

# The Western Horizon

a serial novel by Anna Couani

*The characters so far...Billie is an artist and her cousin Maria is staying with her; Alex is a new arrival to Australia and is living with his brother Leon; Leon is working as a security guard; Rini is a tutor in Cultural Studies and a friend of Billie; Felix is Billie's patron and an artist and art dealer; it was at his house Billie and Alex found an electrician wounded, apparently in a street gang attack... now read on*

## Chapter 3 The Black Pelt

A summer rain period has set in and is saturating everything. Pelting on the brown grass and bald patches of the park, washing the topsoil into the tidal canal, turning the water brown, dispersing and flowing into a huge brown semicircle in the harbour. The humidity has now seeped into all fabrics and any porous materials, especially paper and cardboard. Moulds have started to grow inside cupboards. The foliage outside the window behind the computer has climbed higher than eye level and I can no longer see the street. Like behind a hedge.

Billie floats before me in my world, moving in and out of view, dissolving and reforming.

There was an early morning breeze delivering the perfume of the forest. Billie got up and went to sit in the shaded part of the verandah which looked over the valley. Her hosts, southern forest people, were not up yet. She took out her journal and started to write:

*The ghosts of the past are always with me. Those older artistic and bohemian people with houses filled with fragrant timber. Proto-hippy. They had paintings on the walls, carvings on the shelves, wooden salad bowls, dried flowers, books of Australian and European literature. They felt that as an artist, one was compelled to make art and one's art was the expression of the unconscious or the collective unconscious. Their architecture and interiors were somehow more impressive, like beautiful installations. Exquisite combinations of natural materials. Herb gardens, potpourri and curries at a time when most Anglo-Australians thought capsicum was exotic. They had travelled and possessed a kind of benign paternalism. They had collected a select number of artefacts from their travels. They were the only family people who had sea grass matting, incompatible as it was with strict suburban hygiene.*

*Honey-coloured wood, cinnamon, cumin, red cedar, rose petals, tortoise shell, patchouli oil, sandalwood, batik, jute, New Guinean and African carvings, raw wool, children's art, Carl Jung, Margaret Mead, Paul Klee...*

*But this generation is different. The fascination with the material and surface qualities of objects is muted. Things look un-special. Decor is more conceptual. Like the toy TV on top of the real TV, technology is easily absorbed into the surface chaos.*

They drove to the lagoon for lunch. Billie followed her friends from the car through the burnt casuarina forest, ankle-deep in white sand. On the sand were the fruit of the fire palms, the brilliant seeds scattered across the forest floor. The tragedy of the fire but the beauty of the palms. The huge cones of fire-coloured seeds edged with charcoal, lying broken open in the white sand. They walked through the shallow lagoon, onto a sand bar which became the beach of an ocean bay on its other side. No one around, no cars, no houses.

She took the two children and all the dogs, trotting quietly, to the rocks at the end of the bay. She sat on the rocks while the children and dogs swam. Looking through the sea spray, the bay, the sea, the sky, blue, lavender blue. And across to the sand at the wisp of smoke from the fire where her friends were cooking fish. Their long friendship with each other, their closeness, their attachment, their ability to work together, their complementary natures, the constructiveness, the harmony, the permanency, the love, the sense of family, home and belonging.

Cara sposa, the path not trod.

Without Billie and the dog, the flat was quiet. Maria opened the double doors onto the verandah. She brought over a cane chair and sat in the early morning sunshine to read. From the verandah, she could see people entering or leaving the building but her view of the street was blocked by a hedge of gardenia bushes. She could see the top of Sydney Tower marking the centre of the city. The old Boom-style architecture, the modern office towers along the narrow ridge, the underground shopping arcades. Then she heard a noise in the bushes and a large cat jumped onto the balcony rail and sat staring away from her into the hedge. There was a movement there, beyond the hedge in the street. She went to look from the street side and found a black fur animal skin wedged into the railings of the fence. It was untanned and stank. She brought it inside and put it in the kitchen garbage bin.

Rini slowly becomes awake and turns over to face the open doors to the balcony. The white nylon curtains are billowing slightly into the room. The breeze is already warm and salty. The sun has risen over the horizon and sun rays are beaming intermittently onto the

polished floorboards between the curtains. Rini puts her arm over her partner's chest and rubs his chest hair. She gets up and walks onto the balcony remembering the sea yesterday. There was a strong wind and the waves were pounding on the rocks. She remembers there were drawings, graffiti, in powdery yellow school chalk on the dry rock shelf in the cliff above. She takes out her work journal and sits down to prepare the tutorials for the coming week. She draws the elements of the sessions in an overall diagram together, then writes them out in linear paragraphs. As she finishes, the sun is shining fully on the pages of the book.

She moves inside to the study where another task is waiting. Several unruly piles of papers relating to the new legislation and all the newspaper and magazine clippings on the topic over the previous month. She sits down at her desk with one pile on her lap. Then she turns on her computer and modem, dials up and looks through her mailbox, reading an article from her pile of papers as she waits for the computer to finish each operation. Several ongoing discussions from colleagues in other states and overseas, the latest titbits, references, seminar papers. Still looking, still looking for something buried. The details elude her.

