

## *from* **Dancing in Moonlit Tide Pools**

**D**ee was back at the fence, not far from the car, when she heard voices coming from the river. Who would swim in such an isolated spot? Children? When she heard splashing, she headed towards the sounds.

Under the trees it was dark and cool, and the packed dirt of the paddock had given away to coarse river sand. Dee peered through the canopy of branches ahead to see a wide body of water some twenty metres farther on. It was bounded at one end by a rockfall that dropped some seven or eight metres from above and, at the other, by a sand spit. The fall was dry, scum had collected in damp crevices and, as she approached, midges rose in dark, darting vapours. Coming closer, Dee startled a crow. It flurried its wings, hopped away into the undergrowth.

There was another laughing shriek, another splash—someone jumping into the water from a tree? Dee craned to see beyond the spit. There was another smaller pool farther down, but no children. She was puzzled. She slipped off her sandals, stepped barefoot across the sand and paused, letting her toes sink into the soft mud. The water was warm, the colour of red tea. She took a step forwards, another, and now, lifting the hem of her skirt, another. Behind, churning mud traced her footsteps; ahead, the water was entirely opaque, as if the light, on striking the surface, was wholly absorbed. The effect made her dizzy: she had to look up, re-focus on the trees on the other side.

The water was well over her knees now, cooler, but the mud under her feet was still thick and soft. She squinted downstream—no sign of

children, and she couldn't hear them now, either. She stepped again: there was nothing—water was up to her chin, her skirt billowed, her blouse ballooned. She flapped her arms, pedalled her legs, kicked, scrambled for the bottom. Her foot scraped the mud, she planted her weight, swivelled, rushed forwards, up out of the water, up, back to the riverbank.

She was laughing, squeezing out her skirt, and shaking when she saw the woman. 'Oh!' She was startled—later all she could remember was that the woman was black, enormous, that her breasts were huge.

'Hello. I fell in...can you imagine? I'm okay, though.' Dee stopped, took a breath. 'I wasn't expecting it to be so deep.'

The woman didn't answer.

'I'm dripping wet.' She laughed again. 'And I have to drive back to town!' Dee looked down, shook her skirt. When she looked up the woman was gone.

'Oh!' Dee stared around. 'Oh!' She felt as if she were pinned to the ground. She brushed her skirt, felt hot again, yanked angrily at her blouse, started to say something—stopped. 'Uh—' She ran her hands down her hips.

It was dark under the trees. The few points of light that broke through the leaves flickered, never settled. Had she imagined the woman? She turned. Perhaps the sounds she took for children were birds. She sniffed: a mouldy earth smell, hot and sodden. She looked: deep shade, shifting light, and then a terrible scream—a jarring, hacking, tearing, like rusted iron, a beating of air—four crows tearing at a carcass, thrashing, fighting. And now, a single crow strutting towards her, its

head tipped, its beak gaping, a sound like suffering. Dee picked up her sandals and ran.

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Whenever Dee looked at Daisy's work, she wondered why she had not won at least one award at the Pilbara Show. Initially, she suspected that Daisy had transgressed some rule of category classification, for her style was not strictly traditional. When she mentioned it to the Sydney art critic, though, he had fluttered his hands and said, 'Darling, not at all! Naturally, I *adore* transgression! No, it was that dreadful brown paint spilled over everything! It absolutely ruined the composition, and, really, those awful trees!'

'Trees?' Dee had exclaimed. 'They're not trees; they're arms!'

Now, looking at the paintings spread out on her desk, she could see how the critic made the mistake: the fingers *did* look a little like tree branches—the spreading sort that a child might draw—and the forearms *could* be mistaken for thickened tree trunks. But she could *not* understand what he meant when he spoke of spilled paint. The design was painstaking; an accretion of curves of colour, not the round dots that characterised the art of the Western Desert people, but tiny, moving brush strokes.

Could it be that the critic forgot his spectacles!

