

Flames



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROBBIE ARNOTT

Robbie Arnott was born in northern Tasmania in 1989. After graduating from college, he studied advertising in Melbourne, on Australia's mainland, before taking up a job offer at a small advertising firm in Tasmania's capital city of Hobart. His first novel, *Flames*, was published in 2018 and won a Sydney Morning Herald Best Young Novelist award and a Tasmanian Premier's Literary Award. After *Flames*, Arnott published two other novels: *The Rain Heron* and *Limberlost*. His work takes much of its inspiration from the natural Tasmanian landscape, particularly its coasts and rivers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before the British colonization of Tasmania in the early 1800s, Aboriginal nations made up the island's entire human population. Within the first few decades after the British settlers arrived, the Aboriginal Tasmanian population, which numbered in the thousands, was reduced to 47 through a combination of violence, introduced illnesses, and social policy. This decimation of the indigenous people, which many historians consider to be an act of genocide, features in the novel's account of the fire spirit's origins. Meanwhile, *Flames's* Esk God's observations about the disappearance of other gods—who each represent a different element of nature—align with the fact that many of Tasmania's native and endemic species, including the Tasmanian devil, the bronze whaler shark, and the Huon pine, are endangered, with some on the brink of extinction.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Limberlost, Arnott's third novel, deals with some of the same themes that *Flames* does, particularly familial grief and the interaction between humans and the natural world. Other novels that share *Flames's* rural setting and magical realist style include Erin Hurtle's *The Octopus and I*, which explores a woman's fascination with octopuses on the Tasmanian coast, and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, in which a man sent to an Australian penal colony the 19th century is ordered to paint the local fish. Arnott's work has often been categorized as "eco fiction," a genre that includes Richard Powers' [The Overstory](#). Like *Flames*, [The Overstory](#) focuses on the perspectives of non-human natural organisms to emphasize humanity's destructive tendencies.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Flames*
- **When Written:** Late 2010s
- **Where Written:** Tasmania, Australia
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel, Magical Realism
- **Setting:** Tasmania in the late 2010s
- **Climax:** When Charlotte can't convince Levi to stop building her a coffin, flames burst from her body and set Notley Fern Gorge on fire.
- **Point of View:** Various

EXTRA CREDIT

Not Fussy. Arnott doesn't spend much time thinking about his writing tools—it bores him when other writers talk about their favorite pen or notebook, and he prefers just to use whatever he has at hand.

Climate Action. Though Arnott hopes his work draws attention to the threats of the climate crisis, he believes that progress will only come through action, like protesting and demanding change from large institutions.



PLOT SUMMARY

Two days after Levi and Charlotte spread her ashes in Notley Fern Gorge in northern Tasmania, Levi and Charlotte's mother, Edith, returns from the dead, sprouting ferns and moss from her body. Her second life lasts four days: she spends the first two on the family's farmland before walking to Levi and Charlotte's father's house and finally bursting into flames in his front yard. This kind of reincarnation happens to some women in the family after cremation. In the following weeks, Charlotte's episodes of emotional distress disturb Levi. He resolves to build her a **coffin** to reassure her that she can avoid the trauma of reincarnation by being buried whole.

Meanwhile, Karl walks up the beach toward his house after a day of angling. He misses the kind of fishing he used to do on the open ocean, hunting enormous Oneblood tuna with his seal companion. He and his seal hunted together for decades—during which time Karl met his wife and had two daughters with her—before his seal was killed by a pod of orcas. As Karl walks home, he sees Levi gathering driftwood, and he later discovers Levi is building a coffin for Charlotte.

When Charlotte discovers Levi's plans for a coffin, she packs a few necessities and runs away. She hitchhikes to a nearby town

where she sleeps by the river under an upturned boat. When she wakes, she finds a water rat has curled up against her stomach for warmth. She boards a bus heading south. The bus malfunctions, so Charlotte and the rest of the passengers stay in Tunbridge overnight. At a Tunbridge bar, Charlotte hears two miners discussing a southern mining town, Melaleuca. When the miners attempt to overpower her in order to have sex, she fights them off, leaving one of them with burn marks. The next day, Charlotte gets back on the bus and heads south to Franklin, a small town where she finds a sailor who agrees to take her to Melaleuca.

The water rat Charlotte found sleeping beside her was in fact the Esk God, a deity presiding over Tasmania's Esk Rivers. After Charlotte leaves him, he slips into the river and swims upstream to visit his lover, the Cloud God. As he swims, he observes that the clutter and pollution of humans is overwhelming the natural environment. The Esk God climbs out of the river to rest and eat, but a human traps and kills him.

Meanwhile, Levi begins to correspond with Thurston Hough, the author of a book about coffins that Levi has been reading, to ask him for help building Charlotte's coffin. Though Thurston insults Levi and demands that Levi leave him alone in his replies, his precarious financial position pushes him to help Levi, who promises him a large sum of money.

As the correspondence continues, Thurston reports that he trapped and killed a water rat—the Esk God, though he doesn't know that the rat was a god. Its **pelt** is a source of great comfort to Thurston now that the river creatures have started to attack him. Thurston later tells Levi that, thanks to the violent animals, he won't be able to finish Charlotte's coffin.

Levi hires a detective to find Charlotte after the police give up their search. The lead investigator on Charlotte's case, Graham Malik, is someone the detective knows well; he tells the detective that it seems like Charlotte can fend for herself and probably chose to disappear. The detective learns from the Tunbridge miners that Charlotte was going to Melaleuca, so she asks a pilot in the capital to fly her there. As they land in Melaleuca, they see a huge stretch of land burning. A strange man walks toward the detective and tells her to leave his daughter alone; the detective realizes he's Charlotte's father.

Excerpts from the diary of Allen Gibson, the manager of a wombat farm in Melaleuca where Charlotte has recently begun working as a farmhand, recount the violent, mysterious deaths of several wombats over the course of a few weeks. Allen has vivid dreams about feathers and cormorants and decides that a cormorant must be responsible for the killings. He starts to resent Melaleuca, the wombats, and the farmhands, all of whom he once respected. Finally, he wakes up from one of these vivid dreams while in the process of stabbing a wombat and realizes that he's been possessed by a cormorant spirit and has been killing the wombats all along. When Charlotte tries to stop him, he threatens her with a knife. Flames flow from

Charlotte's body, lighting a huge fire that chases Allen into an abandoned mine shaft where he begins to transform into a birdlike creature.

When Allen's behavior begins to worry them, Charlotte and Nicola, the other farmhand, ask the ranger to arrange transport out of Melaleuca. When the ranger visits the farm, the dead wombats and Allen's threatening behavior confirm the farmhands' worries, and he arranges a plane to take them away. The plane lands in high winds, which prevent it from leaving until the next day. That night, the ranger wakes up to discover a huge fire raging over the fields near the farm. He helps Nicola and Charlotte board the plane and flies with them to the capital. Before he can report the incident to the police, Nicola and Charlotte escape.

Nicola and Charlotte drive north together. Over the past few weeks, the two of them have become close friends; eventually, a romance develops between them. Nicola decides to take Charlotte to the stone cabin at Cradle Mountain that belongs to a friend of Nicola's father. There, surrounded by the safety of stone, lakes, and wet vegetation, Charlotte attempts to control the flames that have begun to leak out of her body. Nicola's touch is the only thing that can put the flames out, a discovery that leads to Nicola and Charlotte having sex for the first time. But when Charlotte's flames burn Nicola, Charlotte decides she needs to end their relationship in order to keep Nicola safe. Before she can do so, the detective finds them at the cabin and urges them to return north with her.

Levi, having collected the half-finished coffin along with the water rat's pelt from Thurston's house, returns home to find his father in the kitchen. Unbeknownst to everyone except the late Edith, Levi and Charlotte's father is an ancient fire spirit who has the ability to move into and out of any fire on the island and to "spark" ideas in human minds. He left the family several years ago when Edith found out he had used his ability to convince her to love him; since then, his relationships with his children have only deteriorated. When Levi's father expresses that he's worried about him, Levi—emboldened by the confidence he feels when he holds the pelt—refuses to listen and instead drives away to Notley Fern Gorge, where he starts making a new coffin for Charlotte out of tree ferns.

Charlotte and Nicola follow the detective back to Charlotte and Levi's home. It's empty. Charlotte suspects that Levi has gone to the gorge. When they find him there, he's emaciated and seems not to remember ever hiring the detective. Charlotte tries to convince him to stop building the coffin. When he insists that the coffin will be good for Charlotte, she's unable to stop flames from erupting from her body and setting the valley on fire. Nicola desperately smothers Charlotte to put the fire out, but by this point the flames have spread, and it seems there's no way to escape. Charlotte sees her father emerging from the flames. He mouths something to her before disappearing in the first drops of a huge downpour, a

manifestation of the Cloud God's grief for the Esk God.

Levi wakes up the next day. Charlotte tells him the detective has gone home, Nicola is in hospital for her burns, and the biggest flood in centuries extinguished the fire. Levi and Charlotte apologize to each other. They visit Nicola at the hospital, where Levi tries to apologize to her and her family but instead starts sobbing. Nicola suggests Levi go out to sea with her father, Karl; Levi agrees. Following Karl's instructions, Levi plunges into the water and swims away from the boat. Just as he feels completely exhausted from staying afloat, a seal pup swims up to him. Levi and the seal form a long-lasting bond.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Charlotte McAllister – Charlotte McAllister is Levi's younger sister and the daughter of Edith and Jack. The story picks up just after Edith's death, reincarnation, and second death, and Charlotte is visibly devastated. Levi, disturbed by Charlotte's visible grief, makes plans to build Charlotte a **coffin** to protect her from the prospect of cremation and its related threat of reincarnation. But when she finds these plans, Charlotte runs away from home. She escapes not only because she feels misunderstood by Levi, whose cool, reserved demeanor directly contrasts her obvious emotionality, but because she feels overwhelmed by the memories of her mother that linger in their home. While away, Charlotte discovers that she's able to conjure fire with her body and spread it to objects around her—an ability she struggles to control. Eventually, Charlotte returns to the family's farm. That decision, and her subsequent desperation to find and help Levi—who has become completely absorbed in his coffin-building task—demonstrates the strength of her bond with him and the importance of family in her life. Charlotte's tendency to distance herself from those for whom she cares most deeply, usually to protect them from herself and her dangerous ability, is also evident in her relationship with Nicola, a farmhand with whom she develops a romance. Though Charlotte attempts to push both Nicola and Levi away, she finally realizes that they are just as committed to helping and caring for her as she is to protecting them.

Levi McAllister – Levi McAllister is Charlotte's older brother and the daughter of Edith and Jack. When Levi and Charlotte's mother dies, Levi seems to get over his grief quickly, and he considers Charlotte's outpourings of emotion a problem he needs to solve. As such, he resolves to construct a **coffin** for Charlotte, which is his way of persuading Charlotte she needn't worry about experiencing reincarnation after cremation, a supernatural fate that many women in their family experience. When his plans to make a coffin drive Charlotte away, he contracts a detective to find her. Levi's later correspondence with Thurston Hough (who has authored a book about building

coffins) highlights his naïve optimism: even when Thurston repeatedly insults him and wards him off, Levi continues to contact him, begging him to build Charlotte a coffin. His stubborn nature pays off when it comes to convincing Thurston to help him with the coffin, but it soon becomes a dangerous quality, especially when Levi comes into possession of the Esk God's **pelt**. Emboldened by the uncanny warmth of the pelt, Levi's single-minded drive to finish the perfect coffin for Charlotte nearly destroys him, as his intense focus leaves him emaciated, unaware of his surroundings, and subject to the dangers of the natural world. Ultimately, Levi's growth as a character comes not by building the coffin (and so exercising symbolic control over Charlotte and his unrealized grief) but by losing his power over her when Charlotte's fire and the massive flood that follows it destroy Levi's coffin. In the aftermath of this destruction, Levi finally understands that he's incapable of totally controlling his emotions and circumstances, and he realizes that he must seek comfort in others to overcome his grief and begin to heal.

Fire Spirit/Jack (Levi and Charlotte's Father) – Levi and Charlotte's father (a fire spirit who most people know as Jack) left the family several years before Edith's death, creating a rupture in his relationship with his children aren't willing to repair. His existence as a fire spirit—a being who was first brought to life by an indigenous woman who lit a fire for warmth, and who can now appear in any fire on the island—is only known to himself and the late Edith. To everyone else, including his children, his identity is profoundly mysterious. When Graham Malik attempts to investigate him, there seems to be no sign of his existence apart from a driver's license, and those who see him are unable to confirm anything about his physical appearance. Because he's foremostly a supernatural fire spirit, Jack can rarely maintain emotional connections with human beings, even his children, and the pain of Edith's death only magnifies this detachment. Though he makes halfhearted efforts to help and protect his children, he's never truly able to repair his relationships with them—relationships that first ended because Edith learned that he'd used his powers as a fire spirit to force her to him. Jack has a long-running habit of lighting "sparks" in humans' brains to make them more receptive to people and ideas they consider foreign. While this suggests that the fire spirit genuinely desires to use his powers for good, his broken connections to his wife and children emphasize that relationships built on exploitation and dishonesty—or even partial honesty—are harmful and unsustainable.

Edith McAllister (Levi and Charlotte's Mother) – Levi and Charlotte's mother dies shortly before the events of *Flames* take place. It's clear from Levi and Charlotte's displays of grief that their mother was a central part of their life—much more so than their father, Jack, is or ever was. During her life, Edith was not only devoted to the natural world, particularly the

surroundings of Notley Fern Gorge, but she was also inextricably bound to it through both her relationship with Jack, a fire spirit, and her family's history of its women being reincarnated with features that echo the landscapes in which their ashes were scattered. However, though Edith and Charlotte share a deep connection to nature, that connection is also the source of the key difference between them. While Edith loved the dark, earthy surroundings of the Gorge, Charlotte feels trapped unless she's near the ocean, and this contrast suggests that Edith's more nurturing, protective, and gentle characteristics—echoed by the enclosed gorge—conflict with Charlotte's affinity with the drama and chaos that the crashing waves represent. Another common quality in both Edith and Charlotte, however, is their desire for freedom and autonomy, which is evident in Edith's angry response to learning that Jack used his supernatural powers to convince her to love him.

Thurston Hough – Thurston Hough is the coffin expert Levi asks for help building Charlotte's **coffin**. Thurston is antisocial, violent, and suspicious, all qualities which make him a particularly unpopular addition to Avoca, the small town he relocates to to evade the government's tax agents. His violence and misanthropy come through in his letters to Levi, but his desperation for money proves more powerful than his desire to be left alone, as is evident when he accepts the task of building Charlotte's coffin upon Levi's promise of a large amount of cash. Thurston demonstrates how greed and self-obsession can harm the natural environment when he traps, kills, and skins the Esk God (who takes the form of a water rat). Though the killing invites the wrath of the river creatures who were loyal to the Esk God, Thurston remains oblivious to the fact that his actions interfered with the river's delicate ecology. He dies with the **pelt** in his hand, which reinforces the futility of attempting to claim a piece of nature as one's own.

The Esk God – The Esk God, in *Flames*'s world of magical realism, is one of the many divine beings upon which Tasmania's ecology relies. He takes the physical form of a water rat and holds authority over the creatures of the two Esk Rivers. As the Esk God swims along his rivers, he bears witness to how humans hurt the natural environment, and his perspective highlights the pollution and destruction that come hand in hand with colonialism and human greed. The Esk God's death—in a metal cage at the hands of Thurston Hough—is a stark contrast to his divine status, and this highlights the ignorance and disrespect humans hold for the intricate workings of the natural world. At the same time, the river creatures' furious vengeance for the Esk God emphasizes the dangers of interfering with a complex and precious ecology.

The Detective – Levi hires the detective to find Charlotte when the police department gives up their search. With her short hair and dark lipstick, the detective is well aware of how strange she must appear to the average resident of rural

Tasmania—but she doesn't mind the isolation this provides her. The failure of her long-term relationship several years ago led to her switching from a safe, corporate job in the city to the turbulent life of a private detective. Though the detective is strategic and cunning, she's also motivated by a sense of righteousness, and she demonstrates these dual qualities when she finds the miners, lures them out for a walk, and then, when they touch her, uses physical force against them. Though she only agreed to find Charlotte for the money, the detective is vital to Charlotte and Levi's reunion, and due to the fact that she travels home without pestering Levi for payment, it's clear that—unlike Thurston—she's able to put her own interests aside, at least temporarily, for the sake of others' feelings and needs.

Nicola – Nicola is Karl and Louise's daughter and one of Allen's farmhands. She's a reliable, diligent worker who cares deeply for the wombats on the farm. She delights in providing for other people. This quality strengthens her relationship with Charlotte; she's eager to find the perfect place for Charlotte to control her flames, and she's willing to sacrifice her own safety to extinguish Charlotte's flames. Nicola's self-sacrificial love balances Charlotte's desire to protect her loved ones from herself—a balance that makes their relationship a viable one and seems to convince Charlotte not to break it off.

Allen Gibson – Allen Gibson is the manager of the wombat farm in Melaleuca. He takes his job seriously and holds himself to a high standard, which means that when the first wombats die, he holds off on telling Mrs Quorn about them until he knows how to solve the problem. Allen rapidly transforms from a pleasant, diligent farmer who enjoys the company of Nicola and Charlotte and the quiet life he leads on Melaleuca to a haggard, violently unhinged man possessed by a cormorant spirit. By the time he realizes he's responsible for the wombat deaths, he's no longer capable of remorse or empathy. His dramatic transformation highlights the treacherous power of nature and the helplessness of humans in the face of it.

Karl (Nicola's Father) – Karl is Nicola's father and Louise's wife. When he meets and bonds with a seal pup, he begins a precious, decades-long partnership which involves the two of them hunting enormous Oneblood tuna together. This relationship—and its traumatic end, which comes when a pod of orca whales kills the seal—emphasizes the power of nature to equally delight and terrify humans who witness it. Though Karl's relationship with Nicola is somewhat detached, her fond memories of him smiling at her suggest that he represents a kind of stable, sturdy love for her—one that she seems to attempt to replicate in her relationship with Charlotte.

The Ranger – The ranger has always been overwhelmed by the beauty of nature and often finds that his awe at the world around him distracts him from his daily tasks. When he delays calling for a plane to take Nicola and Charlotte away, preferring to scope out the situation himself before believing the claims of

young women, he demonstrates the ways even unintentional sexism can lead to danger (perhaps, if he'd believed the farmhands and called the plane earlier, they could all have avoided the devastating fire).

The Miners – The miners are a pair of friends who attempt to force sex on Charlotte when she spends the night in Tunbridge. Though they initially appear harmless, Charlotte eventually realizes that their double act, which allows them to overpower women, is something that they attempt often. Their misogyny is clear not only through this strategy but in their reaction to Charlotte; they quickly switch from desiring her sexually to considering her a “whore”. Their attitudes highlight the sexist double standards prevalent in western society—standards that demand women to desire the sexual advances of men while also punishing them for that desire.

The Cloud God – The Cloud God is the divine being with responsibility for Tasmania’s rain. She feeds the Esk Rivers and is the Esk God’s lover, a relationship that highlights the interdependent, complex cycles of nature. When she realizes the Esk God has died, the Cloud God unleashes a historical downpour which puts out the raging fire Charlotte has inadvertently begun, demonstrating the power of nature to overwhelm, disrupt, and sometimes even heal human lives.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Oshikawa – Oshikawa is a wholesaler of Oneblood tuna. He gets to know Karl over the years that Karl and his seal hunt for Onebloods, and he eventually becomes a friend of the family. His hut at Cradle Mountain is a refuge for Charlotte and Nicola after they escape from Melaleuca.

