

provenance | a fall, a leap
JANE MESSER

In these extracts from 'Provenance', Rafaela discovers she is pregnant while staying on Bob and Clarissa Carmichael's farm, and attempts violently to end the pregnancy. In the second extract, Chella and Rafaela have been separated by misunderstandings, and Rafi must wait for the Carmichael family's return to the farm before going on to Melbourne alone. These events are a turning point in the novel: Rafi's dream of leaving home to become an artist has, in a few short weeks, been horribly complicated.

— NORTHERN NEW SOUTH WALES, 1960

'So, what's upsetting you?' Chella asked.

He waited, but she just couldn't bring herself to tell him. She went off while he was mending the race, walking until she reached a paddock well down the road a way from the Carmichael's place. She found a wide stump and sat on it, looking in shock at the lush hills around her, thinking of what she must do to herself. The place had abandoned her. The short fence posts, streaked black and grey, were tilted like tombstones and were as wizened. She wished she were just a post, just another thing. *Things*, of which there were many out here. Today, she couldn't even draw these things that had only a few weeks ago been beautiful to her: faded slat-posted haysheds on miraculous and historical tilts, long shadows and bundled-high clouds. On the bicycle exploring these parts with Chella, they had passed grey water towers and tanks sitting alone in the middle of bright paddocks. She had seen rolls of flaky barbed wire pollinating rust, and tangles of blackberry bush.

Weeds: weeds that must have been known once to someone, but not now. People could not be bothered to remember, or if they knew, to tell stories about broken old things. And so they were all like her now, just things emptied of beauty and purpose.

Why was she here and not in Melbourne?

'I am a very small thing,' Rafi said out loud.

Twenty feet from the wooden barn, the doors wide open, the barn's shonky stricken side was only half visible. The hay inside was dun in colour.

Entering its shadow Rafi paused and let her eyes adjust to the darkness inside and the height of the bales in front of her. She counted the bales up towards the roof. They were many in number.

Rafi climbed, digging her fingers into the straw. She felt its hardness, its tight pack. Near the ceiling the smell was strong and the air hot. The floor was way, way down there. Water looked as hard as this from the second dive board at the pool. She looked at the spider's webs and sparrow's nests matted in the roof in grey clumps. They were dusty and pocked with holes. The birds had gone from the nests. Up, down, up, down; the looking made her dizzy. Rafi closed her eyes. She swayed, hoping that she'd miraculously overbalance. She swayed and wobbled then opened her eyes, her legs bracing with the effort to rebalance. She wanted to dislodge the child inside her, but rescue herself. To really jump she'd have to leap out into midair, but then she might break her legs. She thought of women falling down the stairs—how did they do it? Twist and turn, somersault, come down crashing, legs and arms flailing. Hit the floor flat at the bottom of the stairs. Rafi squeezed shut her eyes. She needed a push.

She pushed out from the straw, ripping the skin of a finger on the way down. Her skirt caught and tore. Yet she couldn't not grab out with her hands as she fell—and, clinging to the stepped bales, hips bumping down, feet bracing, she slid, skin scraping on the way down. Her hair caught and was yanked out. She climbed again and slipped herself off the top bales, fast. Tufts of hay loosened as she grabbed at them, scared that the baby must want to live as badly as she wanted it to die. She climbed again, and bumped and fell down the stepped bales and did this again until her face and hands were burning with pain.

Where was the shift in her belly, the gush of baby blood? Perhaps it was curled up on itself, arms around its head.

She left the barn, zigzagging across the green fields, dragging out the pain that every bone and all her skin felt. She'd stink of hay and bruises for a week. She smelt like a cow and would be black and blue. Everything hurt and reminded her of her naivety and the desire she had felt, still felt, for him. She sank down between the cow pats and clumps of grass, thirsty and tired. Ants were everywhere; she moved away a little. She throbbled with pain. The posts, the fields around her, herself—another *thing*. Her hand on the ground

was dirt-streaked, nail-chipped, a veiny thing that did not look like a part of her. The dry soil here was not as dark as the farm's mulched garden soils. It was dry and grainy and her hand was just like it, the colour of earth. If only she could disappear into the earth: die, dissolve and merge.