One of Felix's artworkers opened the rear door of Felix's renovated warehouse to Alex. He pointed Alex to the deck above and remained downstairs. On the deck, the light from the courtyard below shone through the slats. The white walls of the rooms around the deck were bathed in soft reflected light. Felix in his chair was a compact black shape against the large fish tank, a curly silhouette. Another bulky man stood near him in the shadow and the big man began to stride forward towards Alex, grabbing his arm before Felix could introduce him.

-Let me introduce myself. I'm Johnny James, Australian Security Enterprises. You probably thought I was a cop in this suit. I'm an ex-cop. Why ex? Only two people in the world know what really happened the night I was identified in the company of a prominent politician and a big-time criminal in a then-illegal casino. One of them is me. The rest is history. I'm an investigator. I'm here to find out what you know.

Alex slowly recoiled from the man's grip on his hand and elbow. As he did so, the man patted him a few more times on the shoulder and back. Alex bent forward coughing and took out a cigarette.

-Don't mind him, said Felix. I am hoping you can help us with two things. Firstly, with your memories of the day you came here with Billie and secondly, about your connection with the security guard for this building.

Alex looked down through the deck at the stone benches and planter boxes below. The artworker was moving some of the stone sculpture around in the courtyard.

-I remember thinking that this place was fantastic, labyrinthine. It was exciting for me because I am interested to meet artists here and to see works of art. But I wasn't expecting to have this kind of architectural experience as well. From the street you cannot imagine what's inside and inside, all the spaces are so different. But there was no one on the street or inside the house except for the electrician. I remember that the door leading up here to the deck was open. But why would I know your security guard?

-You and Leon have the same surname. You have an interest in art and he is the security for quite a few of the galleries in this area, said Felix.

-Leon is my brother, we both studied in the visual arts. But here he took the only work he could find and I will have to as well.

Billie arrived home. She sat down cross-legged on the old carpet in her living room in front of Maria and held up a small possum-skin sack. She took the black velvet cover off an armchair and laid it on the floor.

-You've got to see this, she said and spilled a cluster of fire palm seeds onto the black cloth.

They were still beautiful but it was not the same as seeing them on the sand of the forest floor.

-I found a skin as well, said Maria. But it's not as beautiful as this sack you have.

She stroked the soft fur.

They went into the kitchen to unpack the homemade honey and homegrown pumpkin which Billie's friends had given her. Maria got the kitchen tongs and pulled the black fur skin from the garbage bin to show Billie, explaining how she found it. Billie started to tremble as she looked at it and said,

-It looks like the skin of the dog of mine which was run over.

-You have some kind of Gestapo/Mafia/CIA/KGB thing in this country?

-You think there's some intention here, to unnerve me?

-You have enemies?

-Who would be bothered to annoy me?

-Could they be on someone's payroll?

-But for what reason?

-Is it reason or is it motive?

-Or is it just a coincidence of unrelated events?

-Maybe you should go underground, become incognito?

-I already am incognito, said Billie.

Billie sat on her bed next to the open backpack. Next to that her handbag, just like travelling, the baggage on top of a neat bedspread, in a room, where only the room is your private world.

At the red light, Alex pours over the Gregory's, checking on the road to the International Terminal. When he reaches it, he gets swept up to Departures then circles down again

aiming for the carpark. The cars are crawling past detour signs and airport staff in raincoats are directing traffic away from the main carpark where there are roadworks in progress. He sits in the car waiting for the heavy rain to stop, then runs to Arrivals and finds the flight on the TV monitor. Forty minutes delayed. He goes outside to smoke, watching the sheets of rain sweeping the road.

Peter, brother number three, arrived. Alex swooped on him, laughing, crying, taking his shoulder bag, shepherding him and his luggage under two umbrellas.

-How is everyone, you must tell me, Alex said.

-How is the rug? asked Peter.

-Leon is looking after it somewhere. It's in a vault.

-Leon has a vault? Since when can he afford a vault?

-It's not his vault, it belongs to a client of his. This guy said Leon can keep it there and Leon sees the thing every night because he's the security guard for the building it's in. It's a computerized vault.

-But can you trust the owner of this vault?

-We don't have to trust him so much. We have a receipt for the rug and the valuation certificate. And he has a lot of insurance and heavy security. It seems okay. We're waiting for our own safe deposit box in a bank. Then we can relax.

-And how much is the rug worth?

-Enough to put a deposit on a house maybe.

All the way home, Peter was gesticulating out of the car window, pointing at things, finding buildings and streets equivalent to places back home.

-And you'll be starting school next week. We've got it all organized.

-Can't I start working straight away?

-I hadn't noticed that you speak English.

-What about you, you speak English like Dracula. But does everyone here speak English? Will I have to speak it all the time, like all day?

-I'm going to the same school, you can speak to me.

Sparkling lines of light move across the pale blue floor of the pool around the darker blue shadow of my body. The water spray itself is pale blue in the sunshine, lines of blue drops. Across the water, across the grass in the park, through the giant fig trees, I can see a black and white dog running and a distant figure, Billie, maybe, hitting a tennis ball for the dog to fetch. On the retina, cerulean blue spots floating in a sea of vermilion.