Graham Malik – Graham Malik is briefly the lead detective in Charlotte’s missing person case. He has a long-running working relationship with the detective Levi hires, and he demonstrates his friendship with her by investigating Charlotte and Levi’s father on his own time to help her with Charlotte’s case.

The Sailor – The sailor transports Charlotte to Melaleuca. He’s reluctant to tell the detective anything about Charlotte or himself but relents at the offer of cash, which—similarly to Thurston’s change in attitude when Levi offers payment—emphasizes that in many cases, greed is more potent than one’s principles.

Mavis Midcurrent – Mavis is the author of *Cream, Butter and Small-Town Nutters* in which she discusses Thurston Hough’s antisocial behavior as a new resident of Avoca, the town in which she runs the Country Women’s Association.

Mrs Quorn – Mrs Quorn is the owner of the wombat farm in Melaleuca, which she inherited from her husband after his death.

Louise – Louise is Karl’s wife and Nicola’s mother.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



GRIEF AND HUMAN CONNECTION

Flames depicts grief as an immense force that can become destructive when characters attempt to suppress it, ignore it, or manage it alone. When Levi and Charlotte lose Levi and Charlotte’s mother, their reactions to her death contrast dramatically. Charlotte expresses her emotions visibly and audibly, often screaming or sobbing uncontrollably. Meanwhile, Levi thinks he’s gotten over his mother’s death and that Charlotte’s behavior is inappropriate and unhealthy. Levi arranges to have a **coffin** built for Charlotte to reassure her that she won’t have to come back to life and die a second death like their mother did (following a pattern that’s seen a third of their female ancestors briefly reincarnated after being cremated). When Charlotte discovers Levi’s plans, she runs away to grieve without her brother’s judgment. To manage their grief, the siblings choose self-sufficiency and isolation, seeking to cope with their situations practically and alone.

Ultimately, though, neither sibling can manage their grief alone. Levi persuades himself that his course of action is logical and appropriate. In reality, however, his actions are merely a side effect of his suppressed grief, and it’s clear to those around him, including Levi and Charlotte’s father, that the effort of suppressing it is making him unwell. When Charlotte finally returns home, Levi has disappeared. She finds him in Notley Fern Gorge, a place beloved to their mother and the site where they scattered her ashes. Fixated on the coffin-building process, Levi seems to have lost his grip on reality. Similarly, though Charlotte thinks she’s expressing her emotions in a healthier way, the flames that leak out of her body and create chaos and destruction around her—a supernatural power she inherited from her father—show that her grief is too overwhelming for her to manage alone, and in attempting to suppress it, she’s only allowed it to billow into a more destructive force. Eventually an immense flood extinguishes the fire that erupts from Charlotte in the gorge, threatening her own life and others’, while Levi must venture out into the ocean to find support in the form of a seal companion. It’s clear that the grief of these siblings is too vast and unwieldy for them to manage alone. Both of them, ultimately, depend on the support of forces outside of themselves to heal from their loss. *Flames*, then, emphasizes the necessity of human connection to heal from grief and other hardships.



NATURE VS. HUMAN EFFORT

A battle between human effort and the power of nature lies at the heart of *Flames*. The novel's human characters find themselves overwhelmed by the natural world, often in ways that completely disrupt their lives. For instance, when Thurston Hough, a self-obsessed coffin builder, kills the Esk God, a deity in the form of a water rat who rules over Tasmania's Esk Rivers, he treasures its golden **pelt** without realizing he's upset the rivers' ecology. As vengeance, the river creatures take over Thurston's home and eventually feast on his dead body. By ignoring the possible scope of his single-minded action and by attempting to assert control over nature, Thurston invites the wrath of creatures he misjudged as unimportant. Even characters like the ranger and Karl, who seek to commune with nature rather than to exploit it, are shocked by nature's beauty and violence. The ranger finds that the magnificent beauty of his surroundings distracts him from his menial tasks, and Karl is distraught when orcas rip his seal companion to shreds.

While the strength of nature often renders these characters' efforts and desires powerless, through the perspectives of the fire spirit and the Esk God, the novel also emphasizes the destruction humans can cause to their natural environment when compelled by greed—particularly the kind of greed characteristic of colonialism. While the indigenous people of Tasmania lived in relative harmony with nature, only building fires and killing wildlife to sustain themselves, the white colonialists brought with them an appetite for large-scale industry whose pollution and destruction of natural environments led to the deaths of many of the Esk God's fellow gods. And though the fire spirit delights in the different forms he could take thanks to the settlers' new technology of gunpowder, candles, and gas lamps, he's bitterly aware that these developments directly endanger the indigenous people's lives and ways of existing. Through these points of view, the novel suggests that human beings have a responsibility not only to acknowledge and respect nature's magnificence, but to carefully consider how their desire for progress—which often involves disrupting natural processes and ecologies—does more harm than good.



SEXISM

Many of *Flames*'s female characters find themselves underestimated, threatened, or controlled by men. Though these men's sexist behavior is often unconscious, it nevertheless affects their decision-making abilities, which in turn puts the women around them in danger. For instance, when Charlotte and Nicola ask the ranger for help leaving the farm they work at, an environment they feel has become unsafe due to their manager Allen's increasingly erratic behavior, he doesn't call for a plane to take them away until he visits the farm to confirm their

report. Though the sexism in the ranger's decision is subtle, it shows that he trusts Allen's more senior, male presence on the farm more than the word of two young women. Ultimately, not only does his ingrained prejudice put the two women in harm's way, it also plays a key part in kindling the feelings of frustration, fear, and rage that set off Charlotte's fire, which causes Allen severe burns—a sign that sexism is harmful not just for women but for everyone.

The novel explores sexism in a more blatant and violent way when depicting the miners' behavior when they encounter both Charlotte and the detective. In both instances, the miners' assumption that they can control these women drive their actions. They have no interest in being on equal terms with the women they're interested in, preferring to overpower them physically. Yet, when these women use their own physical power to defend themselves, the miners resort to anger and misogynistic language, which demonstrates that women are only desirable to them if they do what they want without resistance. In both its subtle and blatant portrayals of sexism, the novel criticizes the careless assumptions men make about women and demonstrates that these assumptions can cloud the reality of a situation, creating danger for all involved.



LOVE AND RESPECT

Flames repeatedly shows that miscommunication can weaken relationships. As siblings, Levi and Charlotte have a deep bond, but they seem to have very little in common besides their parents. Though they attempt to demonstrate their love for each other—Levi by building Charlotte a **coffin** because he's misinterpreted her grief over their mother Edith's death as a fear of being reincarnated after death, and Charlotte by running away so she can deal with her emotions before she hurts Levi's feelings—these demonstrations only cause pain and estrange the siblings from each other. The relationship between Charlotte and Nicola is similar in many ways. Though Charlotte enjoys the intimacy that develops between herself and Nicola, a relentless undercurrent of fear that she'll hurt Nicola with her uncontrollable flames forces her to distance herself from her romantic partner. As Charlotte works up the courage to end the relationship, she finds herself increasingly frustrated by Nicola's intimate gestures.

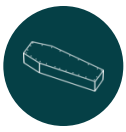
While both these relationships are fraught with conflict and confusion, in the end, the bonds between Levi and Charlotte—and Charlotte and Nicola—ultimately survive because each of them changes to be on equal footing with the other. Nicola responds to Charlotte's attempts to push her away by remaining stubbornly close, helping Charlotte extinguish her uncontrollable flames even though they burn her. This wordless communication demonstrates that Nicola's desire to protect Charlotte is just as strong as Charlotte's desire to protect Nicola, and that therefore strengthens their

relationship by ensuring they play equal parts in it. Meanwhile, Charlotte's desire to help Levi is fierce enough that she puts her own comfort aside to venture into the gorge, a potent and unpleasant reminder of Levi and Charlotte's mother's death. In the aftermath of the fire and the flood, Levi and Charlotte finally understand the misplaced efforts each of them has exerted to demonstrate their devotion to the other, and this understanding allows them to forgive each other. By contrast, the relationship between Jack and Edith, Charlotte and Levi's parents, fails because of their inability to respect each other as equals. When Edith discovers that Jack used his supernatural abilities to force her to love him, she concludes that their partnership—one that was built on her unknowing powerlessness—can no longer continue. In this way, the novel suggests that relationships cannot subsist on love alone: a strong relationship depends on equality and mutual respect.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE COFFIN

The coffin that Levi sets out to build for Charlotte represents the miscommunication that threatens their relationship. Levi wants to build the coffin to show Charlotte that she's not bound to repeat the pattern of reincarnation that they witnessed their mother (Edith) and other female members of their family experience after their cremations (with the existence of a coffin, Levi reasons, Charlotte can anticipate burial rather than cremation, with no possibility of returning after death). In Levi's mind, building a coffin is a sensible way to comfort Charlotte. But for Charlotte, these plans bring their own kind of dread. The coffin is not a comfort but a symbol of how trapped she feels in her relationship with Levi, who is too stubborn to understand her true feelings and desires, or to see that her distress was an expression of grief, not fear. The coffin, therefore, stands between the siblings, representing how the ways that they attempt to show love for each other—Levi through misplaced effort, and Charlotte by running away so that she doesn't unleash her anger on Levi—actually damage their relationship. Instead of bringing them together, the coffin drives Charlotte and Levi apart, and it's only after Charlotte's fire destroys the coffin at the end of the novel that the siblings can apologize to each other and begin to make amends. Therefore, the coffin is a physical manifestation of the ways that miscommunication and misunderstanding prevent people from loving and caring for each other in healthy ways.



THE PELT

The pelt of the Esk God represents the dangers of human greed. Thurston claims the pelt by killing the Esk God, a creature of vital importance to the Esk Rivers' ecology—a creature Thurston presumes to be a common water rat. The other river creatures who were devoted to this divinity seek vengeance by besieging Thurston in his home, attacking him, and eventually feasting on his corpse. In the midst of this onslaught, Thurston treats the pelt as a treasured possession, eventually becoming so obsessed with it that he dies clutching it. This scene is an outward manifestation of Thurston's greed and ignorance. Claiming and owning the pelt leads Thurston to a gruesome and isolated death—his delight in owning something so beautiful—and his presumption that he could own any part of nature—is also his downfall. When Levi takes the pelt from Thurston's corpse, he experiences the same comfort and delight. In time, he depends on the pelt to encourage him and strengthen his resolve. Levi considers the pelt a treasure just as Thurston did—it makes him confident enough to confront his father (Jack) and instills in him a level of concentration necessary to build a **coffin** without the necessary skills—but the arrogant satisfaction he feels as the owner of such an object leaves him malnourished, confused, and estranged from Charlotte, for whom the coffin was meant to be a sign of his love. Ultimately, the pelt signifies that possessing, and obsessing over, material objects causes danger and destruction to the possessor, their environment, and the people they love.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Atlantic Books edition of *Flames* published in 2019.

Salt Quotes

☹️ Back at home the girls showed no interest in hunting Onebloods. Instead, he taught them to push hooks through frozen squid and hurl them out into the water, which they loved as much as he found it boring. And through sharing this banal activity with his daughters he somehow developed an affection for the activity itself, and found himself angling off the rocks even when the girls were away in Devonport, casting and catching and occasionally crying, but only when the mist was clear and he could see past the heads towards the tall spires where the seals still hauled out, or so he assumed.

Related Characters: Nicola, Karl (Nicola's Father)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

Though Karl tries to encourage his daughters to share his passion for fishing, they enjoy fishing with hooks and bait, which is a pastime of a much smaller scale than Karl's past adventures hunting and spearing huge Oneblood tuna with his seal companion. This passage emphasizes Karl's deep, almost primal connection with the water and its creatures: using dead bait and hooks is boring to him perhaps because it requires none of the risk and passion that characterized his past tuna-hunting exploits.

Nevertheless, Karl comes to enjoy this more casual kind of fishing. His changing attitude suggests that a human's relationship with nature is never set in stone—as nature transforms and ebbs and flows, human attitudes transform with it. And just as the natural world (and the ocean in particular) allows Karl to strengthen his bond to his daughters, that bond allows him to adapt his relationship with the ocean after the loss of his seal.

acting in this way out of genuine care and concern, not wanting an outward display of his own emotions upset her further. The passage illustrates the unique nature of each person's grief—even two siblings grieving the same parent. Neither Levi nor Charlotte can appreciate the effort the other sibling is making to comfort or respect them, and that lack of appreciation and understanding, more than any misguided attempt to help each other, threatens their relationship.

☝ Charlotte's neat nostrils are picking up a scent on the breeze: it smells of cleaning products, starch and artificial sweeteners. It is the smell of white-picket fences, of census-friendly families, of collared shirts at church, of people who gossip and chat and tell everyone everything, and she is marching back into the bus station and asking for a ticket that will take her further south.

Related Characters: Charlotte McAllister , Levi McAllister

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis



When Charlotte gets off the bus in the town of Kingston, the smell she picks up discomforts her. The scents this passage lists are artificial products that exist to make people's lives cleaner and allow their households to match the ones around them: starch to make their shirts stiff, cleaning products to sanitize their houses, and artificial sweeteners to make their food and drinks tastier without the risk of weight gain. These items imply that the people here make decisions based on how they'll seem to other people.

While conformity—even uniformity—makes the people in this town comfortable and holds their community together, it repulses Charlotte and makes her feel trapped. It's a way of living that prioritizes artificiality in order to make humans feel comfortable in their domestic lives, completely disregarding the natural world and its organized chaos in the process. When there's no place for nature, Charlotte feels claustrophobic: she needs a direct connection with the wild, natural world to feel at ease. Charlotte isn't seeking isolation for the sake of being alone—she's trying to escape a human-centered world that demands she behave in a socially acceptable way, especially because the wildness of her grief has ostracized her even from her brother, who knows her best.

Sky Quotes

☝ Charlotte knows he thinks she's gone crazy—he's been throwing that jutting look at her every time he's caught her sobbing in the gullies, flinching at the wind and throbbing in the fields. This look of judgement. This look of control. This look of *I need to do something; she needs my help*, when really (as far as Charlotte is concerned) he is the one who needs help, because what is she doing but grieving?

Related Characters: Charlotte McAllister , Levi McAllister, Edith McAllister (Levi and Charlotte's Mother)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis


Even though Levi and Charlotte haven't been able to communicate verbally about their emotions since their mother died, Charlotte feels she can translate Levi's gestures and facial expressions. She's aware of the differences between herself and her brother: she expresses her emotions, while he refuses to acknowledge his own, and she's frustrated that he sees this as a personal victory on his part (and a failure on hers).

Though Charlotte has observed Levi enough to understand some of his intentions, she hasn't considered that he may be

Iron Quotes

☞ He had been here longer than the loud pale apes, longer even than the quieter dark ones who had arrived earlier. He had seen them grow and die and spread, and he knew them far better than they would ever know themselves. With his blunt nose he could smell their foul industries; with the blanched tip of his tail he could feel their intrusions in the water; with his black eyes he could see the iron they sunk into his rivers, building dams, dropping anchors, hooking fish. He had learned the colour and the shape of their callousness, but he could not stop them, for his power was limited to the rivers, while they swamped over everything.

Related Characters: The Esk God

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

As the Esk God swims upstream, he reflects on the changes that have come about since humans—first the Aboriginal Australians, then the British colonizers—began to populate Tasmania. The fact that he understands humans better than they understand themselves emphasizes humans' ignorance of their impact on nature, particularly when it comes to their destructive tendencies. The more widespread and powerful human influence becomes, the less humans pay attention to the impact on the most vulnerable parts of the natural world.


The list in this passage also illustrates that the effect of human industry is widespread, leeching into several different elements of nature: not just the land but the air and water, too. In contrast, the Esk God is only responsible for his two rivers, and he has no power over any other part of the natural world. The passage puts the complex, interconnected natural world in direct contrast with the monolith of human greed. The “swampy,” “callous” brute force of human enterprise easily overpowers unique natural ecologies, but in doing so, it jeopardizes those ecologies' intricate beauty.

Fur Quotes

☞ I have long found that the most appropriate material for those who have died young is wood taken from the many-hued whorls of an old snowgum. Its hard, cold-to-the-touch timber does not rot or warp or even fade. Instead it fossilises, and so too does the body it contains. The flesh of the dead turns as hard and unyielding as the stony coffin, and cannot be altered by any natural means.

Related Characters: Thurston Hough (speaker), Charlotte McAllister, Levi McAllister

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

After Levi tells Thurston that the coffin he wants to build is for his young sister, Thurston replies with a plan to construct the coffin out of snowgum wood. Thurston's choice reveals his attitudes about beauty and nature. He's intent on preserving the body's youth, which implies that he wants to avoid the natural process of aging. Furthermore, he values the “hard and unyielding” qualities of the wood, which suggests that he'd prefer to oppose time and avoid decay rather than embracing their inevitability.

By attempting to make something temporary into something permanent, Thurston is completely at odds with the workings of nature. His arrogant attitude demonstrates his ignorance of nature's unstoppable power and suggests that he imagines himself as someone who can thwart that power through his craftsmanship. No matter how hard he tries to stop time or preserve what's inherently perishable, he'll ultimately find that the natural forces he tries to ignore will eventually overpower him.

☞ So come: collect your half-made coffin. I shall not charge you for it, even though I have laboured over its creation. I no longer need the money—the taxman has no chance of getting to me while these creatures plague my doorstep. Come take the flesh-stoning panels of freshly carved snowgum. But the pelt stays with me, moron boy. The only grave it shall adorn is my own.

Related Characters: Thurston Hough (speaker), Levi McAllister, The Esk God

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Thurston finds himself unable to complete the coffin that Levi commissioned from him as he's besieged by the creatures of the river. He invites Levi to collect the


unfinished coffin with the stipulation that the golden pelt remains with him. Thurston has very little appreciation for the complex workings of nature. The pelt that he values so highly—that he has come to rely on for his comfort—is, ironically, the reason that he’s under attack (the pelt is the Esk God’s, and creatures are attacking Thurston to avenge the Esk God’s death).

Thurston doesn’t think, even for a second, that the creatures could be attacking him out of vengeance. He treats their behavior as a random inconvenience rather than a direct consequence of his actions. It’s therefore clear that he considers himself separate from nature and entitled to exploit it for his own means. He believes that the Esk God’s pelt exists to comfort and glorify humans; removing it from its natural form was only a means to that end. This arrogance turns Thurston from a master coffin-builder into a victim of nature’s destruction, illustrating how the natural world can become a dangerous force when humans threaten or overlook it.

Ice Quotes

☝️ *What case would you like to speak to the senior detective about? He’s very busy.* The boy-cop smiled back, and behind his too-white teeth I could see his fragile little thoughts tracing lines, making assumptions, bouncing off words like Duty and Career and Citizen and Safety.

Related Characters: The Detective (speaker), Graham Malik

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis


When the detective asks to see Graham Malik at the police station, the junior officer at the desk asks her to provide a reason. The detective refers to him in her mind as a “boy-cop,” a diminutive term that suggests she has little patience or respect for him or for the police force generally. On top of this, her judgement of his teeth as “too-white” and the limited list of words she uses to predict his thought patterns show that she considers him to be small minded and preoccupied with his bureaucratic role.