From a distance, it was always the background that caught Dee's eye. At first glance, it was almost monochromatic; a combination of lighter and darker values of brown. Standing closer though, as she was

now, it was obvious that the colouring was complex, comprised of hundreds of thousands of tiny sweeps of browns, blacks, whites and reds. The pigments of the pool were more vivid than the rest, and the arms were painted in a clump.

What fascinated Dee was that, depending on the light, the pool moved in different ways: sometimes swirling, sometimes creeping, sometimes outwards, sometimes inwards and downwards.

'Remarkable!' Dee said the same thing every time.

The pool dragged on the arms; they quivered on the edge. Sometimes, looking at it, she could hardly bear the tension.

Dee shifted the canvasses. On the right-hand side of each painting, so lost in the background that it was easy to miss, were five dancing figures. Being so intrigued by the arms and the pool, Dee had never really studied the dancers; this time, though, she leaned right over. She had seen those dancing figures just down from the Old Homestead only the day before...

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The day before, running barefoot from the crows at the pool, Dee had cut around one of the sun-eroded, hexagonal-blocked basalt scree that littered the slope to the river. Her skirt clung to her legs, and her wet hair dripped down the back of her neck. Twice, she had flinched as the spinifex cut her legs and, finally, having planted her heel hard down on a rock, she limped to a halt.

She held up her foot. 'Ahh-ah! Oh, it's bleeding!' She leant against one of the larger smooth-edged blocks of the scree, balancing awkwardly on one leg.

A moment later, kicking mud out from between her foot and her sandal, she turned to the rock she had been leaning against. Ugh! She had leant against bird droppings. No, not bird droppings...erosion. No. Leached minerals.

But there was something about the marks on the rock—their uniformity—that made her stay to look closer. They were rock engravings—so old they were part of the rock.

'Women,' she said, seeing breasts. 'Dancing women,' she added.

The engravings extended across the exposed rock face: the dancers' heads were flung back; their upper arms and thighs long, their lower legs and forearms longer—bodies arched, contorted, limbs twisted. Dee peered at them until her eyes watered. The engravings were faded, but the figures were dancing in frenzy.

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## **STRICTLY NO ADMITTANCE RAPTOR MINES P/L**

Dee drove into the AJ60 project yard, parked the car near a battery of demountable offices. The place was deserted. She had thought she had seen a car ahead of her just before the turn-off to the company road, but there was no sign of it now—whoever it was must have headed further inland. She climbed out of her car.

That morning, when she had climbed out of bed, placing weight on her sprained ankle, she had felt only the vaguest bruise, a shadow of

pain; now, twisting her ankle, poking it, prodding it, the sprain seemed entirely healed. She bounced on her toes. Yes, she would walk to the top.

Starting out slowly, she skirted the edge of the yard and set off along a rough wheel track. It was a steep climb, she was sweating heavily, but the breeze was picking up, cooling her. As she cooled, she quickened her pace, jutting her chin into the wind, let her hair blow out. Below, a cloud of white corellas lifted off the trees and flew, screaming, over her head. They circled above, wheeling, shrieking, their voices quavering like hoarse old ladies, *Aierek-aier-aier-aierrrek!* Dee flung her head back. 'Aier-aier, yourselves!' she shouted and laughed, waved her arms wildly in the air. The birds dipped, came low enough for her to see their white plumage, their curved beaks, the naked patch of blue around their eyes. *Aierrrek!*

The northern horizon glowed momentarily, then growled. Dee walked faster.

She was breathing hard when she came to the blasted section. Resting near one of the silent bulldozers, she bent with her hands on her knees, then lifted her head, let the wind cool her face. With her head tilted like that, she could see the red cut of earth above. It wasn't safe; sand was running in rivulets all over the surface.

Dee started out once more, walking slowly now, leaving the track behind. She struck out for the crest of the north peak. Minutes later, she was at the top, heaving herself onto a rock shelf, and looking back at the way she had come.