She brooded and the ants crawled. One diverted to a dark patch, and disappeared. Rafi crawled over—it was the strangest thing, only a foot, or maybe a little less than a foot across. When she looked down into its blackness, it was dark and cool. A very deep hole, and narrow.

If she stuck her head down inside, she could suffocate herself. Get her head in but not be able to wrench it out, the way it was with children and stair banisters, and dogs with gates. She could choke on spiders, ants, worms, dirt and old air all the way up from China. The last thing seen would be nothing, just blackness, with no one to see her seeing nothing. Her oily, tearful skin would drip, and her greasy hair grow long as she'd heard the hair of dead people did, and her blackened fingers flail aimlessly in the sunny field outside the hole. A thing, she would scream all the way to China down this deep hole.

China: a place not so far very away from India. She didn't want Chella accused of beating her black and blue then stuffing her face in the hole. She sat back on the ground, picking scraps of hay from her hair.

She said loudly, 'Oh well, I'll live then.'

She didn't mean him any harm. And try as she might, she hadn't killed his baby.

Rafi scabbled around for a good-sized stone, and lying flat, dropped the stone down the hole, pressing her ear to the ground for the thump. She heard nothing. She would come back with twine and a rock to measure the length of the hole.

Walking into the dark house she found the kitchen light needed replacing, and from the cupboard chose a bulb with a low wattage. She stood on the kitchen table screwing it in, squinting up into the cobwebs and dust clinging to the glass lampshade. To drop the child down the hole—no one would find it deep inside the earth.

Rafaela did not know where to stand to greet the Carmichaels when they came back. It was not her house. So she stood tall with her arms by her sides, breathing evenly to keep the tears down until the blue truck was parked and the girls had jumped out and there was lots of noise to hide in. The girls had grown whole inches and their bare legs were beach-brown. With a quick 'Hi!' they ran to the paddock where the new calves grazed.

'So, how's it been going?' asked Clarissa casually with a smile, shaking out her skirt of wide red on white stripes, which in the heat of the drive had stuck to the back of her legs.

'Bob's dad pulled through brilliantly. He made an amazing recovery. Look Bob, we have a herd!' she said, seeing the calves. 'How did it all go?'

'Someone's been fixing fences by the look of it,' said Bob Carmichael cheerfully, walking past with bags. It had been Chella's task to work on the fences while the family were gone.

'He ran out of timber,' said Rafaela.

Clarissa called out to Bob to put the kettle on for tea. 'Is Chella about?' she asked.

Rafi turned away, pulling out a bag from the back of the truck. 'He had to go a couple of days ago.'

'Oh,' Clarissa said, surprised.

'He was offered some work, so I'll be meeting up with him. I was just waiting for you to come back.' Her voice felt stiff in her mouth, not breezy and cheerful as she had planned it to be.

Secrets loomed inside her, swelling unspeakably. Whichever way Rafi figured Chella's silence, she found herself abandoned. By now he would be on the Woolgoolga beach amongst brightly sariied women, their headscarves waving out in breezy streams of pink and gold, their dresses flapping at bejewelled, tinkling ankles.

She did not want sympathy, but Bob and Clarissa were all concern. They were sorry they had been so long with Bob's parents, and then the girls had needed a break. Sorry about Rafi having to stay on alone. Had it been very long; were she and Chella very inconvenienced? Rafi felt herself examined. They would undo her, make her teary.

'Where are you meeting him?' Clarissa asked.

Rafi could not get past her on the steps with all the questions.

'Melbourne.'

'So now you have to go all that way on your own!'

Rafi nodded then ran up the steps with the bag.

Rafi longed to tell her story, and here was Clarissa weakening her resolve. She was as she remembered, but more so. Clarissa was an all-embracing presence: browner, her bare legs tanned, her toenails painted red, brown hair blonded in streaks from the sun, the ends a little dry and fly-away. They must have spent time at the beach. Thea and Adelaide came back from the paddock, Thea so much grown that her pleated skirt was short, her red, peter pan blouse tight under the armpits. They were saying they'd seen the calves, to come and look, Thea clapping a hand over young Adelaide's mouth so that she alone could talk. Adelaide struggled free. They had grown, as had Rafi. Would Clarissa notice her fuller bosom and black-circled eyes? If she were to talk she'd be pitiful. Rafi reminded herself that she barely knew the woman.

