

February 9th

Three days.

I can't sleep, can't eat, can't think. I'm going mad in this hotel room. For a while, I even imagine someone is following me, chasing me. I catch glimpses of someone in the mirror and in the windows at night. A tall, thin, willowy person.

What would you think of this room? Would you lie with me in my ocean-sized bed?

'It'll get better when I see you,' I say to the mirror.

I walk all the way from the hotel to City Beach in thirty-seven-degree heat. For a moment, I think I see Nick in a crowd out the front of a restaurant. It's strange: now that I'm in Perth, it's not your face I see everywhere, it's his. Is that progress?

At the beach, I leave my clothes in a pile and step into the ocean. It's not cold and the waves are rough. I put my head under straightaway, shut my eyes and kick, hoping for a current to carry me out. But I get pummelled into shore, again and again, as if an animal is tossing me back. I keep my eyes open underwater until they sting. I draw patterns with my toes in the sand.

*Grow up*, I tell myself, as I step back into my shorts.

Soon, I'll see you.

Soon, it'll be easier.

In the late afternoon, I walk back, still wet, then dried by the warm air before I know it. Coloured lights glow in the sky above Kings Park, and I find myself part of a crowd. I move with them, towards some sort of festival. *The trees speak*, a sign tells me—a light show. A kind of fever is building as I sway with the bodies to booms and crashes, a throbbing drumbeat, noises like thunder and lightning, and words rumbling through the trees:

*Kambararang.*

*Wildflower season.*

*Time of birth and life.*

You would like it. This land lit up. This beauty.

Trees flash yellow and red. Tiny glowing flowers of light fall around me, so real I think they might settle on my shoulders. I reach my fingers into the air to catch them, but my hands remain empty.

*Birak.*

*First summer.*

Now shadow animals flee across the canopy. Orange light and crackling fire. Colours light me up. You would be smiling. The saltwater I swallowed earlier is still tangy in my throat as I step forward again with the crowd.

*Bunuru.*

*Second summer.*

*Season of heat and coming of age.*

*Bunuru* is now, I realise.

Then it's *Djilba*, the season I spent with you in the desert.

*Season of wetlands and conception.*

And maybe something was planted within me back then in that season, something that's still growing ten years later, something you made. Maybe a new you is growing too, inside those bars.

As the show comes to an end, and I breathe in the smell of citronella and hot chips, I wish I could turn to you and ask if you know these words that are new to me. Six seasons for this vast land seems more reasonable than a mere four. Or perhaps these seasons are just for Perth, and there are more than six for that desert.

From the hill of Kings Park, I look across the dark water towards the lights of the city; the buildings that turn west, back to where I've come from. Behind me, the flat, dry land is waiting, silent and powerful, with its fire-red sunset skies, burning rocks, oily sheens of snakes, and glare of salt-pan patchworks. I often wonder what made the first Europeans think they could control it so easily. You're from England too, Ty, originally, whatever you told me about this land being yours and you being of this land. Maybe you would understand the chaos in my mind, the confusion I have about ownership and the power of control; how it feels possible to own and be owned at the same time.

February 10th

Two days.

I blink awake to messages on my phone.

Mum: So glad you're having a wonderful time, darling. Just what you need. Swim in that warm, bright sea and let your worries sink away. Tell me about the other volunteers, the food, the turtles! Xxx

An unknown number: Where are you?

Is this Nick? Or just a slip of someone's fingers? I click out of it before I'm tempted to reply. There is also an email from Rose.

Kate, you write with such passion about a place that sounds so different from London, almost dreamlike. I never realised the Australian desert was so huge! How do you know it so well? Are you planning any more trips there soon? Any guided tours?

I frown. Maybe I shouldn't drain the contents of the mini bar and then answer emails. I test out the thought of taking Rose on a desert trip with me, imaging us like Thelma and