

# The Western Horizon

a serial novel by Anna Couani

## Chapter 5 Mongrel

The sky is grey behind the bare deciduous trees, their branches looking like bundles of twigs. After the anti-racism rally, a cool southerly breeze is blowing across the Renaissance stone facade of the town hall and across the Gothic stone facade of the church next door. Facades built over steel structures. It blows across the stone balustrades towards Billie. It could be northern Europe. In summer, that is. Billie hunched her shoulders forward, wrapped her heavy coat more tightly around her and looked down at the asphalt. The man standing in front of her leaned sideways and forward to look into her face.

-Are you still cleaning toilets, Bill? he asked, smiling. Still suffering for your art?

-Don't you change out of your office gear on the weekends? replied Billie, pointing at his expensive ochre shirt and his pressed brown slacks and looking around for Rini.

He was taller than average and had a tawny complexion and sandy hair with streaks of grey in it disguised by the sandiness. He had bushy eyebrows and twinkling light brown eyes but the sense of humour which generated the twinkling was designed to needle. He moved closer to Billie so that she had to look upwards to see his face and then relaxed back on his heels with his hands in his trouser pockets.

-Do you have time for a coffee, Bill? It's so long since we really talked. And now, with the Hanson phenomenon... I'd like to get your perspective, as a person from a mixed background, on this idea of "the mongrel"... how you see it in relation to the post-colonial concept of hybridity... you know, the fact that simultaneously we have some people talking about mongrels and others talking about hybridity even though "mongrels" really is a 19th century concept.

And we should catch up on old times too.

His eyes twinkled as he winked at her.

The city seemed on fire as the sunset reflected off the glass walls of the city buildings. Billie hesitated, paralysed, her face going pale, trying to find a direction to exit where he was not going, because she had previously been going in the same direction as he was. Feeling cold, in need of a hot coffee but not with him. Then she caught sight of Rini walking in a knot of people further along the street.

-I'm just on my way somewhere with my friends up ahead. Maybe another time, Billie said and sped off as he was trying to find out if she was coming to the anti-racism meeting in the following week.

She caught up with Rini and merged into the group.

-You look like you saw a ghost. Who's the guy? Vintage spunk or wanker has-been? asked Rini.

The others laughed.

-A ghost from the past... an arts bureaucrat... a philanderer... an opportunist... a user... a liar... a poseur... a rip-off merchant. He wants to know if I'm still suffering for my art by cleaning toilets and he said he wanted me to give him a perspective, as someone from a "mixed" background, on the relationship between the idea of "the mongrel" and the idea of hybridity. I should go back and tell him, "this mongrel dog bites", railed Billie.

One of the other women fell into line next to Billie and took her arm.

-Let it go, Billie. Don't look back. Don't let that dickhead derail our enterprise. He's trivialising our concerns. We need you to help us make posters - something big and colourful and powerful. We've been working on slogans. How about: *Who's next on the Hanson hit list - the handicapped?*

-Or: *Stop Immigration, Clone Hansons!*

-*Hanson smokescreen shields pastoralist land grab.*

-*Hanson Media Promotions Inc - sacred cows our specialty. From the people who brought you Rushdie, Garner and Demidenko.*

Sitting, cosy in the winter sun on the reclaimed land. Previously a polluted bog. Previously a teeming wetlands surrounded by forests. Mangroves and giant fig trees. The people lost in the community of animals and plants. After a break in the rain, the clouds blowing away to sea - at the coast, just here, you can walk there for summer. Huge grey clouds with fractal white edges. Wattle birds, lorrikeets, doves, swallows - calling, singing, diving, chattering. And before the cold has finished, buds appear everywhere. The old leaf falls off to reveal a new bud. This year, some plants never stopped flowering in winter.

Billie's flat was more cluttered now that she had moved her workbench and other gear back home into her bay window. But her cousin Maria had moved out, so it was now only as cluttered as when Maria was there. The browallia sat in its big tub outside the double doors on the verandah with its little yellow-green buds ready to burst into orange flowers. Billie was sitting at her workbench working on a rectangular linocut which, once enlarged, would form a basic design for the poster. Her linocutters were hanging under the workbench in the possum-skin sack. She finished cutting her lines with the V-shaped tool and took out her scooping tool, scooping out the negative area which she had allowed for the slogans. She laid the sheet of lino on tissue paper over her room heater to warm it up

and continued cutting. A plastic sculptural medium. The sharp tool slipped through the material like a knife through butter.

There was a cold wind blowing outside but inside was warm and cosy. The walls of the flat, originally off-white, were a kind of golden tan. The old brown rug still had a few patches of orange in it. Her black and white mongrel dog, Tui, lay on the floor up against the old velvet lounge. When she got up, he sat up, tilted his head and looked at her like a border collie. She looked at him. The ghost of *black (mongrel) dog* and the horror of his death was still with her. Tui got up, pulled his lead off its hook on the door and laid it on Billie's knee. Then he went and got her car keys from the kitchen table and put them on her workbench. After that he walked to the door and tried to open it by pressing on the door handle with his paw. Then he walked back to her and offered his paw for her to shake hands.