The detective’s assumption that she knows everything going through the officer’s predictable mind and her eagerness to disregard him reveal her distrust in the police force and their official, rigorously structured processes. As a

private detective, she has none of the institutional clout that the police have, but she’s also free of their rigid standards and rules. Because “duty” and “safety” aren’t the focus of her work, the detective is able to take a more organic approach to solving her cases. She has an advantage as an outsider and as a free agent—she’s able to critique the institutions that other people trust, and in being skeptical of conformity and mindless rule-following, she’s able to follow her own leads on cases where the police may not have seen subtle clues.

☝️ I could’ve gone over, shown them my photo of the McAllister girl and tried to sweet-talk the information out of them, but my gut told me they wouldn’t give me anything. The boorish looks on their faces told me something else. I didn’t like it, but I knew I could handle it.

Related Characters: The Detective (speaker), The Miners

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

At the pub in Tunbridge, the detective considers how best to get the information she needs from the two miners. She knows that a straightforward, transparent method of interrogation won’t be effective. The passage illustrates the detective’s approach to her work—she’s at once pragmatic and instinctive; she listens to her “gut” but also accepts that she needs to do things she won’t enjoy.



Though these men are prone to taking advantage of women sexually, their sexual desire is so obvious to the detective that she can anticipate it, and this gives her the upper hand. Her innate understanding of what these men want suggests that she’s used to observing other people skeptically and anticipating their motives. It also implies that this kind of sexist behavior is so widespread that it presents as a set of easily identifiable symptoms rather than unique, individual characteristics.

By presenting herself as the sexual object the miners want her to be, the detective is able to use the miners’ crude entitlement against them to eke out a lead on her case. Still, she must put herself in danger—danger she can “handle,” but danger nonetheless—just to get a few basic pieces of information from them. This passage demonstrates that sexism and misogyny, even when challenged and anticipated, create situations of fear, discomfort, and violence.

Feather Quotes

☛ I suppose if you were to suspect one of us, it would be Charlotte, the new hand—but, hard as I try, I cannot convince myself that she is responsible. Yes, behind her pale face there lurks a curious ferocity; and yet, she often wanders through the freezing fields alone after her work for the day is done; and yes, she occasionally seems to lose control of herself in fits of quiet emotion, eyes closed, hands clenched, small noises leaking through her gritted teeth. But it cannot be her; she loves the wombats more than Nicola does, if that were possible.

Related Characters: Allen Gibson (speaker), Charlotte McAllister , Nicola

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 97



Explanation and Analysis

After several wombats die on the wombat farm Allen manages in Melaleuca, he attempts to narrow down who could be to blame. Though he rules Charlotte out as a possible culprit, he's still fascinated by her. His descriptions of her, with her "pale face" and "ferocity," make her seem mysterious and almost primal, but her wide range of self-expression makes her hard to pin down. She's at once fierce and prone to wandering; wildly emotional and gentle.

Allen's observations in this passage emphasize Charlotte's refusal to conform to societal expectations. Not only does she express her emotions outwardly in ways that could disturb onlookers, but her behavior is also difficult to pin down. In this way, Charlotte reflects the wildness of the natural environment that she feels so deeply connected to. Just like the natural world, she displays a kind of ebb and flow of emotions and moods, sometimes gentle, sometimes violent, but never tempered by what others expect of her. Though Charlotte feels as though she doesn't fit in with much of human society, in the wild isolation of Melaleuca, she's free to express herself and her grief without needing to conform.

☛ They simmer after the herd, cooing and frowning at the skinny beasts, treating them as if they were sick children, not mindless marsupials. They are certainly no help in dealing with what is actually threatening them. Each morning I march off, gun in hand and knife in belt, as their eyes follow me filled with what looks more and more like fear. It is futile, feminine softness, and nothing more. I am beginning to regret hiring them.

Related Characters: Allen Gibson (speaker), Charlotte McAllister , Nicola

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

As the wombat death toll rises on the farm, Allen grows resentful of Charlotte and Nicola's emotional reactions to the deaths. While only a few days before, Allen was sympathetic to Charlotte and Nicola's mourning and admired their dedicated care of the animals, he now considers their gentleness ridiculous and impractical.

This passage highlights how quickly sexism creeps into Allen's judgment of women when he becomes angry or frustrated. Allen does not only deem Charlotte and Nicola's behavior illogical; he particularly loathes the "feminine" elements of it. In contrast, he "marches" with his gun and knife, painting an image of himself that's practical and stereotypically masculine. As Allen transforms into a more territorial, aggressive being, his sexist attitude grows, which demonstrates how misogyny often appears concurrently with the threat of danger. Sexism is also an easy way for Allen to detach himself from the farmhands whom he once respected. By reducing the farmhands to gendered objects, he's able to diminish and disregard them, which makes it easier for him to eventually threaten them with direct violence.

Grass Quotes

☛ He was there to stop poachers, maintain trails, preserve the environment, not to be bowled over by the bright, harsh beauty of his surrounds. Yet soon this bowling over became such a common occurrence that he began to accept it, and once he accepted it he allowed himself to enjoy it: to let the wonder take his soul places it hadn't been since he was a child in the forest, crouching in a branch-built shelter, thirsty for the taste of all the wild things in the world.

Related Characters: The Ranger

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of his career, the ranger feels overwhelmed by the vast natural beauty that surrounds

him. Eventually, he realizes that accepting the force of that beauty and awe—not struggling against it—is the only thing that allows him to move on with his work. It’s futile for him to try to ignore the pleasure he gets from witnessing nature’s vast scale—no matter what, it’ll interrupt him and overpower his comparatively menial tasks. So accepting that he’ll be constantly “bowled over” by his surroundings is the only way for the ranger to live in harmony with them.

This passage also suggests that the natural world can provide a potent connection to one’s childhood. Because being immersed in a wild environment is a completely sensory experience, not an intellectual one, it can put people in touch with their earliest memories. In this way, a deep connection to nature is also a way to know oneself more deeply—more than this, it’s a constantly self-renewing source of hope and joy, as long as one accepts that they must surrender to it, not struggle against it.

☛ But as far as he knew, Allen was fine. A quiet man, but a sane one. A good farmer. A friend, or the closest thing to a friend he had down here. So he didn’t give these women what they wanted, not straight away. He told them he’d visit the farm. He would see it all for himself, and he would sort things out.

Related Characters: Charlotte McAllister , Nicola, Allen Gibson, The Ranger

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

When Nicola and Charlotte tell the ranger that they feel threatened by Allen’s behavior and the violence at the farm and ask him to arrange transport out of Melaleuca, the ranger is initially skeptical of their claims and decides to visit the farm before taking further steps. The ranger’s attitude toward the farmhands, referring to them as “these women” and assuming that he has a more accurate judgment of Allen than they do, reveals subtle hints of sexism that cloud his decision-making process.

Because the ranger thinks of Nicola and Charlotte as “these women”—language that sets them apart from him and groups them together by gender—he immediately disregards the fact that they’re autonomous, intelligent individuals. And by valuing his judgment over theirs, preferring to “see it all for himself,” he deems their needs and feelings less important than his and Allen’s. Nicola and

Charlotte are already relatively powerless in this situation, as they depend on either Allen or the Ranger for shelter and transport, so by removing their capacity to assess their own safety, the ranger puts them in a particularly vulnerable position. The passage therefore highlights how even the subtlest forms of sexism can lead to a dangerous situation.

☛ Everywhere the world would open up to him as it used to, huge and humbling; he would be dwarfed by its colour and power. He would forget the farmhands and the fire. In the shudder of his skin, in the run of his blood, he would feel the wonder again.

Related Characters: The Ranger

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

After witnessing a vast fire that destroyed a huge swath of the land that he’s responsible for in Melaleuca, the ranger spends no time mourning what he’s lost. Instead, he sees the destruction as a chance for new growth and a renewed connection between himself and the natural world. The ranger, having worked on the land for many years and having grown up exploring the natural landscapes around his home, is used to the cyclical processes in the natural world. He understands that nature creates new life wherever it can.

The ranger’s wisdom, which comes from living in harmony with the land and respecting its intricate ecologies, allows him to find hope where others might see devastation. In this way, the passage suggests that if humans are aware of and in tune with nature’s ebbs and flows—if they acknowledge that loss is necessary to introduce new life—they can have the opportunity for more optimistic wonder.

Snow Quotes

☛ Through her throbbing fingertips she could feel the source of the flame, pulsing out from deep inside Charlotte. Then she felt it waver, slow, and die, and in that instant she knew: she had done this. Her touch had travelled through Charlotte’s heat. She had quenched the rage; she had stopped the fire.


Related Characters: Charlotte McAllister , Nicola

Related Themes: **Page Number:** 137**Explanation and Analysis**

When Nicola touches Charlotte for the first time to put out her flames, she feels the effect of her touch in a visceral way. She literally puts out the fire, but her action also represents an emotional exchange between the two women, demonstrating Nicola's ability to calm Charlotte and provide her with a deep sense of comfort.

Even though Nicola first touches Charlotte only with the tips of her fingers, her touch and its comfort are a profound relief for Charlotte. The flames also allow Nicola to understand her own effect on Charlotte. As someone whose happiness comes from helping and pleasing others, the proof that it's Nicola's presence and comfort that are calming Charlotte encourages Nicola, both physically and emotionally. The flames not only represent Charlotte's emotional turmoil, but they're also a measure by which Nicola and Charlotte understand the reciprocal nature of their relationship. Because the flames play out their dependence on each other in a visual and sensory way, the two women are able to build a solid foundation of a relationship on this clear, though unspoken, mutual understanding.

☝ That was it: hide, recover, re-emerge. Nicola hadn't factored herself or her needs into this plan; that wasn't her way. Since her days on the deck, cracking open her father's smile, she had lived by putting others first. Her first instinct was always to help, to shrink back from the front and push others forward. It wasn't pure selflessness; she drew pleasure from how she could affect others, and when they showed her gratitude she bathed in it, glowing in the knowledge that she, and only she, had made them feel that way.

Related Characters: Charlotte McAllister , Nicola, Karl (Nicola's Father)**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 145**Explanation and Analysis**




Nicola's plan to shelter with Charlotte in the stone cabin at Cradle Mountain is one she forms in response to Charlotte's needs without considering her own comfort. But what she sacrifices through ignoring her own autonomy,

she gains in the pleasure she gets from helping Charlotte—just as she has done her whole life in her relationships with others. It's not that Nicola puts her own happiness aside for the sake of other people's—it's that her happiness depends on prioritizing and pleasing others.

Nicola's joy comes from the reciprocity of a relationship in which she can see the effect of her effort in a loved one's pleasure. It's vital for her that a relationship is built on this kind of emotional transaction in which she understands her own value. The passage therefore suggests that a relationship can be an equal and equally respectful one, even when one member of that relationship seems to prioritize the other over themselves.

Wood Quotes

☝ In a mind like his, grand acts will always trump honest words. There was a chance he'd understand this—a slim chance, but a chance nonetheless—the moment he saw the coffin. An epiphany might have dawned upon him: What am I doing? Is she even worried about her eventual death? What if she just needs someone to talk to? What if she just needs time? But this chance was destroyed the moment Levi picked the golden-brown pelt from Hough's nibbled fingers. Now, with his fingers tousling the fur, with the uncommon warmth spreading from his fingers to his scalp, he has never been more sure of himself.

Related Characters: Charlotte McAllister , Levi McAllister, Thurston Hough**Related Themes:**  **Related Symbols:**  **Page Number:** 160**Explanation and Analysis**


In this passage, and throughout this chapter, Levi has lost control of his own story. The narrator's perspective is removed from Levi's experience and makes judgments and predictions from outside him—an omniscient point of view that's rare in this novel. This sense of perspective shows that Levi is operating on autopilot. He's no longer aware of his own decisions and has lost the capacity to rationalize or doubt his own actions.

Levi has lost perspective not just because of his frenzied focus on building the coffin, but also because he's acquired the pelt and has since been obsessing over it. It seems that the pelt has completely removed Levi's autonomy: his focus

and purpose now emanate from it. The pelt represents the danger of obsessive human greed and self-obsession, and so it clouds Levi's ability to look beyond himself. The passage therefore suggests that Levi's misguided project has totally consumed him. Because he's absolutely sure that building a coffin will solve his and Charlotte's problems, he can no longer see the other possibilities that could lead to healing and closure, and the reader must rely on an outside narrative voice in order to even consider that Levi is making the wrong decision, seeing as it's something he can no longer admit even to himself.

☛ He parks beside the cottage and goes inside, where there isn't much light and even less warmth, but there is, among the dusty shelves and boot-worn floorboards, the unmistakable pillowy feeling of coming home. Even in the midst of his rock-hard resolve, Levi cannot dodge this feeling. It reaches at him from the faded floral curtains. It snags him from the sagging bookshelves. It rises through the chipped tiles behind the old stove.

Related Characters: Levi McAllister

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 161-162

Explanation and Analysis

When Levi arrives home from his trip to retrieve the coffin, he feels an instant sense of “coming home”—an almost spiritual experience. But though it's a “pillowy” feeling, which suggests comfort, it also “reaches” and “snags” at Levi, which makes it more of a claustrophobic, inescapable, perhaps even unwelcome experience. Levi can't avoid the feeling that he's come home, but he seems to want to, because it feels like his home doesn't fit him anymore.

This passage suggests that grief can transform the griever and disrupt their most deeply held truths. Levi's home is still, irrevocably, his home, but he's become such a different person through his grief that home is now also a cloying and uncomfortable reminder of how he used to be. He also notices that his home has become worn and faded, more of a relic or a memory than a place he still enjoys inhabiting. In this way, the passage demonstrates that grief overwhelms every aspect of one's life. It isn't restricted to the immediate aftermath of losing a person but seeps into everything, changing one's perspective on the life one once took for granted.

Coal Quotes

☛ He even met others like him—beings of rock, of sand, of earth and ice, that lived in much the same way he did, although they weren't the same, not really. Some wore fur and feathers and watched over the creatures they resembled. Some floated high in the sky and released rain, on a whim, to extinguish him. Some swam through rivers and called themselves gods. Some were kind. Some, like a blood-hungry bird spirit he encountered deep in the southwest, were cruel. Most were calm, seeking only to care for the creatures and land that they felt drawn closest to.

Related Characters: Fire Spirit/Jack (Levi and Charlotte's Father), The Esk God

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis


The fire spirit's experience provides a vast perspective on the natural world. From his journeys across the island over many hundreds of years, he's come to understand the complex tapestry of the processes and beings that make up the environment, and though they share habitats and rely on each other, the fire spirit finds it easier to focus on their differences than their similarities. Each element of nature has its own purpose, which means each element is uniquely formed and has its own attitude. The passage suggests that the natural world doesn't function mindlessly—out of every adaptation and evolution, new perspectives and goals emerge.

This passage's lists also reveal the interdependence of these different beings. In these lists, the reader recognizes creatures they've come across before, like the Esk God who swims through rivers and the cormorant spirit “deep in the southwest.” Even though there's a huge variety of these beings on this island, they seem to play major parts in one another's existences, reinforcing the idea that even the most unique elements of nature with their own specific niches are vital to the relentlessly interconnected churn of nature's creation, destruction, and renewal.

●● What part of the world had thrown hooks into his soul?

The answer, he had learned early in his life, lay in the hands that had clashed two stones together to create him. It was people, always people; only people that he really cared for. He had helped them cook, create, shape and heat themselves, and had come to think of them as not so much a family but as part of himself. For of all the shapes of life he had encountered, they were the only ones who had shown him that he had a purpose in this water-edged world.

Related Characters: Fire Spirit/Jack (Levi and Charlotte's Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 172


Explanation and Analysis

The idea that “hooks” bind the fire spirit is bound to human civilization suggests that his connection to people is one that, at least at first, was forced upon him. Though he cares for people, his relationship with them is fraught and inorganic, and it's something he'll have a hard time feeling comfortable with throughout his life.

This passage highlights the fire spirit's unique existence. While all other natural forms and beings are native to particular ecologies and play vital roles in those ecologies, fire can only exist when a sentient being brings it into existence. The fire spirit is therefore completely dependent on humans. He has no role in any of nature's complex relationships, but in human society, his role is a vital one. In this way, the character of the fire spirit demonstrates that no matter how developed the world of human industry and infrastructure becomes, it's as much of an interdependent ecology as the natural world is.

●● They brought pain to the people he'd been helping for centuries—pain that he initially responded to by burning down their buildings, their docks, their great bird-like ships—but they also came with a vast multitude of new purposes for him. With them he was not merely cooking marsupials, sharpening spears and burning scrub; he was exploding black powder and flinging balls of metal through the air faster than any bird could fly.

Related Characters: Fire Spirit/Jack (Levi and Charlotte's Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

When the British settlers arrive in Australia, they bring tools capable of mass destruction. While the fire spirit knows these tools will be used to harm the people to whom he owes his life, he's also excited by the forms he can take if he learns from the settlers. His greed grows in synchrony with the greed of the humans around him. The passage demonstrates that, while the natural world can provide warmth, shelter, and aid if humans live respectfully alongside it, it's also capable of even greater destruction when human greed exploits it. In other words, the relationship between nature and human society is an interdependent one, regardless of whether humans are aware of that relationship.

The fire spirit's perspective also suggests that though there may be a sense of justice in the natural world (for example, the fire spirit is reluctant to help people who cause pain and destruction), primal ebb and flow of growth and destruction—forces that persist no matter what—overpower that sense of justice.

●● After all these years he was reduced to the same state he was in at the moment the woman, crouching by the riverbank, had first summoned him with the clash of two smooth stones.

So when Charlotte began leaking the fire he'd given her, he did nothing more than watch. When his son started unravelling, he intervened with only half of his flaming heart.

Just like their mother, they would eventually die. And he did not want to be close to them when they did.

Related Characters: Charlotte McAllister , Levi McAllister, Fire Spirit/Jack (Levi and Charlotte's Father), Edith McAllister (Levi and Charlotte's Mother)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

Rather than undergoing a series of linear character transformations which allow his character to grow from a beginning to an end point, Jack feels that, despite his long journey, he's returned to who he was at the first moment of his life. His life appears cyclical, echoing the ever-changing movements of nature and setting him apart from other human beings—which reinforces the novel's theme of

nature overpowering human desires and efforts.



At the same time, though, despite Jack feeling as though he has not changed at all, his detachment from his children is the clear result of grief. It's not that he has no emotional attachment to them—in fact, he has to consciously stop himself from letting that connection grow stronger. Because Jack is the only character in this novel who is at once a primal natural element and a socialized human, his complex emotions suggest that grief is not merely a contained, human response to loss, but an overwhelming instinct that's deeply ingrained in the natural world.

Grove Quotes

☝☝ The tree ferns blotted the sky and pawed at my face. Worms and beetles churned across the bracken floor. Water throttled in a stream; I was used to it crashing in waves. My mother found calmness there, down in the reaching, shading fronds, but all I found was a lingering distaste for wet soil.

Give me white-chopped seas full of salt and fury.