It only took a moment to pack her bags and then to huddle them amongst the Carmichaels' gear in the hallway. She stripped the sheets. There was no time to wash

them. Flinging them over the clothes line to air she gave the cotton a shake and pulled free a long strand of Chella's hair.

Bob had driven them here from town so she supposed he would take her back.

From the garden she could see the family with the cows. The girls fetched hay and the two cows ate from their outstretched hands, with the calves hovering nearby. Adelaide was a little nervous, pulling her hand back each time. Clarissa rested her hands on her daughter's shoulders.

It was just a matter of biding her time until it was all over. Nine months was not such a long time. Though the plan, which Rafi had gone over more than once, did not stop her need to cry. Especially here, beside the washing line watching the family.

She wiped her eyes with a corner of the sheet. Another set lay folded in the linen cupboard. She could at least remake the bed. Walking through the kitchen she saw that the kettle was boiling, the water spitting hotly from the spout. She made a pot of tea, and reluctantly took herself down towards the paddock to call them in.

When Bob saw her bags he said she'd not be rushing off, and to take them to Adelaide's room who could move in with Thea for a couple of nights. Thea groaned, Clarissa shushed her. Bob knew the train timetable—there wasn't a train for another two days. Rafi wanted to stay in town at a pub, but they would not hear of it.

It was a relief after all, to stay. Over tea and biscuits and cordial for the girls, Rafi told them the story of the cows' births. The girls munched and gulped on either side of her, hanging off the edge of the table by their elbows, swinging their rear ends and asking questions. They couldn't sit down or be still. 'We've been driving for hours,' explained Clarissa. Rafi liked them, and felt herself relax a little. She touched Adelaide's hair briefly when the girl spoke to her. Then the girls ran off to the chook pen, still excited to be home again. The kitchen was quieter with only the three adults.

Bob said he'd go over to Peter Boil's, let him know they were back. Clarissa went to get their dirty holiday clothes. In the laundry, Rafi lit a match to start the gas. Clarissa dropped a bundle of clothing on the floor.

'Tell me again your arrangements with Chella. Where are you meeting him?'

'Melbourne. I've got it written down somewhere.'

'Didn't you say before that you were both from Melbourne?'

Rafi frowned, pretending to recall. 'Yes, but we're in the middle of moving house.'

'It's just that—Rafi you don't look well. You've got black rings under your eyes, you're white as a sheet, and not at all the strapping young woman we left behind to repair the fences. And with Chella not here, I find myself a little worried.'

'We didn't go into town often enough perhaps. Haven't been eating as much meat as I should have. He's a vegetarian, you know. Sikhs don't eat meat.'

The tub filled noisily. Clarissa leant against the doorjamb with her back to the light, summing her up. A halo of light shone suspended around the loose surface of her hair.

‘Forgot something.’ Squinting, Rafi edged out past the older woman.

Clarissa reached out to put her hand on her shoulder. ‘There are times when you should let people help you. Sometimes it’s important not to be on your own.’

Rafi shrank from her bold kindness, frozen in her determination to keep silent. On the way to the kitchen she picked up a stray white sock belonging to one of the girls. She looked about her blankly, forgetting what she had come into the house for, and then remembered it was to see what else could be found in the way of dirty washing.

She toyed with the idea of telling Clarissa everything. Such a physical woman might understand how it could have happened.

The Carmichael girls showed Rafi around Adelaide’s bedroom, talking as if she were going to be staying forever and not just two nights. At 6.30 pm everyone sat down in the kitchen for chops and mash and an hour later the girls were in their pyjamas having a story read to them.