'Oh!' If only she could design a tapestry that captured all this! In front of her, to the north, was the ocean, a quivering shimmer that made her eyes water. She swung around and was surprised to see the ocean

again: a wide bay cut into the land to the south. Out to sea there were more islands than she knew—fifteen, twenty—the stony peaks of a drowned mountain range. The ruins of Old Lawrence set at the mouth of the Douglas River was to the north and, just south and to the west of it, at the neck of the peninsular, was the metallic dazzle of the new town. To the east, the inland lay creased, dimpled, silver-daubed. Dee held her hair back from her face, swivelled to look at Mount Rexley's southern peak, a half kilometre away. She peered at the stony dirt of the col: one hundred and twenty metres below the surface was the ore body.

A wind-induced earache and the smell of coming rain made her peer over the far side of the rock, looking for a place to shelter. There was another rock shelf a couple of metres below and she wondered if she might try to climb down to it along a broken line of rocks off to the side. The brief sting of advancing, wind-driven rain forced her to make up her mind. She clambered down the rocks and arrived at the lower ledge just as a sudden, violent vein of lightning tore the air around her. Stunned by the searing light, the ferocity of the thunderclap, Dee backed in under the ledge and crouched, looking out.

It was quiet under the ledge and she became aware of the loudness of her breathing. Calming herself, she looked around, realised that the shelf on which she was standing was deep, undercutting the rock above by several metres. The ledge had once been much longer, too, but there had been a collapse at the far end. She could see how two great, black-streaked slabs of ironstone had fallen from above, twisted on impact, come to rest like massive, matched cubes, curiously aligned. Dee trod softly across the floor of the rock shelter, moved towards the collapse.

The fallen rock did not block the shelf entirely: the slab on which they rested was giving away, and a space had opened up behind. The movement had been recent: Dee could see boulders that, newly unearthed, had rolled further down the hill, and she could smell fresh dirt. Curiosity made her look into the space behind, but as she came close, another jag of lightning split the sky, and she leapt back, shocked again by the light and noise. Sand from the upper level had begun to spill, too, and she shivered as it fell into her hair—the blasting for the road works had shaken the whole area. About to leave, she hesitated: directly in front of her was the thin spill of sand, but, beyond that, in the darkness behind the fallen rocks (it had loomed up at her in the lightning) was a human form scored into the rock.

Now she was moving gingerly, not away, but forwards, squeezing through the space behind the rocks. Halfway along, she crouched unsteadily, looked inwards. It was intensely dark and for several minutes she could see nothing. She assumed that she was looking at a continuation of the shelf, but, as her eyes adjusted, she saw that it was a cave—a huge cave that ballooned out in dark, bulging curves. And there were rock engravings on the walls, hundreds of them.

Dee stayed close to the cave wall, felt her way, felt the ground beneath sloping downwards. She edged around, dusting at the surfaces, peering at the faded shapes. There were paintings along with the engravings: gruesome figures with mask-like faces that glared back at her through huge ringed eyes. And further along—it was *so* dark, *so* hard to make out—she saw engraved figures with bodies that tapered to long, smoky wreaths. How old were they? Old. Very, very old. Dee laid her own hand on the rock, moved the heel of her hand to fit over the hand

of a wreathed creature, moved deeper into the gloom. The dirt beneath her fluffed up in a powdery dust, coated her shins. She stepped: a fluff of dust, stepped, dust, stepped, snap, something rolled away from her foot.

It was a human skull, blackened, scabbed, the lower jaw fallen away into the dirt. She covered her mouth. Alongside were the long bones, neatly stacked, carefully arranged. There was another skull further along, a small one, imperfect, compressed. And more. More skulls, more bared teeth, more empty, staring orbits. And more dark-flecked bones, thick joints, tibias, femurs...on and on and on into the darkness.

The hillside behind her began to drum with slow, heavy drops of rain; she smelled steam and wet earth. She turned: blotches had mottled the rock outside, a trickle of water curled darkly across the sand. She plummeted out of the cave, through the passage, flew across the rock shelf, up the path at the side, up onto the overhead rock, scrambled across, jumped, and ran, ran, ran.

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