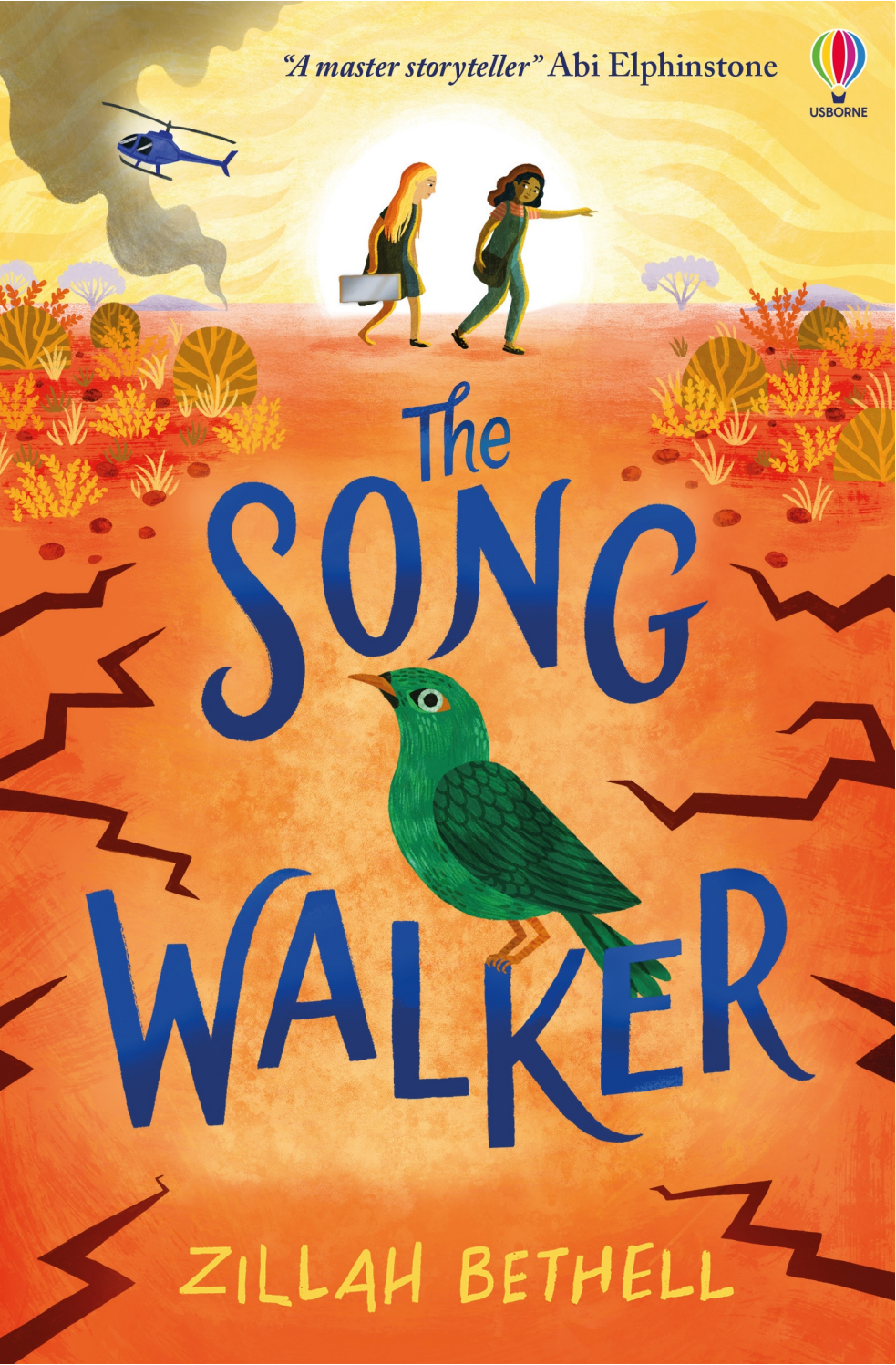
"A master storyteller" Abi Elphinstone

USBORNE



The SONG WALKER

ZILLAH BETHELL

PRAISE FOR
The SONG WALKER

"The girls' journey through such a harsh but beautiful landscape was gripping, and Tarni's love for the land and its stories was so clear. A fabulous adventure in the best possible sense."
Holly Webb

