtenissen en ervaringen die voor haar alledaags waren, maar adembenemend exotisch voor mij: het nemen van een tram naar de stad, zuchten onder een hittegolf in december, het bijwonen van een lezing bij het Royal Melbourne

31. “discursive” has many meanings in Dutch, among which are “onsamenhangend”, “afdwalend”, “wijdlopig”, “langdradig”, “breedvoerig” and “breedsprakig”. Given the rest of the paragraph in which Bryson says that the letters could “range over a galaxy of subjects”, I think that “onsamenhangend” is probably the intended meaning here.

Institute, gordijnen uitzoeken bij David Jones, het grote plaatselijke warenhuis. Ik kan het niet verklaren, behalve door te zeggen dat ik dat alles, zonder ook maar iets uit mijn huidige leven op te hoeven geven, intens graag ook zou willen hebben. Dus was het via haar brieven, meer dan wat dan ook, dat mijn fixatie voor Australië voet aan de grond kreeg.

Haar brieven waren altijd vrolijk, maar de laatste die ik van haar kreeg was al helemaal gelukkig³². Zij en John, haar man, stonden op het punt om hun huis in St. Kilda te verkopen en te verhuizen naar het schiereiland Mornington, ten zuiden van Melbourne, om daar aan zee in stijl aan hun gepensioneerde leven te beginnen, en zo hun jarenlange droom te verwezenlijken. Kort nadat ze die brief verstuurd had kreeg ze, tot grote schok³³ voor iedereen die haar kende, plotseling een hartaanval en overleed. Ik zou nu onderweg naar haar zijn geweest. Het enige wat ik in plaats daarvan aan kan bieden is mijn lievelingsverhaal van de vele die ze mij vertelde.

In de jaren vijftig verhuisde een vriendin van Catherine met haar jonge gezin naar een huis naast een lege kavel. Op een dag arriveerden er wat bouwvakkers om er een huis te gaan bouwen. Catherines vriendin had een dochtertje van drie dat natuurlijk erg³⁴ geïnteresseerd was in al die activiteit bij de burens. Ze hing wat rond langs de kant en op den duur adopteerden de bouwers haar als een soort mascotte. Ze kletsten met haar en gaven haar kleine klusjes te doen en aan het einde van de week kreeg ze een loonzakje met daarin een nieuwe glimmende *half crown*³⁵, of iets dergelijks.

32. I translated “sunny” as “gelukkig”, because I didn’t feel that “zonnig” is really appropriate here and the other translation that the van Dale gave me, “vrolijk”, I had already used.

33. “tot grote schok” is the Dutch saying, so even though the word “grote” isn’t in the original text, I decided to include it.

34. “I added “erg”, because the sentence flows better that way, and it doesn’t change the meaning too much.

35. I kept “half crown”, because translating it or converting it into another currency would be silly. The story is about a girl in Australia in the 1950s, so any other coin would be out of place.

Deze nam ze mee naar huis om haar aan moeder te laten zien, die natuurlijk alle bijbehorende³⁶ bewonderende geluiden maakte, en voorstelde om de volgende dag naar de bank te gaan om het op haar spaarrekening te zetten. Bij de bank was de kassier ook zeer onder de indruk, en vroeg aan het kleine meisje hoe ze aan haar eigen loonzakje was gekomen.

“Ik heb deze week een huis gebouwd,” zei het meisje trots.

“Wat goed zeg!” zei de kassier. “En ga je volgende week ook nog een huis bouwen?”

“Als die kut-bakstenen ooit nog aankomen wel ja,” antwoordde het kleine meisje.

36. The literal translation of “appropriate” would be “toepasselijk”. However, to preserve the ironic tone, I decided on “bijbehorende”, to stress that the sounds were to be expected of her.

Appendix B: Original Text

(pg. 106-169)

Hay was a hot and dusty but surprisingly likeable little town off the Sturt Highway across an old bridge over the muddy Murrumbidgee. In the motel, I dumped my bag and reflexively switched on the TV. It came up on the cricket, and I sat on the foot of the bed and watched it with unwonted absorption for some minutes. Needless to say, very little was happening on the pitch. An official in a white coat was chasing after a blown piece of paper and several of the players were examining the ground by the stumps, evidently looking for something. I couldn't think what, but then one of the commentators noted that England had just lost a wicket, so I supposed it was that. After a time a lanky young man in the outfield, who had been polishing a ball on his trouser leg as if about to take a bite from it, broke into a loping run. At length he hurled the ball at the distant batsman, who insouciantly lifted his bat an inch from the ground and putted it back to him. These motions were scrupulously replicated three times more, then the commentator said: 'And so at the end of the four hundred and fifty-second over, as we break for afternoon nap, England have increased their total to seventeen. So still quite a lot of work for them to do if they're going to catch Australia before fourth snack.'