Tan arrived with a friend Min, to see how Billie was coming along with the design. Then she followed him back to his place to try out some typefaces and font sizes on his computer. The three of them squeezed into Tan's room. The overall impression was of dark brownness. The dark brown floorboards were covered with light brown coir matting. Tan turned on the lights. The walls were lined with bookshelves which were full of books and manuscripts. Some in Vietnamese, some in Chinese, some in French and some in English.

-Tan's a bit paranoid, said Min as he pulled up the blinds to let some daylight in.

-Where is your stuff? Billie asked Tan.

Tan pointed to a set of shelves.

-The top four shelves are my translations of other writers, the lower four are my own works.

The top four shelves contained a mixture of commercially bound books, the lower ones were mostly hand bound.

-How did you get the time to write so much? said Billie, pulling out a fat stapled foolscap manuscript and leafing through it. Her eyes slowed over an exquisite Proustian description in English.

-I'm an enthusiastic amateur, replied Tan, but there are only five manuscripts here. Some of these are repeats of the same manuscript in different forms, different languages.

-Writing the same novel over and over again.

-Yes, but each language changes the novel. Apart from the normal difficulties of translation, there are so many things you can't say in English. They sound too flowery and melodramatic. Contemporary English literature is so minimal. It allows only a limited emotional range. The subject matter is limited as well. And there's no real place in the literature for any explicit discussion of the social order.

They sat down at the computer. Min produced a disk which contained a lot of extra fonts. He and Tan exchanged a joke and laughed as Tan whacked the back of the monitor to stop

the screen wobble. They typed up the slogans and printed them on celluloid so that Billie could use them as overlays on her design.

Billie went home and printed her linocut on the garden table outside the back door of her flat. She was using an old-fashioned wringer as her press. One of the wet prints on tissue paper blew off the table and stuck onto Tui's immaculate white chest. When she peeled it off, some of the oil-based ink remained on the ends of his white fur. Billie hesitated before using the turps. Now he would have to be washed and dried as well.

While she splashed about washing Tui in the bath, Billie remembered one of the Aboriginal speeches from the rally.

-As my father said, "They treated us like dogs. They called us half-castes." And we well know that the Aboriginal victims of European abuse are still around and many are still young. So the criminal perpetrators of the abuse must be on the loose also. Still held close to the bosom of the society which produced them. Clearly, they're being protected. So it's no wonder that there's been such a backlash against native title, against apologising for the stolen children, against Aboriginal sovereignty, against the recognition of sacred sites. The perpetrators of these injustices are still alive and kicking today. Take a good look at the Hanson power base - The Gun Lobby, The Citizens Electoral Council (those Larouche followers). Not to mention all the thousands of Nazis who came here after the war. To this already volatile mixture has been added the pro-active mining company CRA and its subsidiaries which have launched political campaigns against Aboriginal groups on traditional lands and which have joined with the conservative government to turn back the clock on industrial relations. There's a secret Australia on this continent and it's a fascist Australia.

Rini curled up on her big spongy sofa under a wool rug with a sheaf of papers which Billie had given her. Printouts of the stolen files. She started looking at the type of classifications used and the organisation of the file layout. It had the usual *Family Name*, *Given Name*, *DOB*, *Passport N°*. Then came the category, *Racial or Ethnic Background*, followed by *Employment Record*. In the background category, for some people it was *Australian*, for others it was *Aboriginal*, or *Part-Aboriginal*, for herself it was *Greek*. For Billie, it was *Mixed Ancestry* and listed a couple of her ethnic origins. It seemed that the unmarked classification, *Australian*, was for people of British origin, mixed or otherwise. Being born in Australia, having Australian citizenship and having an Australian passport did not automatically render a person Australian according to these files. They stated a reality of Australian life which differed from the legal reality.

-It's interesting, Rini said to her partner who was reading at the table. They mark the racial or ethnic composition of non-Anglos but suppress the composition of British Australians. Who writes this stuff? Who are the informants or the respondents?

-Did you find any evidence there that Billie is on some kind of blacklist?

-It's all here.

The next morning Rini made the invitations for the coming spring party. She sat at her computer in the sun and selected a couple of formatted party invitations from a commercial software program. She printed them out then cut and pasted them together to produce three cards from the original two. Then she went down to the photocopy shop and made copies of the three cards on various coloured boards. The edges of each piece of the collage were still obvious in the photocopies but the images looked unified. She chose a white one for Billie which had a lot of wisteria in it and then coloured the card with water-colour pencils. She also pressed some real wisteria inside the card and sprinkled a bit of silver glitter on it. The snowy white board took on the perfume of the wisteria. On the reverse side of the card at the bottom, she pasted a thin line of type which read *Mongrel Cards Inc, seamlessness our specialty.*