"Another triumph, a truly special book. My heart sang whilst reading this extraordinary story…"
Mrs K, Primary Teacher Bookshelf

"Spellbinding story-telling that had my heart in my mouth as I walked the Australian Outback with Tarni and a very lost young girl."
Miss Cleveland

"An incredible adventure which hooks you in from the off…"
Mrs Sydney's Famous World's Smallest Library

"A breathtakingly beautiful and ethereal symphony that made my heart sing…this is a phenomenal story."
Kevin Cobane, FCCT VIP Reading



First published in the UK in 2023 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England, usborne.com

Usborne Verlag, Usborne Publishing Ltd., Prüfeninger Str. 20, 93049 Regensburg, Deutschland, VK Nr. 17560

Text copyright © Zillah Bethell, 2023

The right of Zillah Bethell to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Cover and inside illustrations by Saara Katariina Söderlund © Usborne Publishing, 2023

Cover typography by Thy Bui, © Usborne Publishing, 2023

The name Usborne and the Balloon logo are Trade Marks of Usborne Publishing Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781474966856 05377/1 JFMAMJJASON /22

Printed and bound using 100% renewable energy at CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.

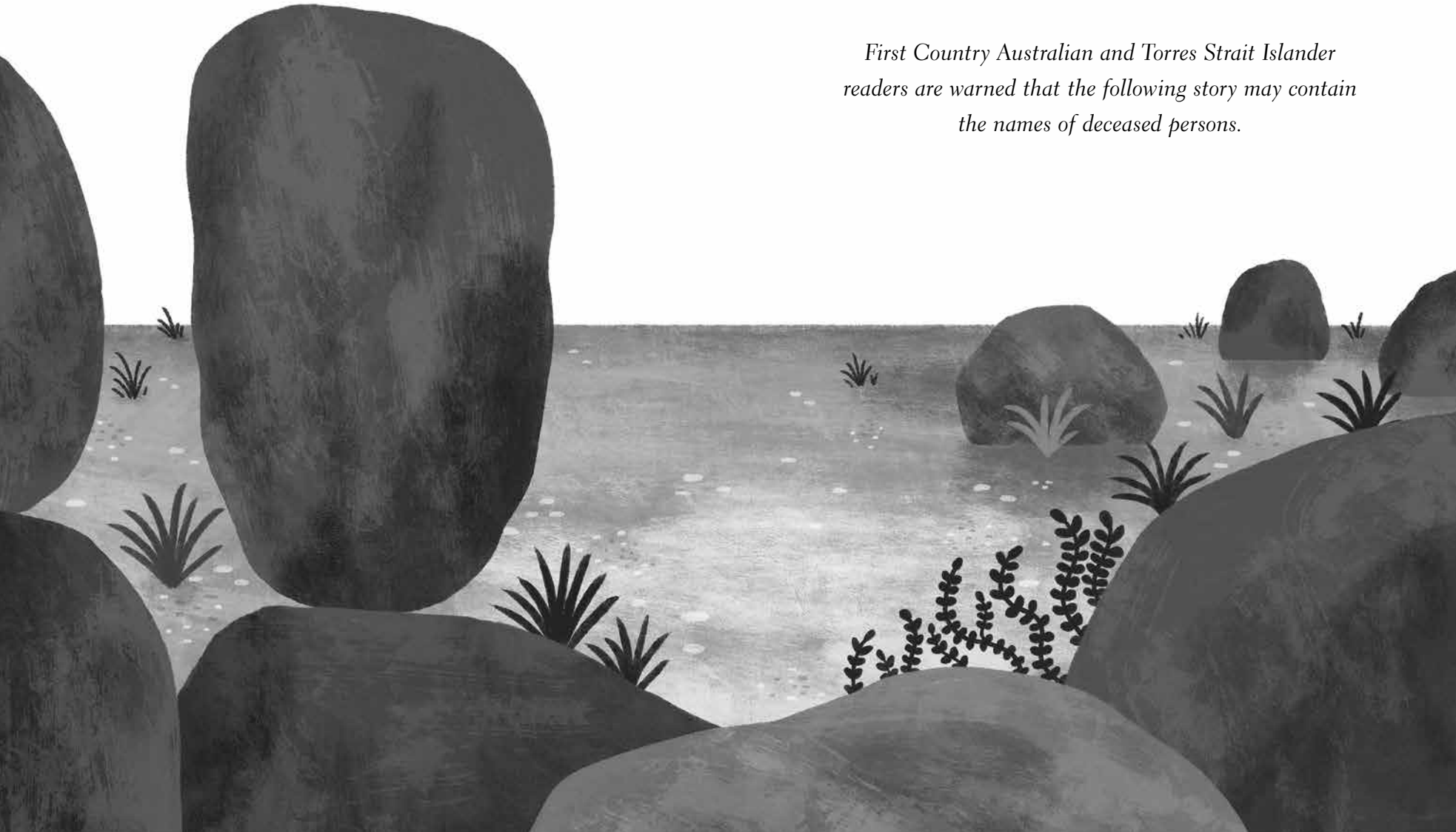
MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C171272
FSC
www.fsc.org