Related Characters: Charlotte McAllister (speaker), Edith McAllister (Levi and Charlotte's Mother)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

Charlotte is deeply connected to nature. Even when she feels uncomfortable in a specific landscape, she interacts with it and views it as a living thing, something that can “paw” at her face, something constantly “churning.” She understands her discomfort in the gorge as a result of personal preference rather than a failure of nature itself. Furthermore, she appreciates the power of nature, even as it takes different forms: water here “throttles” rather than crashing furiously on the shore. Through this, the novel suggests that a person's appreciation of the complex, interconnected ecologies around them allows them a deeper, more fulfilling relationship with the natural world.

Even though Charlotte and her mother are drawn to different locales, Charlotte can understand the differences between herself and her mother because of their equally close connections with the earth. While Charlotte feels at home near the open, furious ocean, she shares an appreciation and respect for nature with her mother, which allows her to connect with her, even after her death, in a complex and uniquely personal way.

☝☝ He blinks. *Mum loved this place.* He looks up at the canopy. *It seemed right.*


I take a gamble; with heat pulsing beneath my nails, I reach out. *It's not. But it's okay.* My palm lands on his naked shoulder. *We need to leave. I'll find you some help.*


He looks at my hand. *I don't need help. I'm helping you.*

Please, Levi. You can help me by coming with me.

You don't understand.

Related Characters: Charlotte McAllister , Levi McAllister (speaker), Edith McAllister (Levi and Charlotte's Mother)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis



Charlotte's decision to physically connect with Levi, an attempt to offer him comfort and support, is a “gamble” for two reasons. Firstly, it's because she can't control the flames that could shoot out of her at any moment; secondly, it's because displaying such a blatant gesture of affection makes her vulnerable to Levi's reaction, especially if he doesn't reciprocate the care she shows him. It's a moment that illustrates the tension between them: though they're bound by their status as siblings, they're also at risk of hurting each other with every action they take.

Here, the siblings fail to communicate, even though, for the first time in the novel, they're exchanging language. Their grief has affected them both in ways they haven't yet understood. Though they've both attempted to control their grief—Charlotte by running away, and Levi by building the coffin—it hasn't yet run its course, and because they don't even understand their own grief, let alone the other's, there's no way for them to help each other to come to terms with it.

Cloud Quotes

☝☝ The cloud's rage howled on, pushing the storm east and west, north and south. Fields became bogs; ponds became lakes; wombats swam like water rats, and water rats cavorted like seals, drunk on the storm's power. A muscly current turned Tunbridge into Nobridge. The Avoca post office was washed clean of all its letters. Hours after it broke over Notley, the storm reached the southern capital's sprawling suburbs. It lashed the huddled houses before pouring onto the shiny docks, where fortunated of yachts clattered against weathered concrete.

Related Characters: The Esk God, The Cloud God

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

This passage reinforces the novel's theme of nature overwhelming human effort and industry. Against the power of the storm, the institutions and structures on which the humans on this island rely have no chance of survival. Fields and ponds, which are civilized, measured ways in which humans contain the natural environment, won't hold their structures permanently—they'll all be incorporated into the ever-transforming flow of nature. Even the human names of locations are only appropriate for a limited amount of time; a human legacy has no hope of outlasting the cyclical force of weather systems and tides.

Meanwhile, even though the landscape transforms in the flood, the wild creatures within that landscape find ways of adapting, and some of them even thrive. The rats "cavort like seals," a phrase that at once suggests their delight in the raging storm and reminds the reader that everything in nature is fluid and interconnected.

Related Characters: Levi McAllister (speaker), Edith McAllister (Levi and Charlotte's Mother)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

Levi has spent most of his life suppressing his emotions. Whether this was a conscious choice or an instinctive one, it's clear that such a long period of emotional repression has allowed his feelings of grief, sadness, and desperation to fester and grow. Levi considers his outburst a "failure." According to that standard, he's been successful for many years—but that success has meant his relationship with Charlotte has weakened because he hasn't been able to express himself to her, or to appreciate her own expression of her feelings as anything but failure. Perhaps this is the moment in which Levi's ideas of failure and success break down, because no matter how much effort he puts into keeping his feelings contained, they erupt out of him in sobs and violence. This passage highlights the fact that grief is ultimately uncontrollable—despite the temptation to treat grief as a problem to solve, it'll inevitably take its own, overwhelming form.

Sea Quotes

●● I had not cried since I was a small child—not even at our mother's cremation. But now my howl was joined by a rapid gurgle of other sobs, and tears, and the occasional moan. I didn't know what was happening to me; I tried to maintain my composure, but failed; I failed as badly as I'd failed my sister. Somehow I ended up on the squeaky floor at the foot of the bed. My throat ached. I was punching the linoleum.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ASH

Two days after Levi and Charlotte spread Levi and Charlotte's mother's ashes in Notley Fern Gorge, their mother comes back with ferns and moss sprouting from her body. Her reincarnation is similar to what happened to their grandmother, great-aunt, and cousin, along with around a third of their female ancestors: these women returned in recognizable forms after being cremated, though their bodies had changed to echo the environments in which their ashes were scattered. Each of them came back to complete a chore or deal to a grudge before disappearing.

Upon returning, Levi and Charlotte's mother spends her first two days showering and gazing at heirlooms. On the third day, she stops showering; on the fourth, she walks for a full day to Levi and Charlotte's father's house. She waits on his lawn, and by the time he finds her, the vegetation on her body is brown and dry. When he walks toward her, she rubs two of her ferns together to light a fire in her body, and he recoils as the flames surround her.

Though Levi finds this event upsetting, he claims to get over it quickly, but Charlotte's behavior—she's obsessed with nature and has screaming fits—worries him. He wonders what form she'll take when she returns after death. When he can't stop thinking about this, he resolves to bury Charlotte whole.

The fact that Levi and Charlotte's mother's reincarnation is the very first thing to happen in the novel shows that this novel falls into the genre of magical realism: the reader can expect magical and supernatural events to occur within these characters' everyday lives. The women's reincarnated appearances emphasize that the family's relationship to the natural world isn't just a hobby or lifestyle but a deep connection that continues after death.



In the final days of her second life, Edith seems to prioritize her husband's feelings and reactions over her own comfort. It's clear that the purpose of her reincarnation has something to do with her relationship to him and that fire is a key part of their relationship, though because Edith performs her actions wordlessly, the exact meaning of this exchange is a mystery to the reader.



It's clear that Levi and Charlotte have a tense relationship, apparently due to their differences: Levi is reserved and unemotional while Charlotte overtly expresses how she's feeling. Levi's decision-making process suggests he values practical solutions, however extreme they may be, over understanding complex emotions.



SALT

At the same time that Levi makes the decision to build a **coffin**, Karl hurries up the beach toward his home, carrying his bucket, tackle box, and rod through a strong gust of wind. He spent his day on a rock, fishing with a rod, but he considers that "angling" instead of fishing: fishing means being on the ocean, with a spear and a seal, waiting for the sign of a Oneblood tuna. Men on the north coast of Tasmania have partnered with seals to hunt Onebloods since before people started keeping records of life on the island. The men consider their seals to be the other halves of themselves.

This chapter marks the first of several switches between characters' perspectives, which prepares the reader to piece together a story across different timelines and places. Having multiple narrative perspectives also emphasizes the importance of place—specifically, the island of Tasmania—over the experience of any one person. The ancient practice of hunting Onebloods, which are fictional, is another reminder that there's an aspect of magic in the daily lives of many of this novel's characters.



Many years earlier, when Karl finds his seal as a pup, they lock eyes for what feels like months. He doesn't know if he'll see the seal again after their first meeting, but two days later, the pup finds his boat again. Their first year of eel hunting together, they don't catch anything—they're too young and small, and Oneblood tuna weigh around 450 kilograms. Though killing them seems impossible, Karl knows it can be done—he grew up seeing men bringing them back to shore. During this year, Karl earns money working on fishing charter boats helping tourists to fish. After one of these trips, he sees the “McAllister matriarch”—Levi and Charlotte's grandmother—rising from the ocean covered in crustaceans.

The next year, Karl and his seal begin to give chase to young Onebloods. One day, the seal brings back a single tuna scale; three weeks later, the seal nips a tuna and draws blood. In their third year together, Karl and the seal begin to master the choreography of a hunt, in which the seal herds the tuna upward to the surface of the water for the man to spear. This year, Karl and his seal attempt this technique many times but never succeed. Meanwhile, the seal grows larger.

Karl meets Louise on the fishing boat he works on. They discuss moving to Devonport, where she runs her business. But when Louise realizes that there's no way Karl will move from Hawley, she moves into the cottage with him. Karl knows he wants to “do something permanent” about their relationship, but first he needs to gain his seal's approval, so he takes Louise out on the dinghy. When the seal emerges, he stares and barks at Louise. She reaches to him and cups his head, and after a few tense moments, he barks happily and swims away. Tears stream down Karl's cheeks.

Three months later, Karl proposes to Louise with a ring he bought after selling the first Oneblood tuna he and his seal catch. (Though Oshikawa, a Japanese wholesaler, wanted the whole tuna body, Karl only sold him the meat; he knew that the other parts of the body belonged to his seal.) After Karl and the seal catch their third Oneblood, Karl quits his job on the fishing boat. The next year they catch four tuna, and the year after they catch six. Over the next decade, they average six a year. Louise's tourism business grows enough to allow her to rent an office, so she and Karl turn her home office into a nursery. They have two daughters together. Karl notices they're growing older, but he doesn't mind.

The intensity of Karl's first meeting with the seal and the unlikely event of the seal finding Karl's boat again in the open ocean magnify the uniquely strong bond between Karl and the seal. Karl's persistence is obvious here, given he's willing to take on a task he can't imagine achieving. Karl seeing Levi and Charlotte's reincarnated grandmother suggests that different characters' stories will overlap in this novel.



Karl and the seal's ability to work together in a complex, coordinated effort demonstrates the strength of their relationship, even though they can't communicate with language. The novel suggests that when humans create genuine connections with wild creatures, that interdependent bond can allow both participants to achieve what neither could alone.



Karl's seems both committed to and slightly uncertain about his relationship with Louise. Though his desire to “do something permanent” about the relationship suggests that he wants to marry her, he also can't marry her without his seal's approval. This latter point suggests that even Karl's deep love for another person can't challenge his loyalty to the ocean, further underscoring the important role nature plays in the novel.



When Karl saves the tuna carcass for his seal rather than selling it—which he could presumably do for a much larger profit—he shows that his commitment to his relationship with his hunting partner is stronger than his desire for monetary gain. Meanwhile, Karl's approach to building a family seems to be logistically driven—it seems that he and Louise only have children when the growth of Louise's business allows it. This sets up a contrast between Karl's primal love for the ocean and his seal and his almost matter-of-fact relationship with his family.



One day, just as Karl is starting to haul a speared tuna onto the dinghy, something bumps into him in the water. He first thinks it's a shark, but its hide is smoother than a shark's hide, and he realizes it's an orca. Just one orca won't attack a seal, but soon a second and a third orca appear, followed by a whole pod of orcas. Karl begins to panic. Each orca takes a turn charging toward the seal before breaking off. The seal moves toward Karl, who realizes he's trying to protect him. An orca's tail throws Karl backward. When he surfaces, he sees the orcas slamming the seal against the water, breaking his body into "ragged chunks of brown-red meat."

For months after the attack, Karl keeps hearing the clicking sound of the orcas in sounds like light switches and snapping fingers. When he hears the clicks, he remembers his seal dying. He doesn't try to find another seal: though he knows other hunters have found successful second matches, he doesn't have the energy, and the idea of finding another pup makes him feel sick. His daughters often find him drunk, crying at the bay. He learns that the Oneblood stocks are the lowest in a decade, and Oshikawa tells him it might just be a bad season, though perhaps the water is getting warmer, or a monsoon messed up the food chain.

Karl and Louise survive comfortably on the money they saved from Karl's tuna sales over the years. They send their daughters to a private boarding school in Launceston, a nearby city. To keep busy, Karl takes the family on holidays. Together, they hike Cradle Mountain where they stay in Oshikawa's cabin and visit Melaleuca, a remote southern region that delights Nicola, the elder daughter. Still, Karl can only think of his seal dying. His daughters show no interest in learning to hunt Onebloods. They prefer to fish using frozen squid as bait. Though this kind of angling bores Karl at first, he begins to enjoy it and makes a habit of it.

Back in the present, Karl battles the wind as he walks up the beach toward the cottage. He sees a young man looking through a pile of driftwood. The man is tall and looks malnourished. Karl greets him briefly, stopping when he notices the man staring at him intensely. Karl says that the branch looks good, but the man says it's "not right." When Karl questions this, the man explains that the wood isn't right for a **coffin**. Though Karl suggests it'd be hard to make a coffin out of driftwood, the man keeps sorting through the pile. Eventually, the man introduces himself as Levi McAllister, a name that feels familiar to Karl.

In this moment, Karl experiences the full force of nature working against him and his seal. The ocean, which until now Karl has felt a seemingly spiritual connection to, has turned against him. It's a scene that demonstrates that the power of nature and humanity's inability to tame it. The description of the seal's body as "meat" further emphasizes this—nature can disassemble Karl's seal as easily as Karl sold the pieces of their tuna catches, which shows that Karl has no sway over the workings of the natural environment.



Karl's response to his trauma demonstrates the overwhelming force of the connection he had to his seal. It also suggests that grief is similarly overwhelming; Karl's memories infiltrate every mundane part of his life, making his loss an inescapable fact. Meanwhile, the dropping Oneblood stocks suggest that the natural world, however powerful, is still vulnerable to human impact like overfishing, climate change, and pollution.



Karl and the members of his family enjoy different parts of their adventures to varying degrees, which suggests that a connection to the natural world can manifest in diverse and specific ways for each person. Though Karl and his daughters engage with the wilderness and the ocean differently, it's clear here that Karl feels a deep emotional connection to his daughters—one that's strong enough to change his mind about angling, even though it's far removed from the kind of fishing he used to enjoy.



To an outsider's perspective, Levi looks unhealthy, which suggests that though he preoccupies himself with helping Charlotte, he may be neglecting his own wellbeing. From Karl's observations, it's also clear that Levi is taking the coffin-building task very seriously, using precise judgment to find only the most appropriate pieces of wood. The coffin he's building for Charlotte needs to be perfect.



When Karl gives Levi his condolences, Levi explains that nobody has died recently—he's just getting the **coffin** ready for his sister (Charlotte). Karl asks if she's sick; Levi says she's not. Karl remembers seeing the McAllister woman emerging from the ocean years ago. He asks Levi how old his sister is. The wind dies down suddenly. Levi says she's 23.

Levi can only explain his plans by constantly subverting Karl's expectations in his answers. It's surprising, even disturbing, that someone would build a coffin for someone so young who isn't even sick. This sense of foreboding is echoed in the natural soundscape of the scene, which further emphasizes how fully the natural world dominates these characters' lives.



SKY

Meanwhile, Charlotte sprints down the driveway. Moments ago, she opened a book that Levi left out: *The Wooden Jacket*, by Thurston Hough. She thought it was about trees or wood but realized it was actually about **coffins**. When she saw a note next to the book, a list of her body measurements in her brother's handwriting, she packed a backpack with her most treasured possessions and some necessary provisions and ran out of the house. The thought of being buried, even if her brother is only researching, is enough to make her run away, because the prospect of cremation is one of the only things that still connects her to Levi and Charlotte's mother.

When Charlotte leaves in a hurry without confronting Levi about his plans, it's clear that the relationship between her and her brother is built on gestures rather than verbal communication. Both siblings' actions—the coffin plans and the escape—are dramatic and even slightly violent, which suggests that there's a tension between them: perhaps they haven't explained themselves to each other because they don't expect the other to understand. This moment also demonstrates Charlotte's instinct to escape whenever she feels trapped, whether emotionally (in her relationship with Levi) or physically (in a coffin).



Charlotte flags down a pickup truck. The driver, a neighbor she's not particularly close to, picks her up, and they drive away from her home. Charlotte deliberates going to Levi and Charlotte's father, but she quickly realizes that she still resents and mistrusts him after he left the family; his house is "another **coffin**." The driver drops her off at the Launceston bus station. She goes for a walk to stretch her legs and finds herself on a waterfront boardwalk. She watches the two Esk rivers meeting with the Tamar in the dark. She crawls under an upturned dinghy at the dock and falls asleep.

Charlotte seems accustomed to uncomfortable and potentially unsafe situations like getting into a car with a stranger and sleeping under a boat, given that she appears to make these decisions without much hesitation. This suggests she puts her emotional safety—feeling in control of herself and far from those who threaten her happiness—above physical comfort.



Charlotte dreams that the fields of the farm where she lives are becoming wide patches of green lava, and the coastal gullies freeze and crack. In the dream, Levi and Charlotte's mother sprays water onto sunburnt shoulders, and then those shoulders sprout fern fronds. Meanwhile, Levi pounds on the walls of their cottage and screams. Charlotte wakes up. Something warm is pressing on her stomach: a rakali, or water rat. Charlotte lifts the boat and climbs out from beneath it while the rat curls up and goes back to sleep.

Charlotte's dream includes repeated transformations of natural landscapes, which emphasizes the power—and potential destructiveness—of the natural world. The dream suggests that Charlotte is still in a stage of profound grief, given the focus on her mother. But it also suggests that she's also worried about Levi; even though she's running away from him, she knows he may be in danger, and she's worried about him.



Charlotte boards a rickety bus, which sets off south along the highway. She's sure that leaving Levi was the right decision: talking to him wouldn't have changed his mind. She knows he thinks she's gone mad and is trying to help her. But in Charlotte's opinion, he's the one who needs help because—unlike her—he hasn't demonstrated any grief for Levi and Charlotte's mother.

Something goes wrong with the bus, so it stops in Tunbridge for the night. Charlotte gets a beer at a pub. She was angry when she learned they'd be stopping here, but she calmed down upon seeing her comfortable hotel room. At the pub, she listens to a pair of miners a few chairs away muttering to each other while sneaking looks at her. Charlotte begins to pay close attention to their conversation when they start talking about a tin mine in the south, "at the bottom of the world."

The miners notice Charlotte eavesdropping and move to sit next to her. She relaxes in their company. One of them has a moustache and is "sharp and funny." The other is taller, kind, and quiet. After a while, Charlotte puts a hand on the taller one's shoulder and he smiles shyly at her. She "lures" him back to the corridor outside her hotel room and begins to kiss him. Suddenly, she feels the hands of the other miner on her shoulders. The tall miner winks at his friend, and Charlotte understands they've done this before. She feels a "burst of heat" in her body and shouts at the miners to leave her alone. The taller miner clutches his wrist, and he and the other miner run off. Before Charlotte goes to sleep, she writes down the name of the southern mining town they were discussing: Melaleuca.

The next day, Charlotte, hungover, continues south on the repaired bus. The miners' faces fade from her memory. In this season, the landscape should be lush and green, but instead it looks malnourished and beige. Charlotte dozes and wakes up when the bus reaches the suburbs of Tasmania's capital city. She hopes the bus will drive straight through the city. It does, and then it stops in the nearby beach town of Kingston. Here, Charlotte gets off the bus and smells "white-picket fences" and "collared shirts at church," so she returns to the bus station to buy a ticket further south. Then she boards a smaller bus, and as it drives through smaller towns and bigger fields, she relaxes.

From Charlotte's inner monologue, it's clear that she feels the need to reassure herself about her decision. Although it was a decision she made quickly and without informing anyone about it, she's still preoccupied with how Levi might react to it.