I went out for a stroll over the terrestrial hotplate that is inland New South Wales in the summer. The day was extravagantly warm. Every leaf on the kerbside trees was limp, like a tongue hanging out. I wandered up and down both sides of Lachlan Street, the main drag, and then some way out into the country to enjoy the sunset – an event always of calm and golden glory in the bush – and in the hope, ever unfulfilled, of seeing some kangaroos hopping picturesquely into frame. Kangaroos are commoner in Australia now than they were before Europeans came because all the

rural improvements - the encouragement of grassland, the creating of ponds and so on - have benefited them in the same way as they have sheep and cattle. Nobody knows how many kangaroos the country holds, but the number is generally assumed to be over 100 million, making them not much less numerous than sheep. But could I find one even out here? I could not.

So I strolled back into town and passed the evening in my usual gracious style – lager cocktails in a forlorn and nearly empty pub, dinner of steak and salad in a restaurant next door, another stroll to the edge of the town to look, on vain, for kangaroos by moonlight. I was back in my room by about nine thirty. I switched on the TV and was impressed to see that play was still going on. Give the cricketers their due. It may be light work but they put in the hours. The man in the white coat was still chasing paper, though it wasn't possible to tell if it was the same piece. England, according to the commentator, had lost another three wickets, which seemed rather absent-minded of them. At this rate they would soon run out of equipment altogether and have to call it a day.

Perhaps, I decided as I switched the TV off, that was what they were hoping for.

In the morning I treated myself to a big breakfast to fortify myself for another long day's drive. Breakfast is, of course, our most savage event in western society (if you hesitate to agree, then I urge you to name me another occasion - any occasion at all - when you would happily devour an embryo), and Australians seem to have a good fix on this. A lot of it comes down to a mastery of bacon. Unlike the curled shoe tongues that are consumed in Britain or the boringly crisp, regimented strips we go for in America, Australian bacon has a rough, meaty, fair dinkum heartiness. It looks as

though it was taken off the pig while it was trying to escape. You can almost hear the squeal in every bite. Lovely. Also, they cut their toast thick. In short, the Australians know what they are about with breakfasts.

And so, radiant with cholesterol and contentment, I returned to the lonesome road. Beyond Hay, the landscape was even more impossibly flat, brown, empty and dull. The monumental emptiness of Australia is not easy to convey. It is far and away the most thinly peopled of nations. In Britain the average population density is 632 people Per square mile; in the United States the average is 76; across the world as a whole it is 117. (And, just for interest, in Macau, the record holder, it is a decidedly snug 69,000 people per square mile.) The Australian average, by contrast, is six people per square mile. But even that modest figure is wildly skewed because Australians overwhelmingly live in a few clustered spots along the coast and leave the rest of the country undisturbed. Indeed, the proportion of people in Australia who live in urban areas is, at 86 per cent, about as high as in Holland and nearly as high as in Hong Kong. Out here if you found six people occupying the same square mile it would be either a family reunion or an Aum Shinrikyo planning session.

From time to time I passed through long miles of mallee scrub – low shrubs just bushy enough and high enough to strangle any view – and very occasionally, in the open plains, I would spy a low line of vivid green on the right-hand horizon, which I presumed marked an irrigated zone along the Murrumbidgee. Otherwise nothing. Just hard earth that strained to support a little dry grass and the odd thorny acacia or bent eucalypt.

It wasn't always so. Although inland Australia has never been exactly verdant, much of the marginal land once experienced periods of relative lushness, sometimes lasting years, occasionally lasting decades, and it enjoyed a natural resiliency that let

it spring back after droughts. Then in 1859 a man named Thomas Austin, a landowner in Winchelsea, Victoria, a little south of where I was now, made a big mistake. He imported twenty-four wild rabbits from England and released them into the bush for sport. It is hardly a novel observation that rabbits breed with a certain keenness. Within a couple of years they had entirely overrun Austin's property and were spreading into neighbouring districts. Fifty million years of isolation had left Australia without a single predator or parasite able even to recognize rabbits, much less dine off them, and so they proliferated amazingly.