The SONG WALKER



ZILLAH BETHELL

USBORNE



First Country Australian and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following story may contain the names of deceased persons.

This book is dedicated to the Alyawarre community of the Northern Territory.

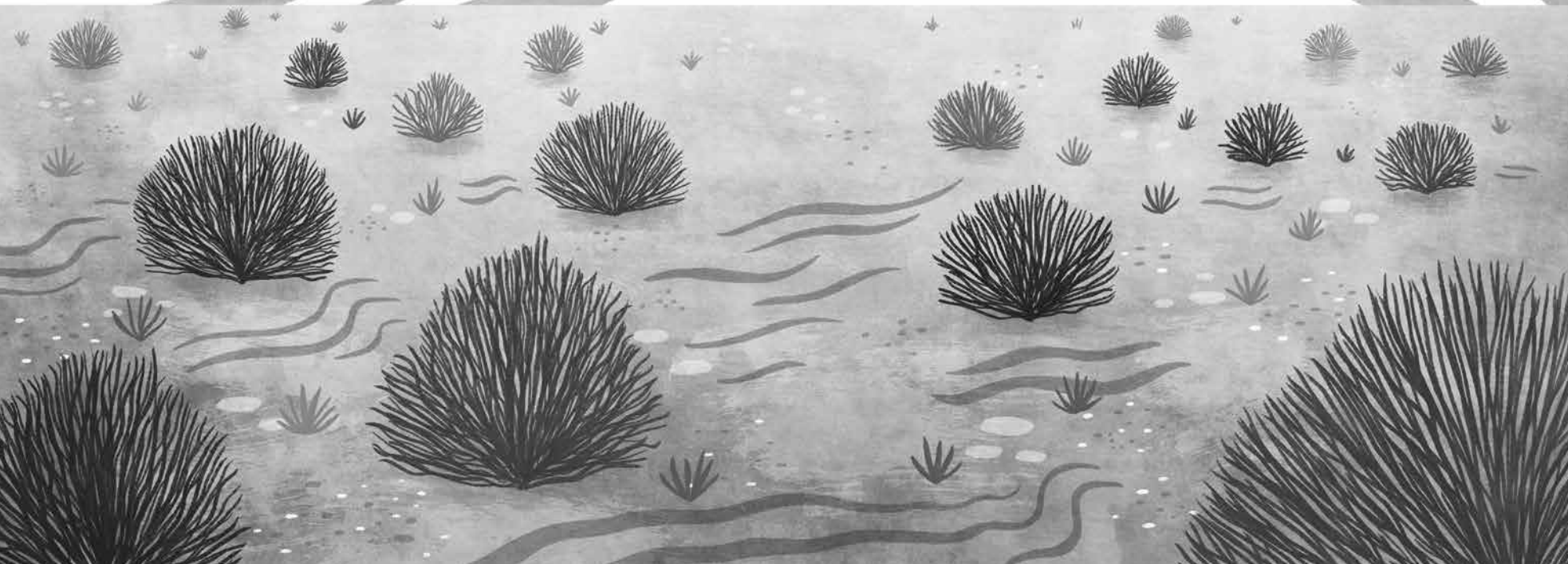
The author and the publishers thank the Alyawarre community for reading the book and allowing their name to be used.