Charlotte's angry reaction demonstrates her instinct to respond emotionally to life events, opting to panic rather than stay calm. Meanwhile, her instinct for escape is clear when she hones in on the miners' conversation about "the bottom of the world"—she is obviously eager to get as far away from the north as she can.



Charlotte doesn't initially sense any danger in the miners' company. She feels in control of the situation—that it is her, not the miners, doing the "luring."—Her read on the situation suggests that she underestimates or hasn't frequently experienced the kind of sexist behavior the two miners are about to exhibit when they attempt to overpower her. The heat in her body combined with the miner clutching his wrist implies that she has the capacity to burn others, hinting that she possesses a supernatural, fire-based ability that she hasn't yet fully realized.



The fact that the landscape doesn't look as lush and healthy as it should is a foreboding sign, one that suggests that the natural world has been disrupted and that climate change is becoming visually apparent on the island. The scents that Charlotte notices build a picture of clean conformity, so her decision to leave the city as soon as she arrives demonstrates her discomfort with stifling social norms. In running away, she's escaping not just from her brother, but also from anything that makes her feel trapped, including a lifestyle that's governed by the opinions of others.



The bus stops in Franklin. The stillness of the town calms Charlotte. She finds a map in an antique shop and locates Melaleuca on it, but there's no road that leads there. The owner of the shop tells Charlotte that boat or plane are the only ways to get there. She gives Charlotte the name of a boat that sails there. Charlotte finds the boat and knocks on its hull until a sailor with "grey hair, a grey beard, grey eyes and grey lips" emerges. Charlotte begins to list the things she'll do for him, including cleaning fish and scrubbing the decks. The sailor tells her to stop talking, tosses her a brush, and tells her they'll leave tomorrow morning.

External influences, like the feeling of a particular geographical place, have an instant effect on Charlotte: she's happiest when she can live in harmony with the world around her. Her pursuit of a method of transportation to Melaleuca gives her journey a sense of epic scale. This isn't any ordinary vacation; rather, it's an odyssey that requires stamina and great effort. In this way, Charlotte's journey becomes a hero's journey, and the reader gets the sense that she'll be profoundly transformed along the way.



IRON

When Charlotte lifts the boat and climbs out, the Esk God wakes to a flash of light across his face. If he hadn't been so grateful to the girl for keeping him warm, he would've pierced her throat. As Charlotte leaves, the Esk God considers going back to sleep, but instead he slithers out and slips into his river. The eels part to make way for him. The names "Rakali" and "water rat" mean nothing to him. He's been around since before even the indigenous humans arrived. His understanding of humans is that they're "callous" and only swim in the heat; some of them grow "horns their fellow apes could not see"; some of them, like the girl he slept beside last night, return after their ashes are scattered.

Though the bright light angers the Esk God, Charlotte's warmth pleases him, demonstrating that he prioritizes basic primal comforts and needs and is upset when anything disturbs the world's natural balance. This, paired with his observations about humans' destructive tendencies, establishes the Esk God as a creature who exists in harmony with nature's ebbs and flows. Furthermore, it's clear that what's important in the natural world isn't superficial labels (like the name "water rat") but rather the purpose and function of everything that makes up a particular ecology.



The Esk God paddles onward, feeling pleased that he let Charlotte live. He knows she has a purpose, and he knows Levi and Charlotte's father, too—he's someone the Esk God doesn't want to get in trouble with. He swims upstream to the mountain where his lover, the Cloud God, lives. She's the source of his rivers, which means his love for her is more fate than choice, and he's never even seen her—just her ankles and the hem of her dress.

The Esk God's observations about Charlotte and her father, along with his relationship to the Cloud God, emphasize the interconnectedness of living things. Just as he depended on Charlotte for her warmth, he understands that he played a small part in keeping her alive so that she can fulfil her purpose just as he and the Cloud God can.



The Esk God swims through a series of rapids with ease. He reaches the wall of the Trevallyn Dam, which is more of an obstacle than the swirling currents. He hates the dam, so he passes through quickly because he knows his rage won't stop the humans or their industries. On his way through, he nips the screws from a jet ski. Back in the river, he relaxes and swims on, snapping the neck of a trout whose species was introduced by humans. As he travels south, he hopes that today he'll catch a glimpse of the Cloud God's face. He notes that the influences of other gods—the Frost God's dew on the grass beside the river, and the Bark God's hides that fall from tree trunks into the river—are becoming overwhelmed by the taste and smell of iron.

The Esk God's hatred for the dam suggests that the changes humans have made to the environment for their own convenience are directly at odds with the movements and needs of nature. To the Esk God, iron is the most prominent sign of humanity's intrusions into nature, which creates a direct link between human industry and the decay of the natural environment. Though the Cloud God is his lover, the Esk God is yet to see her face, which emphasizes the vastness of the natural world.



The Esk God rolls over to see a goshawk descending as if to attack. Seconds before impact, the goshawk sees the Esk God's white tail and golden belly and, recognizing him as a deity, swerves to avoid him. The Esk God climbs out of the river to sit on a taproot. He sees a yabby—a crustacean—on the opposite bank and dashes toward it. As he bites into its head, he feels the soil moving beneath him and finds that he's been trapped in a cage by a "male pale ape."

The Esk God resolves to wait until the man opens the cage to leap out and attack him, but as the man lifts him out, he finds that he's unable to move. The man laughs, and the Esk God vows to kill him and then go after every one of his "tribe." Suddenly, the man pierces him with a knife. The Esk God feels himself leaving his body and ebbing upward. He realizes he's going to see his love, the Cloud God. Just before he sees her, he remembers the dream he had the night before. In the dream, he'd felt warm, and then he rolled over to see that the land and river were covered in walls of blue flames.

FUR

In a letter to Thurston Hough, Levi writes his admiration for Thurston's book, *The Wooden Jacket*, before asking for his help in building a **coffin** for Charlotte, who will be the first woman in their family to be buried instead of cremated. Levi also mentions that he asked Hough's editor for his address, having found no other method to communicate with him. Thurston replies to Levi's letter with a barrage of insults: he's upset that Levi has interrupted his "quiet life of monastic contemplation." He says that he doesn't take on unsolicited clients then notes that his fees are likely too high for Levi to afford. He ends his letter by demanding Levi never contact him again.

Levi writes to Thurston again, apologizing for offending him. He explains that Levi and Charlotte's mother died recently, and the loss has left Charlotte "barely clinging to the edge of her sanity." He suggests that a **coffin** might help his sister settle down, and he offers Thurston \$5,000 for his advice and offers even more if Thurston can help in a more substantial way.

Within the natural world, there's a deep respect for hierarchy: the goshawk recognizes the Esk God as a divinity and refuses to attack him. That respect doesn't translate to the human, or "pale ape" that traps the Esk God, which demonstrates that humans ignore and overpower the intricate workings of nature to prioritize their own greed.



The Esk God finds himself unable to fight back against the man who trapped him. His force and might, which allow him to reign over the Esk Rivers, are no match for human strength and technology, which suggests that when humans set out to fulfil only their own desires, they put the natural world at risk. This is the second dream mentioned in the novel, and, like the first, it involves large-scale natural transformation, which foreshadows a real, major, perhaps even catastrophic natural event.



Levi is confident that Charlotte will be buried, and that confidence emphasizes his stubborn nature and lack of awareness that Charlotte may not, in fact, want a coffin at all. His stubbornness is also evident in his mission to find Thurston's address. Meanwhile, Thurston's rudeness is clear from the first line of his letter. It's ironic that he considers his life a "monastic" one, as his rudeness seems at odds with spiritual enlightenment.



Levi reveals a significant amount of personal information in this letter, especially given that the letter he's replying to was hostile and aggressive. That transparency, along with his offer of a large sum of money before inquiring about Thurston's fees, demonstrates Levi's naïve, trusting nature, and perhaps also his desire to connect with others.



Thurston responds to Levi, addressing him as “Mr Moron.” After more insults, he explains that a “difference of opinion with the Tax Department,” which his nosy neighbors caused when they informed the department of Thurston’s whereabouts, has left him in urgent need of funds. He then describes himself as not only an expert on **coffins**, but also “the world’s finest coffin maker,” and he offers to make a coffin for Charlotte with fine timber and a fur lining. He tells Levi to reply as soon as possible with his sister’s age, measurement, and “probable cause of death.” Levi replies, offering Thurston a further \$22,000 for building the coffin. He provides Charlotte’s age and measurements, but he explains that she’s not actually dying, and he needs the coffin as proof that she’ll be buried, not cremated—hopefully she won’t need to use it for many years.

In Thurston’s next letter, he calls Levi a “nincompoop” with “brain-shattering levels of stupidity.” His process is highly dependent on the condition of the **coffin’s** inhabitant and his choice of materials depends on who the subject was. For instance, a blackwood coffin would mean no trees could grow in a 50-meter radius from it, apart from a single, huge blackwood that would sprout from the plot and house a single, territorial cormorant. This kind of coffin wouldn’t be suitable for a popular, sociable person. Thurston writes that he should decline Levi’s request, given that Levi seems to know very little about his process, but thanks to Mavis and her Country Women’s Association, the Tax Department is hounding him, so he needs Levi’s payment.

Thurston continues by describing the coffin he’ll make for Charlotte: he’ll use snowgum wood, which is appropriate for the coffins of those who die young because it fossilizes their bodies and immortalizes the beauty of their youth. He writes, “I understand she isn’t dying right now, but she could die at any time.” Though he mentioned a fur inlay, he explains he won’t be using wombat fur as he usually does, thanks to a wombat shortage. Instead, he’ll use the **pelt** of a particularly beautiful water rat he trapped a few days ago. He finds himself habitually running his fingers through it. He tells Levi not to contact him again—he’s begun working.

Here, Thurston further reveals his arrogance and sense of entitlement. He feels comfortable insulting Levi while still accepting his money, demonstrating that he holds his knowledge and skill in high regard and expects everyone else to do the same. He isn’t as self-assured as he wants to appear, though: he’s desperate enough for money that he needs to at least partly abandon his hostility and accept Levi’s proposition. His refusal to pay taxes suggests that he’d prefer only to think about himself and considers the needs of others unworthy of his effort or attention.



Thurston devotes a lot of thought to his coffin-making practice, to the extent that he can’t comprehend Levi’s lack of understanding. His single-minded devotion to his work and resultant inability to sympathize with others reinforces his isolated, antisocial nature. The types of coffins he lists, including the one that would grow a tree to house a cormorant, all have slightly magical features, contributing to the novel’s streak of magical realism and suggesting that the power of nature grows when death and grief are involved.



Thurston’s priority is to preserve the body’s beauty as if it were still young rather than to encourage a natural process of decay, which emphasizes his tendency to work against, rather than in harmony with, nature; the revelation that Thurston was the man who trapped the water rat further suggests his desire to control rather than coexist with nature. Furthermore, his statement that Charlotte “could die at any time” is abrupt and unfeeling, a sign that he cares far more about his work than the feelings of other people.



Levi replies to thank Thurston. Two weeks later, after no reply, he writes another letter, saying that he'd like to update Charlotte about the **coffin** but hasn't seen her in weeks (though, thanks to local reports, he knows she's alive and travelling). He tells Thurston he has a lot of free time now and offers to help with building the coffin. Thurston replies with more insults and tells Levi to leave him alone. He says the only thing Levi could do to help him would be to poison the South Esk River, because its inhabitants—water rats, frogs, eels, even birds—attack him as soon as he's within twenty meters of the river. He calls this the “price of genius” and insists that the coffin is shaping up beautifully.

A month later, Levi writes to Thurston, having received no recent updates. He asks for a report on Thurston's progress and says that the police have been unable to find Charlotte, so he's hired a private detective to look for her. Thurston replies to tell Levi that this will be the last letter he writes to him: he's unable to complete the **coffin** because the river creatures have besieged his house. He can't go outside without the creatures attacking him, and the water rats are digging at the house's foundations. During daylight hours, he shoots at the creatures from his window, but they return at night in even greater numbers. Thurston tells Levi to feel free to collect the half-finished coffin, though he won't give up the **pelt** of the water rat, which has been his “sole comfort.”

ICE

The detective downs a shot of gin before getting into her car to drive to a new client's (Levi) house. He seemed like a “weird kid” on the phone, and she doesn't trust him, but she needs the money and the distraction of a case. Her car's tires skid on black ice as she drives, so she reluctantly slows down. She arrives at her client's farm, but it doesn't seem like much of a farm—it's just a few fields of thistle—and she wonders how its inhabitant makes money. She parks and knocks on the door. The client invites her in and tries to make small talk, which she doesn't enjoy.

From what the detective's new client, Levi, tells her, she can't understand why it was necessary to meet in person. The story of someone's strange behavior and disappearance after a death isn't particularly unusual. Levi tells her that the police didn't find anything in their investigation, but he gives her the name of the lead detective, Graham Malik, with whom the detective is familiar. When she gets up to leave, she asks for Levi and Charlotte's father's address. She has to stare him down before he gives it to her.

Levi seems more preoccupied with keeping busy than with trying to find Charlotte—a sign that, as with his grief, he prefers to distract himself from his worries rather than confronting them head-on. Thurston's suggestion that poisoning the South Esk would solve his problem illustrates his ignorance. The creatures are attacking him for threatening their environment, but he's unaware that their rage is his fault. His statement about the “price of genius” reinforces his attitude that his own efforts and desires are more worthwhile and important than the natural life that surrounds him.



Levi's worry about Charlotte has clearly escalated, given he considers the police's efforts unsatisfactory. Meanwhile, the fact that the water rats dig at the foundations of the house is a symbolic reversal of Thurston's situation: at first, he was the one disrupting the foundational structure of the river's ecology, and now the river's creatures are attempting to dismantle his habitat. That Thurston responds with violence rather than reflecting on his own actions demonstrates the human tendency to destroy and overpower nature rather than respect and live alongside it.



The detective's pre-drive drink and tendency to speed paint her as a reckless person who doesn't care much about her own safety (or the safety of others), which suggests she might end up in a dangerous situation. The state of the McAllisters' farmland symbolizes the isolated life that Levi and Charlotte live—in fact, their lives, and particularly the question of how they earn a living, are a mystery to those around them.



The detective has worked in this field long enough that a disappearance doesn't shock her. It's clear that while this case seems like a regular one to her, it's a serious worry to Levi. Yet Levi's relationship with his father is so fraught that it almost prevents him from giving the detective critical information she needs to start looking for Charlotte.



Half an hour later, the detective arrives at Levi and Charlotte's father's address. His house's grandeur impresses her, and although the garden is now overgrown, she can tell it was once impressive. She doesn't look at it for too long—she doesn't like pretty things. The house is dark, and there aren't any cars parked. When she knocks on the door, there's no answer. As she gets in her car to drive away, she notices a blackened patch of grass on the lawn surrounded by lush new grass and feels "a brief twinge." She gets home after dark, eats a sandwich, and drinks several glasses of gin. The neighbor's huge cat comes in and sits on her stomach as she falls asleep.

The next morning, the detective wakes up hungover and completes her regular morning routine before heading to the police station. She asks the junior police officer at the desk to let her see Detective Malik, and when the junior officer asks for details, she says she's Malik's ex-wife. When she opens the door to Malik's office, he starts defending himself to his ex-wife before realizing it's the detective instead. She tears open the bag of croissants she bought on the way there as he explains to her that his ex-wife is taking everything from him in the divorce.

People refer to Malik as the "Last Graham," partly because he's one of the youngest people around called Graham, and partly because he's so slow to solve his cases. In the detective's opinion, Malik isn't as bad a police officer as people say he is. She trusts and respects him, and he's helped her out with several cases. She tells him she's looking for Charlotte McAllister. Malik says his team thinks she just wants to escape from her life, especially from her brother (Levi), so she may have moved "interstate" to Australia's mainland—and once she does that, there's nothing the Tasmania police can do. He says two men in Tunbridge "had a crack at her" and learned she could look after herself. In Malik's opinion, Charlotte isn't dead and hasn't been kidnapped—she's hiding.

The detective thanks Malik. Just before she leaves, she asks about Levi and Charlotte's father. Malik says he seemed to appear out of nowhere before marrying Edith, Charlotte's mother, and nobody thought much of it apart from Malik. He was only a junior police officer back then, though, so he couldn't investigate the father much. The detective feels a "full-body, skin-shaking twinge," a feeling she usually gets before a situation becomes dangerous or something bad happens. She dismisses this feeling; looking back, she'll consider that decision a mistake.

The detective's scorn for physical beauty shows that she's a pragmatic, task-oriented person—she doesn't let prettiness get in the way of her judgement—but it also hints that she's been attracted to (and perhaps betrayed by) beautiful things in the past. Her past experience seems to have made her not only practical, but also stubbornly defensive; and though she tends to operate on logic, her "twinge" suggests she has a more instinctive connection to the natural world around her, even though she attempts to ignore its beauty.



The detective is used to functioning hungover—it seems like a natural part of her regular routine, which suggests she often drinks a lot before going to sleep. She also seems to know Malik relatively well, given that she knows his marital status and can anticipate the best way to get into his office. It's clear she's an adept, subtle liar and doesn't hesitate to manipulate a situation to work in her favor.



Though Levi thinks he is trying to find Charlotte in order to protect her, other people suspect Charlotte might be running away from him and may not want him to find her. Malik describes the two miners' attempt to sexually overpower Charlotte as "having a crack" at her, implying she's a challenge to be defeated. This sexist language suggests that casual misogyny is ingrained in police attitudes and might be a reason that they're not taking Charlotte's disappearance seriously.



Because the detective is telling her story from a point in the future, looking back, the reader gets a hint of foreshadowing here: there's something ominous, even dangerous, about Levi and Charlotte's father. And because the detective experiences these subconscious twinges, she joins many of the novel's other characters in having a slightly supernatural ability, something that connects her to the world around her in ways she doesn't fully understand.



The detective accelerates down the Midlands Highway. An hour later, she reaches Tunbridge, a town whose prettiness upsets her. She waits outside the pub until two men arrive who match the description of the miners in Charlotte's file. After a few moments, the detective follows them into the pub. People stare at her: a woman with "hard eyes, dark lips and short hair" is an unusual sight in rural Tasmania. She orders a gin and sits down in a booth with a sightline to the two miners. She winks at one of them. Soon, they both come over to sit at her booth.

The detective finds it annoyingly easy to get the miners to talk. When they start talking about their fathers, she's tempted to give up the case completely, but she persists in flirting with them. Although she's not conventionally beautiful, she knows she has an "I wonder-if-I-could-handle-her" kind of attraction, which compels these men. She suggests a walk, and soon all three of them are sitting by the river. She asks the miners if they often hang around with women from out of town. When they say they do, she asks if other girls are put off by the two of them working as a team. They tell her there was one girl who "went mental" and burnt the wrist of one of them, though they couldn't see her using a lighter.

The miners tell the detective that the girl (Charlotte) had wanted to know about Melaleuca and that she's headed south. The detective, having found her lead, lets the miners touch her body with their hands and mouths before punching one of them in the groin and elbowing the other in his stomach. One of them tries to call her something—she can't tell if it's "bitch" or "whore" or something similar—but instead of kicking him while he's down, she walks back to her car, where she sleeps for the night. She reflects on how life used to be: she was someone with a corporate job who socialized and had a life plan, including a fiancé, until that fiancé cheated on her, which led to a heavy gin-drinking habit and a decreased desire to please the people around her.