Going alone into Adelaide’s room that night she found some comfort in the mattress’s lumps and a lost building block that her feet came across under the covers. Not for a moment did Rafi connect this little girl’s room with the possibilities of her own child. While the Carmichaels were away she’d not come into it, but now from the bed she looked about her at the girl’s things before turning off the lamp. Everything was arranged for a child’s entertainment and consolation: the small woven cane lamp that was Adelaide’s night-light, the yellow gingham curtains which, missing curtain rings, hung crookedly, a row of wide-awake dolls sitting along a low wooden bookshelf. From the family’s travels Adelaide had brought home a Russian canister doll and a wooden Dutch girl in clogs with stiff red skirt and articulated limbs. Rafi found her place in the bed’s dips and hollows, and fell asleep.

When it came time to leave for the train station, the girls hung onto Rafi beside the truck, wrapping their bare legs around hers, ordering her to stay. Thea was starting at her new school on the Monday. She didn’t want Rafi to leave and not be there in the afternoon.

‘I’ll write letters and visit,’ Rafi promised. How rash that offer was. Rafi hid in their uninhibited, dismayed noise. There could be no visit. The tower of lies she’d be spinning until the baby was born was to be perilously tall.

In the truck a mile down the road, Clarissa took an envelope from her handbag.

‘Here’s more wages for the fences.’

‘This morning’s pay more than covered what we did, really.’

‘Just take it,’ said Bob.

'No, really, I've enough money.' She blushed: she had to stop blushing every time she lied. 'We won't be poor.'

'Please, you'll need it.'

They thought Chella was a scoundrel. They were right, he was. He was gone. And she *would* need every pound. Clarissa leant against the window, the elbow of her folded arm resting on the rim of the opening. Rafi turned slightly to look at her. Clarissa was thinking of something else and whatever it was it made her mouth fall at the corners and her eyes look away tearily, and her back, usually so upright, slump.

Bob patted Rafi's knee. 'You look after yourself,' he said.

Another mile passed before Clarissa moved. She leant out the window to yell out, 'You girls okay?'

'Yes,' they called back.

Clambering down from the high cabin seat at the train station, Rafi thought how bravery could hide bleak fear.

Bob was getting the girls out. They leapt down then climbed back up and jumped again.

Clarissa asked if Chella would be meeting her at the station.

'Well, no, I haven't told him I'm on this train. I'll catch a tram home.'

'Where do you live in Melbourne?' asked Clarissa.

Rafi looked away. 'We're looking for a new place.' She couldn't recall the name of a single Melbourne suburb.

Standing with the Carmichaels on the platform, Rafi dreaded sliding into her empty train seat. Clarissa was sure to give her a quick kiss on the cheek. They walked towards her carriage. Clarissa helped the girls to step across the wide gap between the platform and the high metal step. Beneath their feet was the deep drop between platform and carriage. Only two months ago Rafi had stood beside a train like this, beneath a white moon, meeting Chella for the first time.

Clarissa hurried down the aisle ahead of her to her seat. The train was leaving within minutes. Rafi gave a little wave to Bob who stood with arms crossed on the platform outside. The girls leant over Rafi to wave at their father, pushing her with their knees and jutting elbows, touching her for the last time. The horn sounded.

'Telephone us reverse charges if you need to,' said Clarissa.

'I'll write. No need to phone, especially not reverse charges.' Still, it was a relief to know she could call.

'Give Rafi a kiss.'

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As evening turned to night, laughter rose over the clatter of wheels from the far end of the carriage. Other than these clutches of sound from the two young men and the woman

they were with, the train carriage was empty and silent. Rafi hid in her seat. She didn't want to be noticed by anyone.

Rafaela closed her eyes to sleep, too nauseous to eat her sandwiches or to find the food car. She did not know if it was the pregnancy or her misery that kept her on the edge of vomiting. The sounds of the drinking and laughing receded almost as though the men had left the carriage.

But dozing, she sensed someone standing near. Could she smell his breath? His beery breath would be a warning if he got too close. The train sounds of wheels and metal were very loud around her; she could not hear him standing silently beside her. The rug was tight around her; she willed the intruder away. If she did not acknowledge his imagined presence he wouldn't dare lay a finger on her. Her handbag jutted against her hip, the woollen rug scratched her chin. These things were real, not the draft and change to the pattern of air as she sensed him at last rise and retreat to where his friends sat in the back of the carriage. After a few minutes more when her heartbeat slackened, Rafi opened her eyes, and, neck stiff with anxiety, swung a glance at the empty seat beside her. No beery vapour hung suspended to mark the space where he had stood. There was no sign of a man having bent over her. The sounds from the back of the carriage were just the same. It had been a bad, bad dream, Rafi told herself.