Collectively their appetite was essentially insatiable. By 1880, two million acres of Victoria had been picked clean. Soon they were pushing into South Australia and New South Wales, advancing over the landscape at a rate of seventy-five miles per year. Until the rabbits came, much of the countryside where I was driving now was characterized by lush groves of emu bush, a shrub that grew to a height of about seven feet and was in flower for most of the year. It was by all accounts a beauty and its leaves a boon to nibbling creatures. But rabbits fell on the emu bush like locusts, devouring every bit of it – leaves, flowers, bark, stems – until none was to be found. The rabbits ate so much of everything that sheep and other livestock were forced to extend both their range and their diet, punishing yet wider expanses. As sheep yields fell, farmers perversely compensated by increasing stocking levels, adding to the general devastation. The problem would have been acute enough, but in the 1890s, after forty unusually green years, Australia fell into a murderous, Decade-long drought – the worst in its recorded history. As the earth cracked and turned to dust, the topsoil - already the thinnest in the world – blew away, never to be replenished. In the course of a decade, some 35 million sheep, more than half the nation's total, perished; 16 million went in a single pitiless year, 1902.

The rabbits, meanwhile hopped on. By the time science finally came up with a solution, almost a century had passed since Thomas Austin tipped his twenty-four bunnies out of the bag. The weapon deployed against the rabbits was a miracle virus from South America called myxomatosis. Harmless to humans and other animals, it was phenomenally devastating to rabbits, with a mortality rate of 99.9 per cent. Almost at once the countryside filled with twitching, stumbling, very sick rabbits, and then with tens of millions of little corpses. Although just one rabbit in a thousand survived, those few that did were naturally resistant to myxomatosis, and it was their resistant genes that they passed on when they began to breed again. It took a while for things to get rolling, but today Australia's rabbit numbers are back up to 300 million and climbing fast.

At all events, the damage to the landscape, much of it irreversible, had already been done. And all so some clown could have something to pot at from his veranda.

Just as you plunge into emptiness with startling abruptness in Australia, so you plunge out of it again. Shortly after crossing into South Australia in mid-afternoon, I found myself entering rolling hills of orange groves. It was so startling I got out and had a look. On one side lay arid emptiness – a plain of stretched hessian spattered with clumps of mallee. But before me, Filling the view tot the distant horizon, spread a biblical-looking promised land – citrus groves and vineyards and vegetable patches in every lush shade of green. As I pushed on, the balance between orchards and vineyards tipped increasingly in favour of the latter until eventually there was nothing but vineyards and I realized that I had reached the Barossa Valley, a quite spectacularly pretty corner of South Australia, with rolling hills of abundant green that gave it, literally and metaphorically, a Mediterranean air.

It was mostly settled by German farmers, who started Australia's wine industry here. Today Australians are among the most wine-savvy people on earth, but that development is quite recent. A story often recounted is how the British wine expert Len Evans, on a visit to the country in the 1950s, asked for a glass of wine in a country hotel. The hotelier regarded him narrowly for a long moment and asked: 'What are you, some kind of poof?' Even now the wines for which the Barossa is celebrated - Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz – are all recent arrivals. Into the 1980s, the government was paying growers to uproot Shiraz vines and produce sticky sweet Rieslings. I've never quite understood why tourists from the more prosperous end of the market are so drawn to wine-growing areas. They wouldn't, presumably, want to go and see cotton before it became Gap slacks or caviar being gutted from sturgeon, but give them a backdrop of vines and they appear to think they have found heaven. Having said that, the Barossa Valley *is* awfully appealing, particularly after a couple of days on the lonely and far-flung Sturt Highway.

I stopped for the night in Tanunda, a handsome and well-touristed little town, mostly built along one very long street, fetchingly shadowed with leafy trees. Given its popularity with tourists and its Germanic beginnings, I had rather feared that Tanunda would be themed accordingly, but apart from one or two restaurants with 'Haus' in their titles and the odd mention of wurst ub shop windows, there was mercifully little attempt to exploit its heritage. It was the eve of Australia day, the big national holiday, and Tanunda was busy with people who had come for a mini-break.