The detective wakes up freezing. She scrapes the ice off the windows and heads south to Franklin to confirm Charlotte left there for Melaleuca. She passes through the capital, a place she hates for all its memories of the life she led there. When she's on her way out of the city, she gets a call from Malik. He tells her he's been looking for more details on Levi and Charlotte's father and couldn't find any documentation beyond a driver's license—no birth certificate or work history. He adds that nobody has seen the father since Charlotte went missing, and when the locals talk about him, they never provide any concrete details. He tells the detective to be wary. The detective feels another full-body twinge.

The detective is hyperaware of her appearance and is in the habit of assuming other people's opinions about her. This defensive behavior suggests she's experienced outward judgment in the past, but instead of changing her appearance to become more anonymous, she's embraced the way she stands out: rather than succumbing to others' judgments, she'd prefer to challenge them, and she doesn't mind alienating herself the process.



The detective enjoys an intellectual challenge, but she's easily deterred by expressions of emotion, which shows she's much more focused on completing tasks than building personal relationships. She's able to have control over the situation here because she understands what the men want from her: as long as she can pretend to be a sexual object for them, they'll keep talking to her. The miners' sexist attitude, which led them to expect Charlotte would have sex with them, also allows them to explain away Charlotte's behavior by pinning the blame on her mental state.



When the miners find themselves hurt and disempowered, their attitudes toward the woman in the situation—in this case, the detective—change from desire to rage, and their sexist entitlement morphs into aggression. The detective doesn't use more force on them than is necessary to escape their advances: she operates out of self-defense rather than a desire to hurt them, which suggests she's driven by a desire for justice rather than pure rage.



The detective's attitudes to the landscapes around her are similar to Charlotte's. The city repulses her just as it upsets Charlotte, and they both find that their surrounds affect them emotionally. These similarities suggest the detective might not find it too difficult to locate Charlotte if she simply follows her own instincts. Meanwhile, the air of mystery surrounding Charlotte and Levi grows, and the detective's "twinge" suggests that the father is a dangerous, foreboding figure.



An hour later, the detective pulls into Franklin. There's no airfield, so she heads to the docks and finds a peeling yacht. After she pounds on the cabin door, a sailor emerges. At first, he doesn't want to tell the detective anything about Charlotte, but she reassures him she's not a police officer: she's there to help. He tells her Charlotte doesn't need any help, but at the detective's offer of cash, he tells her everything he knows.

The detective drives back to the capital and asks a pilot she knows to fly her to Melaleuca. She helped the pilot escape an abusive relationship a few years ago, so now the pilot owes her this favor. The tiny plane flies over increasingly dense vegetation as the detective tries to work out what to say to Charlotte when she finds her. Just before they reach the landing strip, the detective and the pilot see a huge, smoking, burnt field. Upon landing, the pilot heads into a nearby hut to call the ranger, but the detective walks towards the burning field which stretches for around 20 kilometers.

A man begins to approach the detective. She can't pin down his appearance: he looks average, but beyond that, none of his features seem constant—his eyes are blue one moment and green the next. She doesn't notice the twinge in her body. When the man looks at her, she finds herself unable to speak except to eventually ask him who he is. He says, "I think you know." He (Levi and Charlotte's father) walks away, only pausing to tell her to stay away from his daughter (Charlotte). The detective doesn't follow him, instead thinking about how far she is from home. She feels she's followed the case too far, and the only thing that will make her feel better is a glass of gin.

FEATHER

In his diary, Allen Gibson writes that something is killing the wombats on his farm in Melaleuca. The deaths are unnatural—the wombats' eyes have been removed and there are holes in their throats and stomachs. It seems like some kind of bird is attacking them, but there aren't any birds around that could do this. The most territorial one around is the cormorant that lives in the tree above the grave of the farm's founder. Allen doesn't go near the tree, not only because he dislikes the bird, but also because the main shaft of the tin mine is in that field, so there could be deadly hidden sinkholes in the grass. It seems logical to assume the killer is human, but the only people around are Nicola and Charlotte, the two farmhands, and Allen himself, along with a ranger who visits occasionally.

There aren't many purely altruistic characters in the novel: most of them, including the sailor, want something (usually money) in exchange for their help. Unlike the interconnectedness of the natural world, these humans feel little obligation to support or relate to one another.



While the detective prioritizes justice and feels a strong need to defend women against men, just as she defended herself against the miners, she's also pragmatic and opportunistic—she'll take the pilot up on her favor as soon as it becomes useful. This sudden scene of a burning field reminds the reader that, as characters get deeper into the wilderness, they're also more vulnerable to the destructive and transformative powers of nature.



The detective's inability to pin down the man's appearance matches with what Malik told her about Levi and Charlotte's father's constantly changing physical features. Her impression of him as "average" suggests that, though his appearance is fluid, he can somehow make himself look normal and acceptable to witnesses. Levi and Charlotte's father's uncanny ability is a sign that he, like many of the novel's other characters, has a degree of magical or supernatural power.



The diary form of this chapter leads the reader to assume they're reading Allen's private, honest thoughts—and, in effect, makes the reader trust what they read immediately. It seems natural, then, to assume Allen will discover the cormorant is to blame for the deaths. These deaths also create an ominous atmosphere around Melaleuca: it seems certain that more deaths are to follow or that the situation will escalate in some way. Allen mentions Charlotte as one of his farmhands, which reveals that Charlotte has settled in Melaleuca and apparently has stopped running for now.



Allen feels a close bond with the wombats—they're the closest thing he has to a family. He knows he's not the one killing them, but he can't imagine Nicola or Charlotte doing so either. Nicola is in her second year on the farm and is both diligent and caring; though she's from the north coast, she seems to belong here. Charlotte might be the most likely killer, but Allen can't believe she's capable of it—while she sometimes loses control of her emotions, she seems to love the wombats even more than Nicola does, and she cares for them meticulously. Nicola cries when there are more wombat deaths, but Charlotte screams uncontrollably.

Allen doesn't think it's necessary to contact the farm's owner, Mrs Quorn, yet. He doesn't want her to doubt his capabilities as the farm's manager or, worse, to fire him, because the farm is his home, and he loves Melaleuca's "lonely beauty." He, Nicola, and Charlotte have come up with a plan to sleep amongst the wombats in order to catch whatever is killing them. Though he knows this plan will worsen his already fitful nights of sleep, he suspects his bad dreams are due to the killings and that solving them will help in the long run.

In his next diary entry, Allen writes that the plan to sleep amongst the wombats seemed to succeed for the first six nights. On the seventh night, during which Allen was keeping watch, he let himself fall asleep. He woke in the morning to find three dead wombats in a neat line, and he felt angry not just at himself but, for the first time, at Melaleuca and its isolation. He could tell these deaths affected Nicola and Charlotte more than the others. Though that was the hardest day he can remember on the farm, Allen refuses to give up hope.

In the next entry, Allen describes finding six cormorant feathers with the most recent wombat corpse. He concludes that the killer is the huge cormorant. Nicola and Charlotte aren't as relieved by this information as he'd expect. They seem to blame Allen for all the deaths. When he sees them together, he assumes they're gossiping about him. Meanwhile, the surviving wombats have stopped eating and are succumbing to fleas and mange, meaning the farm won't be able to meet its orders for the season. Allen knows he needs to tell Mrs Quorn, but he wants to kill the cormorant first. On top of this, his dreams have changed: they used to be full of menacing feathers, but now the feathers are objects of curiosity instead.

Melaleuca is profoundly isolated and seems to attract humans who prefer to be isolated themselves. Still, Allen's emotional connection to the wombats shows that no matter how much someone enjoys isolation, they'll instinctively search out connection. Therefore, the novel suggests that humans might be unaware of how connected they are to each other and to nature—and that that kind of connection is necessary.



The wombat deaths threaten not just the wombat population but the safety and comfort of the humans who care for them, another sign that humans are inextricably connected to the workings of nature. Though Allen tries to reason that his dreams are a psychological effect of the killings, the reader suspects that perhaps the dreams are more deeply connected, perhaps in a supernatural way, to what's happening on the farm.



Allen's anger is an ominous change in his behavior. Now, instead of calmly attempting to work out why the deaths are happening, the deaths are leading him to resent his isolated surroundings. In this moment, Allen experiences the way that the whims of nature can overwhelm someone just as readily as they can provide awe and delight.



Allen closes the case, deciding that the cormorant is to blame, rather abruptly. It seems all too easy to see the presence of the feathers as evidence that the cormorant is the killer, so the reader may suspect that the case isn't actually solved. The wombats' ailments are a sign that something has profoundly disrupted Melaleuca's ecology—and that Charlotte, Nicola, and Allen are therefore in danger. Allen begins to align himself more with the cormorant than with his fellow humans, becoming suspicious and territorial.



The next diary entry details Allen's frustrating pursuit of the cormorant. He can find it easily, but as soon as he aims at it with his shotgun or net, it leaps away. He thinks it can sense his fear. Its high-pitched cry stays with him even when he's far away from it. Meanwhile, the wombats are still dying, and more cormorants arrive at the farm each day. The feathers they drop bother Nicola and Charlotte, so Allen collects them to store in his room. He begins to resent the farmhands' emotional behavior and describes the way they "simper" over the wombats as "futile, feminine softness." Though Allen knows he can kill the cormorant, he's beginning to respect it.

In Allen's next diary entry, he describes the dreams he had the previous night, which felt more like "visions," in which the fluttering feathers turned into the sharp shapes of cormorants who seemed to acknowledge and welcome him into their flock. At the center of the whorl of birds was the largest cormorant in Old Quorn's tree. When the huge bird screamed, Allen woke up. He headed outside to see Charlotte corralling the wombats into their burrows and felt a sense of hatred for them and for the "barren southern hell" of Melaleuca—a hatred he suspects he's always felt.

Allen's next entry begins, "Damn these women!" in response to Charlotte and Nicola contacting the ranger to tell him "lies and exaggerations" about the farm. The ranger arrives to tour the farm and eventually asks Allen how he's feeling and if he needs to see a doctor. He tells Allen that the farmhands have asked to be flown out of Melaleuca, so Allen needs to work out how to solve the farm's problem quickly. Allen threatens the ranger with his shotgun. Rather than feeling sad to end his long relationship with the ranger, he feels joy and power; he's relieved to restore his control over the farm. Before he goes to sleep, he resolves to visit the huge cormorant the next day, because he knows that will reveal the next step to take.

Allen writes the next entry despite being overwhelmed by pain. He describes waking up after the ranger's visit and going to see the cormorant, taking his knife and journal but not his net or gun, and feeling buoyed by optimism. Unusually, the cormorant isn't in his tree, so Allen sits and waits for him. When he falls asleep, the cormorant appears behind his eyelids, swooping toward him. Just as it's about to plunge into him, he wakes to the feeling of a wombat nudging his legs. Without thinking, he rolls the wombat over and stabs it. He feels a rush of realization: he's the one who's been killing the wombats. Suddenly, he remembers all the previous times, and the way he grew more confident with each kill.

The cormorant evades capture, emphasizing how easily the instinct of a wild creature can overpower human effort; this, in turn, underscores that nature can't be easily tamed. Allen's attitudes toward Nicola and Charlotte have changed dramatically. While he used to admire their diligence and care, now he resents them and considers their "feminine softness" a weakness—a sign that sexism goes hand in hand with aggression and danger.



Allen begins to treat his dreams as "visions," which means he considers them to be omens of the future rather than reflections of his psychological state. Allen's dream, like the other dreams in the novel, depicts the overwhelming power of nature, setting the reader up to expect a catastrophic natural event. Allen's attitude toward Melaleuca has turned from fondness to hatred. It seems he's under some kind of external influence that is affecting his emotions—though it's not yet clear exactly what that influence is.



Allen has completely detached himself from the only other humans on the farm. By referring to Nicola and Charlotte as "these women," he reduces them to their gender rather than perceiving them as individual people, which again emphasizes the fact that sexism and aggression often work together. Allen's attitude toward the women also demonstrates how sexist attitudes create rifts between people. When Allen drives the ranger, now his only friend, away, it shows that he's resolved to completely remove himself from human society: isolation is no longer a threat to him, but a necessity.



Allen's transformation continues. He no longer wants to trap the cormorant—he wants to become closer to it. However, he can only do that when he's at his most vulnerable—that is, asleep—a sign that nature and human effort are fundamentally at odds with each other. Rather than deciding to stop killing or feeling horrified by his actions, Allen seems to become even more violent. Given the novel's elements of natural realism, readers might guess that some external, fantastical influence is overwhelming Allen and influencing his behavior.



Allen feels the scraping of a beak, not from outside but from within himself. He hears a sharp cry and realizes it has come from him. It's clear now that the cormorant wasn't a dream—it actually entered him and now lives in his body. A huge flock of cormorants flies out of the mine. The pecking inside Allen urges him to keep killing, so he makes for the wombat burrows.

Allen is about to stab one of the wombats when he hears Nicola screaming at him. He walks toward her quickly, aiming his knife. Charlotte leaps toward him, and he and the cormorant agree to kill her first. Charlotte lets out a yell and streams of fire escape from her eyes, nose, ears, and fingertips. The flames begin to spread. After a moment of shock, Charlotte, Nicola, and Allen begin to run. In his desperation, Allen hurls himself into the abandoned tin mine.

After a week in the mine, Allen's severe burns have healed well (which he assumes is because of the cormorant within him). His skin has fused with the feathers that littered the mine, and the feathers are growing instead of dying. His nose has become bonier and straighter. He treasures his solitary time in the mine away from the wombats and the farmhands. Still, the cormorant in him knows they'll leave the mine one day: he's hungry and will need to kill again.

CAKE

In her book *Cream, Butter and Small-Town Nutters*, Mavis Midcurrent acknowledges the people of Avoca who have played important parts in her life. She lists Larry, who works at the gas station; the mayor; Garth Burbank, one of the winners of the male beauty pageant she judges; and the members of the Country Women's Association as her fondest friends. On the other hand, she singles out Thurston Hough as the least pleasant man in the area. For instance, after arriving in Avoca, he claimed the postwoman invaded his privacy by delivering his mail. When she persisted, he posted signs around town attacking her character. Shortly after this, the postwoman died.

Mavis goes on to describe Thurston's antisocial behavior, including shooting at accidental trespassers with an air rifle and claiming that the Country Women's Association was infecting the population with mind-control chemicals on the government's behalf. However, just as the Avoca residents started organizing to have him removed, Thurston died, and his body was eaten by water rats. Mavis can't find anything positive to say about Thurston, and she assures her reader that nobody else can, either—not even the young man (Levi) who found his body. When that man left, he took with him a half-finished **coffin** and a golden **pelt**.

By melding dreams with reality, the novel suggests that the natural landscape and its wild creatures possess a mysterious power over the minds of the humans surrounding them. A pecking sensation, not language, prompts Allen, and this confirms that he's transforming into a primal creature.



Allen has abandoned all social cues. He no longer treats Nicola and Charlotte as coworkers but as physical threats. His antisocial behavior and aggression suggest that the cormorant's influence has completely overwhelmed him. Meanwhile, Charlotte's flames erupt here for the first time: it seems they're a result—or perhaps an expression—of heightened emotions like anger and fear.



The effects of the cormorant's influence over Allen are now physical as well as psychological. His quick healing paired with his physical transformation into a more birdlike creature demonstrates that in the natural world, healing and comfort go hand in hand with uncontrollable, overwhelming transformation: a human can't choose which parts of nature affect them.



After the previous chapter, which ended with a huge fire and a man's painful transformation into a birdlike creature, it's hard to appreciate Mavis's sweetness, with her alliterative name and her book's rhyming title. In this way, the turbulence of the natural world overwhelms the novel itself—characters feel insignificant in the face of the wild, primal transformation the reader witnessed just pages earlier.



Mavis's perspective allows the reader to understand how those around Thurston view him: not only is he at odds with his natural environment, but he's also remarkably antisocial and suspicious of the motives of people who seem to get along with one another.



GRASS

In the ranger's ten years in the Southwest National Park, he's been awed by various aspects of nature—ice storms, Oneblood tuna, the southern lights. As a child, he'd come home after school only for his mother to lock him outside, leaving him to roam the outdoors. Still, he'd been unprepared for the wildness of the southwest. It overwhelmed him at first, but he soon began to enjoy the wonder of everything he saw and heard.

When Nicola and Charlotte arrive at the ranger's hut and report on the deaths at the wombat farms, claiming that Allen has gone mad and asking for a way out, the ranger doesn't believe them at first. He doesn't help them until he sees the state of the farm for himself. An hour after arriving there, once he's seen the dead wombats, the hungry cormorants, and Allen's haggard, crazed appearance, he requests a plane to take the farmhands away. The plane lands. Because of the high winds, it won't be able to leave until the next day. The ranger also calls for a doctor, but they won't arrive for another week, so he decides to leave Allen alone until then, even though he's the closest thing the ranger has to a friend.

The ranger wakes from a dream of something "bright and vivid." He pulls the curtain aside to see a blue flicker near the farm. He heads out to see what's going on. The blue light has disappeared, but soon he hears the thundering of feet—Nicola and Charlotte—followed by a blue flame racing over the top of the hill. As the flames ravage the fields, the ranger scrambles to decide what to do. He hears a bang and a shout behind him: the pilot has opened the door of the plane, and he gestures for everyone to get onboard. The ranger and the farmhands reach the plane, but the farmhands stop to talk before they board. The ranger sees flames falling like tears from Charlotte's eyes. Nicola reaches to touch Charlotte's cheek, and the flames die out. At the pilot's urging, they all board the plane.

The plane lands in the capital as the sun rises. The ranger asks Charlotte and Nicola to wait in the airport police office as he reports the fire. He resolves not to tell anyone where the flames came from if Charlotte and Nicola refuse to elaborate in their interview. By the time an officer finally appears at the desk, Nicola and Charlotte have disappeared, so the ranger simply reports the fire and ensures the pilot gets paid. He imagines what Melaleuca looks like right now: the fire will have burned out on the water's edge, and soon new shoots of grass will spring up stronger. Wild animals will return. The ranger will feel the wonder of nature, and he'll write to his mother about it.

The ranger's childhood and the first difficult years of his job suggest that a relationship with nature—one of love and respect, rather than greed and exploitation—takes time and effort to build. It took his mother's forceful encouragement and his own patience to truly appreciate the beauty of the natural world.



The ranger's lack of trust in Charlotte and Nicola suggests two things. First, it's highly surprising that Allen is acting in a threatening way, which emphasizes the extent of his psychological transformation. Second, the ranger's instinct to put more stock in his own observations than the word of two young women who clearly believe themselves to be in danger suggests that he has a slight, perhaps unconscious sexist bias. Given that the winds are so high by the time the plane lands, the ranger's ingrained sexism (which delayed his decision to investigate the situation at the farm) effectively leaves Charlotte and Nicola in danger for longer.



The ranger's dream is synchronized with the vibrant fire on the farm, hinting that there's something supernatural about what he's about to witness. The blue flames that follow Nicola and Charlotte over the hill reinforce this idea. When the ranger watches the farmhands before they board the plane, it seems to make them all forget the danger of the fire, suggesting that all three of them are just now realizing the life-changing significance of what has happened here.