Some hours later she reawoke with a start. Her mouth was dry, and burning down the back of her throat. She checked her watch. It was two am and she hadn't drunk since boarding. She rose to get some water from the gangway. One of her arms was stiff with pins and needles. The hip she'd lain on ached. Stumbling sleepily down the aisle, trying with her numb fingers to grip the seats to steady herself from the rocking of the fast train, she saw the men and the girl were gone. Still half-asleep she didn't wonder about their bags lying amongst the party litter, the beer cans and empty chip and cigarette packets. They must have got off the train while she was asleep. The noise of the train's wheels and engine was louder than the clang of the thick door, so they didn't hear her enter the carriageway. But the girl saw her after a moment, saw Rafi's stare of fright. And the girl's eyes, glassy with drink and pleasure, or so Rafi imagined, did not change in expression. Her pale sodden eyes held Rafi's languidly. A smile strayed across her lips, perhaps she smiled at Rafi's shock—her mouth half hidden by her long hair, thick tendrils of which had fallen out of the tight bun she'd worn earlier in the evening. She was leaning back against the young black-haired guy who'd hooted at Rafi, the one she thought had breathed on her. His face was buried amongst the brown locks of her hair as he sucked on her neck. One of his arms reached under her shoulder to help her stand, his hand gripping a small bare breast, radish white, his other naked arm—his sleeves were rolled up to his biceps—holding one of the girl's bare legs. The girl's scuffed brown pump hung

precariously from her toes. The other man pushed himself slowly in and out of her, as if in a daze, while the girl touched herself, rubbing herself up and down the way Rafi did, looking at Rafi. Her other pale and naked arm reached languorously up, waving drunkenly. The girl's fingers were curling to Rafi, beckoning Rafi closer.

Three beer cans stood apart on the floor and then one fell over, releasing its smell of hops, the brown liquid chasing across the metal floor. The black-haired man looked up and saw Rafi. Her shock coalesced in a spasm of sound as she hauled the carriage door open and ran back to her seat. Grabbing everything she owned she pushed her way down into the next near-empty car, then through to the next, looking behind her, afraid the men would haul her back to where the girl was grinding and humping. She flung herself down in a seat near some sleeping people, with her back against the window so that she could see him as soon as he got to her, and kick him away. She gripped her bags tightly, ready to wake the sleeping passengers, but found herself gagging and so she struggled out of the narrow space and down towards the next set of toilets. Sliding the lock tight, Rafi steadied herself against the wall, vomiting until her arms were too weak to hold her up. Sinking to her knees she clung to the thin metal rim of bowl, long strings of yellow spittle hanging from her lips, tangling with her hair.

She wept, afraid for having been beckoned by the girl—as if she *knew* about Rafi. As if she knew what confusion and shame she was in. Rinsing out her mouth, every limb shook with the shock of what she had witnessed. Rafi squeezed into the space on the floor between basin and toilet beneath the glazed window; she didn't know how to stop herself from crying: how would she ever stop? She didn't know what to do. Nothing was certain, not what lay inside her, not Chella, what next to do. She couldn't stop recalling the girl's feasting eyes and soft-skinned arm waving to her, as if they shared a common end. She couldn't bear to see again the girl's fingers openly touching herself.

The train stopped. Were they at a station? She couldn't tell through the frosted window, so she scrambled up, her bags swinging and bumping behind her. Yanking open the exit door, Rafi saw how brilliant and numerous were the stars. She dived, legs seesawing, heart a-gamble, into the giant puzzle of the night.

JANE MESSER lectures at Macquarie University and writes fiction and essays. 'The Mermaid of Cockatoo' is forthcoming in *Best Stories under the Sun 2*, August 2005; for another extract from 'Provenance', and discussion of otherness and cultural difference, see *New Writing*, vol. 1, 2005 <www.multi-lingual-matters.com/multi-journals>.