GLOSSARY OF ALYAWARRE TERMS



ampe – child
anatye – bush potatoes
angente – mirage
aperle – father's mother
arelhe – woman
arrpwere – magpie
atyemeye – mother's father
atyeye – little sister / brother
aywaye – old man
aywerte – spinifex grass
gnamma – waterhole
gwardar – a highly venomous snake
ipmenhe – mother's mother
irntirte – horrible
kele – done/okay/finished
kwarte – egg
kwepalpale – bellbird
tidda – best female friend
werte – hello
yaye – older sister

Only the song through the land
hallows and heals.
Sonnets to Orpheus (Rainer Maria Rilke)



Coda – *Music*

The concluding passage of a piece or movement.

(*Oxford English Dictionary*)

……right, left, right…left……right……left……..…right……left……right……

Le…ft.

I stop walking.

I didn't even know I was walking until a moment ago but…

I stop.

Still.

Quiet, until I can hear my dry breath.

I don't know where I am. I look around. A red landscape of dust. Flat. Stretching everywhere. And above, a blue, blue sky.

What am I doing here?

My foot is hurting.

The left one.

It is the pain that has made me stop walking, I think.

I look down at my feet. On my right foot I have a black, shiny leather shoe. Pointed at the front. Delicate

stitching around the seam. The leather looks scratched and scuffed and dirty. A piece of it hangs off the side of the shoe, dangling like the last leaf off a tree. Underneath I can see the white of the lining, filthy now with red dust.

I look at my left foot.

It is bare.

I lift it and try to see its bottom side. Slivers of small sharp stones stick into the sole, dried earth clumped between my toes. And on the parts of the foot that touch the ground more often than the others – huge blisters. Bulbous, bursting and bloody. Open wide sores with ripped strips of skin. It is no wonder it hurts.

I suddenly feel sick.

I *want to be* sick.

I brush the stones from out of my foot – making the pain even worse for a second – and crash forward onto the ground. The thing I am holding bangs hard on the grit and I let go of its handle.

Lying on the ground I take deep breaths. I close my eyes and imagine…well, I don't know what. Not this, I suppose. I imagine something that isn't this. Something else. Something better.

Something soft and cool and shapeless that I can't quite picture.

That makes the sick feeling go away. Eventually.

So, I open my eyes, roll onto my back and look up at the sky.

So blue.

Like the sea.

I imagine myself in the air – the whole world upside down – as I fall towards this sky sea. The wind rushing itself around my arms and my legs. The birds watching me in awe. Dropping wonderfully towards the water and never splashing into it.

But my body stops me hiding in this dream.

My body doesn't *want* me to dream.

My head is angry and thumps like a punch.

My throat and mouth are raw and gluey.

My stomach feels lonely and hollow and sour.

And my left foot hurts.

I sit up, my arms wrapped around my aching legs, my chin resting on my knees. I look out over the red, flat land before me. A heat-haze horizon blurring the sand and scrub up into the sky.

Then I twist my head and look behind me.

The same.

A vast expanse of nothingness. No buildings. No cars. No trucks. No bridges. No electricity pylons. No power stations. No railway tracks. No roads. No people. No lost shoe.

Nothing.

Just emptiness.

Everywhere.

The wind begins to blow dust off the ground and I hug my legs closer and shut my eyes.

Through the pounding of my head I try and think as hard as I can.

Think, think, think. I need to think.

There are three questions…

Three questions in my mind that I want to know the answers to right now.

The first question is – obviously – *Where am I?*

I feel as if this place is not the place to which I belong. It is too hot and too empty to be somewhere I belong. The one shoe on my foot does not look right for a place like this. The black dress I am wearing feels too soft for a place like this. Which leads my mind to the second question…

What am I doing here?