The ranger doesn't report the incident as arson or as a crime at all, perhaps partly because he doesn't understand what caused the fire, and perhaps partly because he feels responsible for Charlotte and Nicola's safety. He doesn't attempt to get involved in a situation he doesn't understand, which matches his attitude toward the natural landscape in which he works—his small tasks aim to preserve nature rather than to tame or exploit it. After all, nature's ability to restore itself will always far overpower his small, human actions.



SNOW

Nicola recalls a vivid memory of Nicola's father coming home after a day of fishing and beaming when he sees her face. No feeling compares to that, except touching Charlotte for the first time. In the middle of the burning field, she grabbed her without thinking. She felt the burning warmth within Charlotte dying, and it was clear that her touch put the flames out. Later, when Charlotte suggested they run away from the airport police office, Nicola surprised herself by going with her. They collected Nicola's car from the long-term carpark and began driving north. Now, Nicola drives as Charlotte sleeps. Nicola's thoughts are a blur of images: her father's smile, the dead wombats, and her fingers on Charlotte's skin. These thoughts circle until she decides on a destination.

Nicola remembers Allen bringing Charlotte up from the dock at Melaleuca. Though at first Charlotte hardly looked at her, Nicola the prospect of having a friend in such a lonely place thrilled Nicola. Eventually, as Allen's behavior began to worry Nicola and Charlotte, they started to go everywhere together and find comfort in each other's company.

After a few more hours driving north, Nicola pulls the car into a supermarket parking lot. She knows she should sleep, but instead she heads into the store and buys food to last them both a month. She drives on into the forest. Charlotte finally wakes up and asks where they are. Nicola says they're almost at their destination, which is "somewhere safe." As she drives, the landscape changes from ferny lushness to a flat plain dotted with ponds and boulders. Nicola follows the signage to Cradle Mountain. Charlotte is skeptical—it's a tourist destination—but Nicola continues on along a narrowing road before coming to a stop in a small parking lot.

Nicola and Charlotte put on hats and gloves in the cold air. They take the bags of clothes and groceries from the trunk. Nicola tells Charlotte it's a 15-minute walk to where they're going, and they set off into the forest and up a winding mountain path. Soon, they arrive at a stone hut on the edge of a lake. The hut belongs to Oshikawa, a friend of Nicola's father, who invited her family to visit a few years earlier. It's the most fireproof destination Nicola could think of—a place for Charlotte to control her flames without causing too much damage, thanks to the stone walls, the lake, and the wet vegetation. Nicola is used to making plans that prioritize other people's comfort and needs, but right now she feels driven by something deeper than a simple desire to help.

Nicola's most profound memory of her father is a visual and sensory one, not one that involves language or any explicit action. This suggests that her relationship with him is of simple, peaceful coexistence: they feel their love for each other without having to acknowledge it verbally. Nicola's relationship with Charlotte, it seems, will function in a similar way: rather than using language to communicate their needs and desires, they'll become close to each other through their actions. Here, Nicola also positions herself as the more decisive, caregiving figure in the relationship—a position that she naturally falls into rather than feeling obligated to fulfil.



Though Nicola and Charlotte both deliberately decided to come to Melaleuca, knowing it'd be an isolated existence, they both find human connection to be a great comfort.



Nicola tends not to act with her own comfort in mind, preferring to serve the needs of others, which is why she decides to stock up on groceries instead of getting any sleep. The changing landscape contrasts with Nicola and Charlotte's changing situation—they're finding refuge while the landscape becomes more exposed. But it could also suggest that their relationship with each other is something that they can no longer hide from.



Nicola's use of the hut forms a direct connection between this chapter, told from her perspective, and her father Karl's chapter earlier in the novel. This structural connection is one way the novel highlights the interdependence of its characters, which echoes the complex, interconnected natural ecologies present in nature. That interdependence is also present in Nicola and Charlotte's relationship. Nicola helps Charlotte find safety and comfort while Charlotte is a source of motivation for Nicola: they propel each other forward.



It's as cold inside the hut as it is outside. Charlotte builds a fire in the wood heater and looks for matches to light it before realizing she can simply shake sparks from her hand. Nicola collapses onto the couch and falls asleep without even taking off her boots. She wakes up in the middle of the night to the smell of smoke. The fire in the wood heater has gone out; she realizes the smoke is coming from a cushion beside Charlotte. There's a stream of blue fire leaking from Charlotte's ear. Nicola smacks the fire out of the cushion and puts a hand on Charlotte's cheek. She feels the flame within Charlotte flicker out. Charlotte wakes up and apologizes. She tells Nicola to go back to sleep and gets up to tend the fire in the wood heater.

Nicola wakes up again hours later. Charlotte is unpacking the groceries in the kitchen. She brings Nicola a slice of toast. They find thermal hiking gear in the closets and, having nothing else to do, they head outdoors and walk without saying much to each other. After climbing to the edge of a crater, they can see Cradle Mountain in front of them: two peaks with a sagging sling that joins them. It's getting late, so they start heading back to the hut.

Charlotte asks Nicola what her plan is. Nicola says they're going to wait until Charlotte can control her "episodes," and then they'll sort things out with the police and the ranger. Charlotte asks what will happen if she can't control the flames. Nicola doesn't know how to reply. She worries that Charlotte thinks the plan is stupid, but when they get back to the hut, Charlotte makes a fire and prepares dinner, showing no signs of doubt. After Charlotte eats and showers, Nicola does the same.

Nicola wakes up later that night to the smell of smoke again. Blue flames are leaping out of Charlotte's feet and burning the sheet on her bed. Nicola grabs Charlotte's ankles, and the fire inside Charlotte dies, but the flames keep burning the sheet and Nicola's wrists, too. Charlotte wakes up, swears, and smacks out the flames. Though Nicola says she's fine, Charlotte swears again when she sees the burns on her skin. Nicola offers to stay in Charlotte's room with her—the flames stop when she touches her. Charlotte refuses at first because of Nicola's burns, but she eventually pulls the covers back on the bed for Nicola to get in beside her.

Charlotte's ability to create fire within herself is still new to her—it hasn't yet become a part of her identity. Nicola continues to fulfill the role of the protector in her relationship with Charlotte. Charlotte depends on Nicola to put her flames out, a symbolic act that portrays Nicola as a calming presence for Charlotte. Charlotte's fire invites a deeper connection to develop between herself and Nicola, as it's one of the clearest ways they communicate with each other.



One of the ways Charlotte shows affection for Nicola is through practical gestures, like performing household chores and offering her food. Just as Nicola helps Charlotte put her flames out, Charlotte responds with reciprocated acts of caregiving, suggesting that their relationship is growing on a foundation of shared devotion and respect.



Nicola's choice of the word "episodes" to describe Charlotte's bursts of flame connects the flames to Charlotte's emotional outbursts—a sign that Nicola understands that the flames are not simply an external symptom, but rather a sign of Charlotte's deeper emotional turmoil. The fact that Nicola eats and showers after Charlotte emphasizes her tendency to put others' needs before her own, but Charlotte was the one to prepare the dinner, which shows that the relationship has become more evenly balanced.



Even when she's just woken up, Nicola's instinct is to help Charlotte, and she doesn't hesitate before putting her hands directly on the flames. It's clear that Nicola is so devoted to Charlotte's physical and emotional safety that her own comfort and safety isn't even a consideration. Charlotte considers herself a liability, but because she lets Nicola get into bed with her, it seems that her desire to show and receive affection is stronger than her pragmatic intention to protect Nicola.



There are no more accidental fires for three nights in a row. Charlotte and Nicola sleep in the same bed, trying not to touch each other. In the mornings they go walking, and in the afternoons, Charlotte sits by the wood heater or beside the lake trying to control her flames—which sometimes works and sometimes doesn't—while Nicola reads on the couch. When they talk about their families, Nicola mentions how Nicola's father was "wrecked and hollow" after his seal died and Charlotte describes Levi and Charlotte's mother's death, Levi's difficult nature and Levi and Charlotte's father's absence in general terms. At night, they change clothes in separate rooms before climbing into bed together, with Charlotte always falling asleep first.

A week after their arrival at the hut, there's another fire. Nicola wakes up to see flames leaking out of Charlotte's mouth. She touches Charlotte's chin, but the flames don't stop, so she runs her hand up and down Charlotte's neck. Charlotte wakes up and sucks the flames back into her mouth. She tells Nicola to keep touching her. The next morning, after sleeping in, they hold each other again before getting up. They go for their usual morning walk without discussing what happened in the night, but they do share a kiss as they go out the door.

At the end of their walk, Charlotte and Nicola sit at the lake's edge holding hands. Nicola gets up to go inside, but Charlotte points at a white car parked next to theirs in a lot. They see a stranger (the detective) trudging up the path toward them. Nicola says, unconvincingly, that it's probably just a tourist. She doesn't want anyone to threaten the life she's living in this moment with Charlotte. Ten minutes later, the stranger emerges from the trees. She's short-haired and dressed poorly for the weather. When she sees Nicola and Charlotte, she looks relieved, stops walking, and asks if they have any gin.

WOOD

Levi stands in Thurston's house, retching at the scent of the corpse at his feet. Though the body has been stripped of much of its skin and flesh, Levi knows it must be Thurston, because this is the address he got from Thurston's publisher. He retches again before he sees the golden **pelt** Thurston's mutilated hand is clutching. He pries the pelt out of the corpse's grip. It feels warm in his hand, and instead of feeling sick, he now feels confident and purposeful. He goes to find the half-finished **coffin** in Thurston's workshop and drives away with it. After speaking with the Avoca police, he never plans to return to the area, and it feels good to put Thurston firmly in the past.

Charlotte and Nicola toe the line between intimacy and distance. Though they live together and even sleep in the same bed, the bounds of their relationship are, for the moment, rigid—they're not ready to enact any physical intimacy except when necessary (that is, when Charlotte's flames are out of control). Their comments about their family members, which mostly involve themes of loss and detachment, suggest that Nicola and Charlotte are both aware of how emotional attachment can cause pain, which perhaps explains why they're hesitant to let their relationship become more serious.



This time, Charlotte's flames are reminiscent of the way someone drools in their sleep, which suggests they're becoming a more common part of Charlotte's life, though she still isn't able to control them. Here, the flames provide an opportunity for Nicola and Charlotte to become physically intimate with each other, which demonstrates that as they become more emotionally vulnerable, they're able to form a deeper connection to each other.



Even though Nicola only intended her stay at the cabin with Charlotte to be temporary, she still feels threatened by the prospect of it ending. This suggests that she's become emotionally and romantically closer to Charlotte than she expected to; the thought of their life at the cabin coming to an end pains her because it feels synonymous with the end of their relationship.



The scent and decay of Thurston's body hints at the passage of time—days or perhaps weeks have passed since he died, which means Levi has been attempting to build a coffin and locate Charlotte for a considerable amount of time. Even though the scent of Thurston's body is making him sick, he's focused enough to collect the coffin and take the pelt, so even though he's had plenty of time to lose interest in this project, he proves he's still as committed to completing it as he was at first.



Levi strokes the **pelt** as he drives. He understands why Thurston wrote about it with such praise: touching it seems to clear his mind. He focuses on the **coffin**: he knows he needs to finish himself, but he has no woodworking skills nor any friends who could help him, and he's running out of the money he inherited from Levi and Charlotte's mother. He reminds himself of the purpose of the coffin, which is to reassure Charlotte that she doesn't have to die twice, and in this way, to show her that he loves her. He resolves to cut down a snowgum when he reaches the north of the island and to saw it into planks for the coffin.

As Levi drives, the sun sets and reflects off the water. He reaches for a pair of sunglasses. They belong to Levi and Charlotte's father, who would wear them while driving no matter the weather. Levi wonders if his father is home—his house is only five minutes away—but when his father's face appears in his mind, he takes the sunglasses off and races past the turnoff that would take him there. After 20 minutes, he arrives home and heads down a gully to the ocean. Here, he remembers swimming with Charlotte, Levi and Charlotte's mother sitting on the sand, and their father never daring to come close to the water. Though he keeps telling himself that Charlotte will come back, he begins to realize she could be sick or dead, or somewhere very far away.

Levi remembers he left the **pelt** in the house. He goes back to retrieve it and finds Levi and Charlotte's father sitting at the dining table. He asks his father why he's come; his father asks where Charlotte is. Levi says he hasn't heard from her. His father tells him to clear his head—he hasn't been healthy since Levi and Charlotte's mother died. Levi repeatedly insists his father leave, but his father keeps talking, urging him to be a strong brother for Charlotte.

Levi remembers he came back for the **pelt**. He picks it up and his confidence renews. He mentions that he hasn't seen Levi and Charlotte's father since Levi and Charlotte's mother's cremation. His father tries to explain why he's been absent, but Levi begins to shout at him before walking out of the house with the pelt in his hand. His father doesn't follow him. When Levi reaches the car and looks at the **coffin** inside, he realizes that snowgum isn't the right material for Charlotte: she needs something "more personal," and Levi will build it himself.

Levi becomes immediately obsessed with the pelt, which emphasizes the pelt's magical nature and suggests it holds the power to influence Levi's actions. In fact, Levi's plan to cut down and carve a snowgum suggests that the pelt has already begun to influence his thoughts, encouraging him to overestimate his own power and ability just as Thurston did when he trapped the Esk God to claim the pelt in the first place.



Though Levi eventually resolves not to visit his father, the fact that he considered a visit at all shows that their relationship is not a completely lost cause. Meanwhile, his slow realization that Charlotte may be in more danger than he first thought—or that she might not even want to come home—suggests that Levi is becoming preoccupied with worry. Rather than the coffin project being a catharsis for him, he relies on it as a distraction from his darkest thoughts, but those thoughts persist and grow—especially because he refuses to confront them.



Levi's father gives no warning about his arrival and happens to show up just as Levi gets back to town, which highlights his ephemeral, impermanent nature: not only can people not remember his appearance, they're also unable to predict his whereabouts. Levi and his father share a stubborn streak, but instead of bonding over this similarity, they allow it to frustrate them and drive them apart—a sign that communication, more than shared attributes, is the foundation for a strong relationship.



Levi has begun to depend on the pelt to improve his mood, which suggests that his outward appearance of confidence and focus is just a façade. Instead of expressing his vulnerable emotions, he uses the confident anger that the pelt provides him to push his father away. Because the pelt represents the danger of human greed and self-obsession, this moment demonstrates that that kind of obsessive behavior can stand in the way of genuine human relationships.



COAL

Many centuries earlier, when a woman strikes two rocks together to make a spark, a kind of fire spirit is born. He falls in the form of a spark onto a pile of dried leaves, where he grows into a flame. He surveys his surroundings; he sees both dead fuel and vibrant life, like the woman who is feeding him sticks and making him grow. He realizes that he exists for more reasons than to eat and grow—he can cook the woman's food and make ash for her to mix into paint. Then the woman splashes him out with water, and he learns the feelings of fear and horror for the first time.

Later, the fire spirit comes back to life when lightning hits a dead tree. Now he's somewhere different, a forest at the edge of the sea. He moves through the trees, growing into a "swollen beast" and feeling like no amount of water could stop him, but then a huge downpour puts him out. This time, he knows he will return. He wakes again in the clearing of a bush. The humans have surrounded him with rocks to stop him from growing, which teaches him frustration, then patience. The humans use his flames to keep warm, and he learns that he has the power not only to end life but to nurture it.

The fire spirit keeps coming to life in new places. Eventually, he realizes he can bring himself to life in any fire on the island simply by concentrating. He can travel through fire between highlands, beaches, and bogs in seconds, and his life spans lengthen from hours to months. On his travels, he meets beings like him that inhabit other elements and creatures. He finds he's most invested in people—after all, it's people who brought him to life and who he's spent so much time helping. He discovers he can take the form of a human when he attempts to mimic a man skinning a wallaby: suddenly, he has hands of his own and eventually a body that he forms in the image of the wallaby skinner.

Once the fire spirit has finessed his human form, he looks around him at the wallaby skinner sleeping amongst other humans. He slinks away and returns in the morning, introducing himself to them as a lost traveler. The people accept him, and when he introduces himself to different groups of people over the next few decades, they accept him, too. Because the fire spirit doesn't age, he needs to keep moving from group to group. He finds that although he enjoys human company, he can't fully relate to their pain and joy, and it's easier for him to watch from afar.

At the beginning of this chapter, it isn't clear whether the fire spirit is connected to any of the characters who have already appeared in the novel. The huge leap back in time gives this chapter a mythic quality. The fire spirit's perspective shows that nature is just as dependent on the care and respect of human beings as humans are dependent on nature for warmth and food—it's a reciprocal relationship that makes both sides vulnerable to the other's power.



The fire spirit's cyclical appearances—appearing, growing, dying, and appearing again—suggest that in nature, transformation is the only constant. In fact, transformation is a key strength in the natural world, allowing creatures like the fire spirit to learn, adapt, and grow in new ways. The fire spirit learns that his connection to humans is interdependent, and he values what he can learn from them as much as they value his heat.



The fire spirit's growing consciousness suggests that elements and organisms in nature are complex beings with their own desires. Instead of feeling content amongst these beings, though, the fire spirit feels most connected to human beings, bridging the gap between the natural world and human civilization. In his effort to develop a human form, he demonstrates that nature doesn't only ebb and flow, it evolves and creates, too.



As an outsider in every human group, the fire spirit learns about humans by observing them. Still, he struggles to completely understand their emotional complexity, which prompts him to keep his distance. Despite his physical form matching theirs, the fire spirit feels fundamentally separate from humanity—yet he continues to enjoy walking alongside them.



When the “paler people” arrive on the island, they cause the indigenous people pain, to which the fire spirit responds by destroying the settlers’ buildings, docks, and ships. Eventually, though, he’s tempted by their new, intricate tools and plans, and he enjoys exploding gunpowder, burning gas to make light, and melting candles in houses. Even more than this, he loves being kindled into fires hotter than he’s ever known for the purpose of melting ore. He begins to make excuses for not helping the indigenous people. But he knows he’s being selfish; he really just wants to keep learning from the settlers.

As more and more settlers arrive, the fire spirit begins to walk amongst them as a human in order to gain more of their knowledge. They don’t react well to his brown-skinned appearance, but he doesn’t want to betray his love for the people who brought him to life, so instead of changing his skin, he attempts to light “tiny sparks” in the settlers’ minds to persuade them to accept him. Sometimes, when this doesn’t work, he lights other sparks in their minds, which prevent them from perceiving him objectively. Once he’s learned enough from them, he lights a final spark that burns out their memory of him.

The fire spirit is happy with his ever-changing existence until he meets a woman in Notley Fern Gorge. There, he’s a small fire on a twig. He sits near her, enthralled by her appearance, until she douses him with her water bottle. He goes looking for her and finds her by the ocean. He learns she’s called Edith McAllister; her family has lived on a farm on the north coast for five generations. Edith’s family history of brief reincarnations doesn’t interest the fire spirit much—he’s seen a lot in his many lifetimes—but he does consider it something that connects him to Edith.

The fire spirit follows Edith, watching her tend to the animals on the farm and pondering how to make her love him back. The first time he appears to her as a human, she chases him off the property. The next time, he changes his face and orders for her at the fish and chip shop, but she’s offended by his attempt at gallantry. The third time, he finds her in a pub. His appearance is the same as the first time he took human form. He offers to buy Edith a drink. She refuses his offer, which leads him to make what he’ll later consider “the worst mistake of his life”: he lights a spark in her mind that removes the negative feelings she has for him.