I found a room, not without some difficulty, then wandered to the main street for a stroll before dinner. It was crowded with people who, like me, were trying to fill that empty hour between the shops' closing and the moment when one might with propriety start to drink. I walked among them, happy to be back in civilization –

happy, above all, to be able to eavesdrop on conversations that didn't involve sheep dip, temperamental machinery, new wells or land clearance. (Or rumps, sumps, pumps and stumps, as I had begun to think of it.) It was clear from the conversations that I had landed in Yuppieville. Most were engaged in the interesting middle-class pastime of identifying all the objects in shop windows that looked like objects belonging to people they knew. Wherever I lingered I could hear someone observing, 'Oh, look. Sarah's got a bowl just like that,' or 'Your mother used to have a tea service like that one. I wonder whatever became of it. You don't suppose she gave it to Samantha, do you?' A few couples were playing a slightly edgier version of this game, which involved supplementary comments like 'No, the one *you* broke was *much* nicer' and 'But how many pairs of pearl earrings do you *need*, for God's sake?' and 'Well, if she did give it to Samantha, I'm going to be extremely pissed off, frankly, because she promised it to me. You'll just have to have a word with her.' These were the people, I guessed, who had driven the furthest to get here and most needed a drink. Or possibly they were just assholes.

I liked Tanunda and had a very pleasant evening there, but there was nothing exceptional or eventful in the experience, so I am going to tell you instead a little story related to me by a lovely woman named Catherine Veitch.

Catherine Veitch was my oldest friend in Australia, both in the sense that she was my first chum here and also that she was just old enough to be my mother. I met her at the Melbourne Writer's Festival in 1992. I can't remember the circumstances now other than that she approached me after a reading either to set me straight with regard to some mistake I had made in one of my books on language – she was of a scholarly bent and impatient with sloppiness – or to enlighten me concerning some aspect of Australian life on which I had imprudently commented in the question and

answer session. The upshot is that we had a cup of coffee in the cafeteria and the next day I took a tram to her house in St Kilda for lunch, where I met most of her family. Her children, of whom she seemed to have a large but indeterminate number, were all grown and living away, but most of them called in at various points in the afternoon, to borrow a tool or check for messages or burrow in the fridge. It was just the kind of household I had always longed to grow up in – happy, comfortable, nicely chaotic, full of shouted conversations of the ‘Try looking in the cupboard at the top of the stairs’ type. And I liked Catherine very much. She was kind and funny and thoughtful and direct.

So we became great friends – though it was a friendship based almost entirely on correspondence. She had never been in America, and I went to Australia once a year if I was lucky, and not always to Melbourne. But three or four times a year she would send me long, wonderfully discursive letters hammered out on a jumpy and wilful typewriter. These letters seldom took less than an hour to read. In a single page they could range over a galaxy of subjects – her childhood in Adelaide, in inadequacies of certain politicians (actually, of most politicians), why Australians lack confidence, what her children had been up to. Generally she stuck in a wad of cuttings from the *Age*, the Melbourne newspaper. Much of what I know about Australia I learned from her.

I loved those letters. They came from so far away – just getting an envelope from Australia still seemed to me a faintly wondrous event – and described events and experiences that were unexceptional to her but breathtakingly exotic to me: taking a tram into the city, suffering through a heatwave in December, attending a lecture at the Royal Melbourne Institute, shopping for curtains at David Jones, the big local department store. I can't explain it except to say that, without giving up any part of the

life I had already, I wanted intensely to have all that in my life as well. So it was through her letters, more than from almost anything else, that I consolidated my fixation with Australia.

Her letters were always happy, but the last one I received was especially sunny. She and John, her husband, were about to sell the house in St Kilda and move to the Mornington Peninsula, south of Melbourne, to take up a life of gracious retirement beside the sea, fulfilling a dream of many years' duration. Just after she sent that letter, to the shock of everyone who knew her, she suffered a sudden heart attack and died. I'd have been on my way to visit her now. Instead all I can offer is my favourite of the many stories she told me.

In the 1950s, a friend of Catherine's moved with her young family into a house next door to a vacant lot. One day some builders arrived to put up a house on the lot. Catherine's friend had a three-year-old daughter who naturally took an interest in all the activity going on next door. She hung around on the margins and eventually the builders adopted her as a kind of mascot. They chatted to her and gave her little jobs to do and at the end of the week presented her with a little pay packet containing a shiny new half crown, or something.

She took this home to her mother who made all the appropriate cooings of admiration and suggested that she take it to the bank the next morning to deposit it in her account. When they went to the bank, the cashier was equally impressed and asked the little girl how she had come by her own pay packet.

'I've been building a house this week,' she replied proudly.

'Goodness!' said the cashier. 'And will you be building a house next week, too?'

'I will if we ever get the fucking bricks,' answered the little girl.