There must be some reason for me to be here. Some reason why I have found myself walking around – one shoe lost – in the middle of…well…nowhere. Everything happens for a reason, doesn't it? Don't people say that? I'm sure I have heard it before.

But it is the third question that worries me the most.

Or at least it is my inability to answer the third question that worries me.

I close my eyes even tighter and try to block out the landscape. I try to block out my headache. I block out my hunger and my thirst and I try to concentrate.

Okay, I think.

So…

Who am I?



PART ONE

Fugue – 1 A musical composition in which a short melody or phrase is introduced by one part and successively taken up by others.

2 A period during which someone loses their memory or sense of identity and may leave their home or usual surroundings.
(*Oxford English Dictionary*)



Chapter One

THE END

I've no idea how long I have been walking. Or where I've come from. Or where I'm going. Seconds, minutes, hours – they mean nothing to me.

I stumble on along what feels like the same strip of landscape, over and over and over and over again. Red dust desert with patches of small, wiry green bushes, endlessly reaching out in front of me.

The sun burns down from directly above – *does that mean it is midday?* – and the top of my head feels sore. So do my arms.

Looking behind, I see a trail. No footprints. My legs are too tired to actually lift my feet off the ground. Instead, I half drag them along, leaving a continuously twisting path that disappears between all the bushes somewhere back in the distance.

I keep moving and, after what feels like a very long time, I come to a small slanting rock jutting out of the dirt. It has a flat slice missing, just wide enough to sit on. I lean back against it, the heat in the rock burning my bottom and the tops of my legs through my dress. I rest the thing I carry on my lap.

This thing is a silvery, metallic box about a metre long with a handle in the middle. On either side of the handle are two locks. Each of the locks has three numbers that you have to turn. Line up the correct numbers and the locks will spring open. Only I don't know the numbers. Or, at least, I don't *remember* the numbers. Like I don't remember anything else.

I pick up a small rock from the ground and start banging at one of the locks. There might be something useful inside. Some food perhaps. Or something to drink. Something to help me survive in this weird wilderness. I slam and I slam but the rock doesn't help. It just buckles part of the lock slightly. I try the other one, slamming the rock down hard, hoping the lock will flick open.

It doesn't.

Dropping the rock back onto the earth, I clutch the box to my chest and shut my eyes.

Listen, I tell myself.

I try to listen.

If there is a road nearby, I might hear a car. Or if there is a railway track, I might hear a train.

So I listen.

But no. There is nothing. Just the sound of the wind blowing over the shrubs and around the rock, and the occasional squawk of a far-off bird.

That's all.

HELLO, I scream into red dust.

It doesn't answer.

WHERE AM I?

Hysterical.

Who's laughing?

I turn around.

Me.

A pool.

I see a pool.

Water!

I drag my body – heavy, now, so heavy – towards it. I am so tired. So thirsty.

But the pool moves away. It shimmers in the heat and clings to the horizon. I hold out one hand to tell it to stop. To stay where it is. But it keeps moving away.

I don't understand.

I don't understand.

I think time passes…

Air getting cooler. Sun drooping.

Pull the short sleeves of my dress down but they don't stretch further than my elbows.

A small pocket on the side of my dress…inside a green swirled marble. *A marble? Why am I carrying a marble?* Hold it up to the last glow of light and turn it around with dirt-cracked fingers, before slipping it back into the pocket.

I look around. Lost. Cold.

Please don't leave me out here in the dark, I say into the emptiness.

But only my heart answers.

I think the time has passed again.

Night smothers me.

Sounds…a flap of leathery wings, chit-chattering creatures, distant howls, snufflings close by.

Squeeze my ears and eyes tight after one peep at the cold frieze of stars and violent moonlight.

Breathing in and out, heart beating still…dozing in

and out of dreams. I am gliding…soaring…screaming…falling…

Then…

…the sun explodes, forcing my eyes wide to the same picture.

Endless red dust before and after.

Whimpering, sobbing.

Is that my voice? Is that me?

Don't leave me out here to die.

Somebody…save me…

Save—