Though the fire spirit is compelled by his sense of justice at first, that righteousness soon gives way to his eagerness to learn and grow. This suggests that, though there might be a sense of right and wrong at the heart of the natural world, a creature’s instinct to thrive and transform is far stronger than any moral obligation. And on top of this, it’s clear that when human greed meets the natural world, both become more dangerous and destructive.



The fire spirit makes compromises in order to fit in with the British settlers. Though some of them can be convinced, albeit supernaturally, to accept his brown-skinned appearance, the stubbornness of others forces the fire spirit to change their perceptions of him—effectively changing his own chosen identity in order to placate them. This hints at the destructive effects of colonization: when these settlers arrived, they destroyed or changed anything that didn’t suit them, including the customs and identities of other human beings.



Edith’s family has lived in the same place for several generations—a sense of permanence the fire spirit has not, until now, found in his own life. Still, Edith’s family members’ pattern of reincarnation means she shares some of the fire spirit’s fleeting ephemerality, and—much like in most human relationships—the fire spirit uses this common ground as a way to connect with Edith.

From the outset of their relationship, the fire spirit has the advantage of anonymity. This allows him to observe Edith and learn about her without revealing himself, but she has no such opportunity. She also can’t control whether the fire spirit watches her or not, and while he can use his supernatural power to attempt to make a better first impression for a second and third time, she has no such ability. This means their relationship is built on uneven ground, with the fire spirit having complete control and Edith having none.



The fire spirit's spark doesn't convince Edith to take him seriously, so he lights another, and then three more—he gives her, in the end, five chances. After the fifth spark, she begins to talk to him. He invites her to go on a bush walk with him in the gorge, pretending he's never been there before. On the walk, he talks about things he knows she's interested in; by the end of their walk, she's willing to consider a second date. They spend a lot of time together over the next few months, and he moves into the farmhouse with her. One day, she takes him into the gorge and asks him to marry her; he says yes.

The fire spirit (who now thinks of himself as Jack, his human name) and Edith have a child—a boy, Levi, who looks just like Edith and bears no resemblance to Jack. Though Jack loves Levi deeply, he relates to him less and less as he grows up. When their daughter, Charlotte, is born, Jack feels an instant connection to her. The night he and Edith bring her home from the hospital, Jack leans over her cot. A tear falls from his eye, but it takes the form of a flame. The flame drops into Charlotte's mouth, but she doesn't seem hurt. Jack picks her up and shakes her, and when she burps, a blue flame bursts from her mouth.

Edith witnesses Jack and Charlotte leaking fire. Though she's wary of Jack's ability at first, after he explains who he is, she becomes even closer to him. He shows her the different things he can do with fire, and she feels lucky to have married someone so unique. The children grow up: Levi remains dutiful and serious, and there are no more signs of the fire within Charlotte. But at a parent-teacher meeting, when Charlotte's teacher begins to rant about Charlotte's bad behavior, Jack clicks his fingers to light a spark in her brain. The teacher pauses, then she begins to rave about Charlotte's kindness and work ethic.

Edith asks Jack to explain what he did to the teacher. He describes his ability to change people's minds. She asks him if he's ever done it to her. He pauses, and from that pause, Edith knows that he has. She doesn't want to know the details of how he influenced her; she simply asks him to leave. Despite Jack's pleas, she tells him never to come back to the house again. For years, he leaps out of fires near her, begging her to take him back. He lights a spark in a rich man's mind to convince him to bequeath him a huge house close to Edith's farm, which he moves into when the man dies as proof that he intends to stay close by. Still, he doesn't intrude on Edith's privacy. When she gets sick, he doesn't know until he sparks to life around her funeral pyre.

Instead of accepting that Edith isn't interested in him, the fire spirit stubbornly persists in his attempts to woo her. He relies on his supernatural ability to persuade her to take him seriously, which means that their relationship has very little chance of being an equal one, much less an open, honest one. He's even manipulated their conversation based on his prior knowledge of her. Edith has almost no agency whatsoever, and while her eventual proposal seems like a moment in which she takes control, it's virtually his decision, too.



Levi doesn't look like Jack at all, which reinforces the fact that no matter how much effort Jack puts into living as a human, when he's among humans, his essential form restricts him from truly connecting with even the people he feels closest to. But when Charlotte exhibits an ability to produce fire, Jack sees his distinct influence on the human world. It's a moment that physically proves his connection to the humans he loves, though that sign of connection also shocks and scares him.



Edith values honesty and transparency in her relationship with Jack; his elemental nature doesn't threaten their connection as much as his attempt to keep it a secret. But when Jack uses his ability to change people's minds—that is, when he manipulates the thoughts and realities of human beings—he clouds that transparency and jeopardizes his relationship with Edith.



Not only does Jack reveal that he has manipulated Edith's thoughts, but his pause also suggests that he considered lying to her about it. This is a kind of double manipulation and, though it ultimately separates him from Edith, it also demonstrates how desperately he wants to hold on to his relationship with her. This moment between them demonstrates that no matter how much someone may want another person to love them, that love can't flourish without mutual respect and understanding.



As Jack burns around Edith's dead body, he suffers "his biggest death of all." He only keeps burning because he knows it's Edith's wish to be cremated. When she returns and stands on his lawn, he can't tell whether the look in her eyes anger, sadness, regret, or forgiveness is. When she burns out for the second time, he feels like his most human parts die with her. He returns to his previous life of flitting between fires, but this time he feels purposeless, reduced to the very first form he took when the woman brought him to life. When Charlotte starts leaking flames, he watches from afar, and when Levi becomes sick with grief, he doesn't try very hard to help him: he doesn't want to be close to his children when, like Edith, they eventually die.

After his relationship with Edith, Jack understands himself as not merely a primal being with a desire to grow and be fed, but also as someone with emotional needs that are distinct from those primal functions. Though he's still alive and able to function in all the ways he could before, Edith's death profoundly affects him, and this demonstrates that a close relationship between nature and human beings is reciprocal—it helps both sides to strengthen and grow, but it can also cause hurt and destruction.



GROVE

Back in the stone hut, Charlotte doesn't trust the detective. There's something in the detective's body language that suggests to Charlotte that she's pretending to be tougher than she really is. Charlotte can tell she's lonely. But, because Nicola trusts the detective, Charlotte agrees to let her tell her their story. Nicola doesn't tell the detective that she and Charlotte have a sexual relationship, or that the flames came from Charlotte's body. She says that they came to the hut because they wanted to be away from other people after the fire; they didn't know who they could trust.

Charlotte mistrusts the detective because she can tell that the detective is pretending—something she can recognize because it's how Levi behaves, too. Still, Charlotte values her relationship with Nicola more highly than her own judgment or comfort, which is why she lets the detective question them. Nicola doesn't share any details of her and Charlotte's relationship with the detective, which suggests she feels protective of their bond and doesn't want any outside influence to threaten it.



The detective congratulates Charlotte and Nicola on their decision to come here. She begins to tell them about her own journey here, but Charlotte tunes her out; she's busy thinking about how to tell Nicola they can't be together anymore. She knows it'll hurt Nicola badly, but she doesn't want her flames to endanger her. She starts listening to the detective's voice again. The detective says Charlotte and Nicola should head to Beauty Point. Nicola says her parents live at Hawley, so that seems like the place to go, but the detective says they should go to see Charlotte's brother (Levi), as he's the one who hired her.

Charlotte feels she has to weigh Nicola's physical safety against her romantic love for her. She isn't yet prepared to accept that their relationship is built on mutual commitment—that Nicola's desire to help and protect her is as strong as her own desire to protect Nicola. And she still hasn't figured out how to reign in her flames, so she considers herself a danger to those around her—a sign that her grief, which leaks out in those flames, still feels turbulent and uncontrollable to her.



Though Charlotte and Levi don't understand each other, Charlotte knows they love each other deeply. When she ran away after finding Levi's notes about the **coffin**, it was out of love for him. She couldn't deal with the amount of death in her life, and this wasn't something she could explain to Levi without becoming too emotional. She didn't want to break the bond between them. She planned to return after she had calmed down. What's more, she'd wanted to leave earlier, because since Levi and Charlotte's mother died, she'd begun to feel flames crackling within her body.

Charlotte sees her relationship with Levi as operating on many levels. Though they haven't found out how to use language to relate to each other, they have a primal love for each other, which they both try to nurture and protect in their own ways. This moment confirms that Charlotte wasn't only escaping Levi and the coffin, but also her own uncontrollable emotions.



Nicola and Charlotte drive north, following the detective's car. The trees around them get taller and denser, and Charlotte feels hemmed in. Nicola puts her hand on Charlotte's knee, and Charlotte dreads the moment when she has to tell her to leave. As the landscape becomes sparser, Charlotte relaxes. She thinks about what awaits her at home. Perhaps Levi's worry at her disappearance caused him to abandon his **coffin** plan, or perhaps the coffin is finished and waiting in the living room. Either way, she knows that he'll lecture her in a condescending way when she arrives.

Charlotte knows that if she leaves Nicola, she'll have to control the flames on her own. She pictures herself standing in the kitchen with Levi, talking calmly with no flames in sight. As they drive on, she realizes this image of her family is missing Levi and Charlotte's father, whose house they can see from the road. She doesn't want to let their father into the picture, and she knows Levi would feel the same: they have no desire to welcome a father who left them and didn't even come to Levi and Charlotte's mother's funeral.

Charlotte and Nicola arrive at the farm in the afternoon. Nicola tells Charlotte her home is beautiful, though Charlotte knows Nicola's home must look quite similar. Levi's car isn't there; he isn't home. The detective asks if there's anyone he might be visiting. Charlotte says no. She finds the spare key, and the three of them go inside. Charlotte feels an overwhelming rush of emotion, and Nicola touches her on the back. The detective pokes around the house and finds a bottle of sherry. Charlotte tells her she can have it, but that she should leave. The detective replies that she's not leaving until she gets paid, so they need to find Levi.

Charlotte becomes angry. She can't stand the detective's smugness and feels the urge to burn her. Nicola studies the fridge and the trash for clues on Levi's whereabouts. Soon, she calls out from the hall table. She's found a map and a notepad that holds the grooves of a previous page on which Levi seems to have written some directions. When Charlotte looks at the map, she realizes one part of it has been marked with tiny notes: Notley Fern Gorge.

Charlotte doesn't like the gorge, though she never told Levi and Charlotte's mother that. She feels claustrophobic there—she'd rather be by the violent ocean. She hated it even when she went there to spread her mother's ashes, and she knew that when her mother came back, bearing physical similarities to the gorge, she'd only remind Charlotte of their differences. The gorge now holds Charlotte's last memory of her mother.

Nicola seems to understand Charlotte deeply and innately, which she expresses through a gesture of physical care at the precise moment Charlotte needs it. Charlotte's emotional wellbeing affects her perception of the natural landscape she's in—when she feels at peace with nature, she can appreciate its beauty, but it can easily overwhelm her. Meanwhile, even as she travels back to her brother, she prepares to defend herself against him, which suggests that misunderstanding has eroded their relationship over time.



Charlotte has become so used to her father's absence that she instinctively leave him out of the picture when she visualizes her family. At the same time, though, this suggests that her father's absence somehow strengthens her bond with Levi—their shared conviction that they'd prefer to live without their father is something that connects them.



Once again, Nicola demonstrates her desire to make others feel comfortable, this time by sharing a compliment that others might not have bothered to express. Even when Charlotte isn't leaking flames, Nicola knows when her emotions are overwhelming her, and she's always ready to show her support. In this moment, the detective shows she doesn't care much about Charlotte's comfort—her task is over, and now she just wants payment.



Charlotte has grown used to her flame-producing abilities and now considers using them for specific purposes, like burning the detective. This suggests that she's getting better at controlling her emotions, which the flames symbolize.



Charlotte's connection to nature dramatically contrasts with her mother's: while Edith wanted an enclosed part of nature to comfort and nurture her, Charlotte finds her own kind of comfort in nature's most exposed, violent locales. This reaffirms the idea that a deep connection to nature is also one that's uniquely suited to each person's attitude and psychology.



Nicola and Charlotte drive to the gorge separately from the detective. Nicola asks Charlotte why Levi would go to the gorge. Charlotte is too anxious to give a proper answer. She decides not to tell Nicola to leave today—she'll do it, but not on the same day that she visits the gorge. This decision brings a wave of relief. Less than an hour later, they arrive at the gorge as the sun sets. Levi's car is parked there. Charlotte, Nicola, and the detective trudge down the wooden steps into the thick vegetation. Soon, they begin to hear a monotonous knocking sound, and as they walk further, they realize it's the sound of Levi swinging an axe into a tree fern.

It's freezing, but Levi has taken off his shirt and put it on a nearby sawhorse along with something furry. He's emaciated, and his hair is greasy and knotted. Charlotte's anger turns to concern. Levi doesn't see her until she says his name, at which he turns to her but doesn't recognize her. After a while, he starts to repeat her name. He smiles manically and tells her he's been "a bit preoccupied." Charlotte introduces Nicola and the detective. Levi says he never hired the detective. He grabs the **pelt** from the sawhorse and clutches it.

Charlotte asks Levi what he's doing. When he tells her he's making her a **coffin**, she says she doesn't need or want one. Levi says she will one day, but Charlotte disagrees. When Charlotte suggests they go home, Levi becomes frantic. He insists that Charlotte just hasn't considered that a coffin would be helpful—it would mean she wouldn't come back after dying. Charlotte feels like Levi is trying to kindle her flames. Levi explains that he's doing this to help Charlotte, and that because Levi and Charlotte's mother loved this place, it seemed right to build the coffin here. Charlotte insists they leave. She grips his arm, feeling an urge to help the only family she still has.

Levi stumbles. Charlotte ends up grabbing the **pelt** from him instead of grabbing his arm, and she feels its glowing warmth. The two siblings fight over the pelt. Nicola leaps to grab the axe in Levi's other hand. Levi swings the axe and throws Nicola backward; her head cracks against the sawhorse, and her eyes roll back. Charlotte can no longer contain her anger. She rips the pelt from Levi's hands and releases her flames into its fur. More flames pour from everywhere on her body, releasing wild heat. She can barely hear Levi's screams. The pelt burns with a purple fire that's more energetic than it should be, then it dissolves into ash.

While Nicola and Charlotte head to the gorge to find and help Levi, the detective goes along in search of payment. But though they have different purposes, they're still driving to the same place—in this way, the natural environment to which they are headed overpowers the minor differences in their reasons for going there. Levi's monotonous knocking is ominous and suggests that he's being compelled into repetitive action and is longer in control of his actions.



Levi's shirtless, gaunt appearance shows that he's completely out of touch with the weather and his own needs—he's completely focused on finishing the coffin for Charlotte that he's even forgotten how to speak to other people. On top of this, he's lost all memory of the detective. And he's threatened by the fact that his everyday life has caught up to him. The only things that matter to him are the pelt and the coffin, but Charlotte and the others are unlikely to understand that.



Levi is unable to accept that Charlotte knows what's best for herself. He's become so absorbed in his task that he can't imagine it having been the wrong thing to do. When language fails between them, Charlotte resorts to physical gestures to show that she really cares about Levi. Even though they love each other, their expressions of love are threatening their relationship because neither one can express themselves in a way the other understands.



Charlotte finds the pelt just as enticing as Levi does, which emphasizes its magical quality—the tempting warmth it emanates is actual and material, not merely a product of Levi's desperate focus. The vibrant purple flame the pelt lets off when it catches fire echoes this magic quality. This is a scene of complete chaos, but that chaos releases the tension between Charlotte and Levi, which hints that nature's overwhelming power might heal at least a small part of their relationship.



Levi kneels over the pile of ash that was once the **pelt**. Charlotte stands above him, still leaking fire. She sees Nicola lying unmoving by the sawhorse. She moves toward her but realizes she can't control the spreading fire: flames are licking at Levi's body and spreading through the gorge. The detective helps Nicola up while Levi races to his fern logs. Out of nowhere, Nicola smashes into Charlotte and pins her down. Charlotte struggles, knowing Nicola is in agony, but Nicola clings on until Charlotte's flames die out. When Charlotte gets up, she sees the detective dragging Nicola into the stream to submerge her burned skin.

A small distance away, Levi curls up in terror as the fire surrounds him. Charlotte struggles to reach him, but she soon realizes that neither of them will leave the gorge. The detective keeps pouring water over Nicola. Charlotte lies down on the hot ground, thinking only about how much she wants Nicola to survive; she wishes she'd told her to leave her when they were at the farm. She wishes in vain for the flames to recede.

A man emerges from the flames. Only Charlotte sees him. From his smile, she instantly recognizes him as Levi and Charlotte's father. She must be hallucinating, dreaming, or dead. Her father mouths something to her, looks up at the sky, and sighs. Then rain starts to fall, slowly at first but amassing to a huge downpour. Charlotte's father disappears as the rain starts to submerge the surroundings.

CLOUD

The Cloud God's downpour hits the gorge first and spreads outward across the nearby farms and forests. The rain bloats the island's rivers and floods towns and suburbs, destroying buildings and yachts. Eventually, the rain fills the Melaleuca tin mine, sending a flock of cormorants spiraling into the sky, along with a "foul and broken," fleshy, feathery body. The Cloud God is weeping so fiercely because of the smoke that rose from the golden **pelt**, which confirmed that her love, the Esk God, had died. In her sorrow, she tries to drown the whole island.

SEA

Like Levi and Charlotte's father, Levi has always feared the water. He remembers his father watching him and Charlotte at the beach without even stepping onto the sand; after their father left, Levi felt that the deep fear of the ocean had been transferred to him. Since then, he hasn't touched saltwater—until now, when he splashes his foot climbing into Karl's boat three days after the fire.

Charlotte observes the destruction around her. She was the one who burned the pelt and set fire to the gorge, and it's because of her fire that she can't reach Nicola to help her. Though she, Nicola, and the detective came to the gorge to help Levi, it's here that Charlotte's own emotions play out, outside of her control—and the resulting danger and destruction suggest that she isn't as in tune with her grief as she thought she was.



Where just before, Levi was stubbornly taking charge of the situation and reassuring Charlotte he knew what she needed, now he's curled up, completely vulnerable and afraid. This moment of unchecked natural devastation reduces Levi to his most basic instincts, and he's longer able to pretend he's in control.



Charlotte's assumption that the vision of her father is some kind of hallucination rather than reality implies that she doesn't know his true identity as a fire spirit. Still, even if she doesn't understand why, her ability to produce flames connects her to him, which allows them to share this mysterious, private moment.



The Cloud God's downpour is a demonstration of grief, which suggests that grief is not an isolated human emotion but vast, primal, and inevitable, much like any other natural process. The god's mourning in the form of a flood emphasizes that grief overwhelms its bearer and transcends what people may consider acceptable limits: when fully released, grief affects every part of one's life—or in this case, every pocket of the island.



Levi and his father's shared fear of the ocean a sign that the fire spirit, in his human form, expresses his fieriness in human ways—like this fear, which echoes his fire form's inability to exist in water. The fire spirit's primal instincts translate to his human form's emotional and social behavior.



The morning after the fire, Levi wakes up in his bed with no memory of how he got there. Charlotte tells him the detective carried him to the car—she’s gone home now, but she promised to come back for the money he owes her. Charlotte tells Levi more details: that the storm that put out the fire was the biggest the island has seen in centuries, that the whole island is flooded, and that Levi and Charlotte’s father emerged from the flames briefly. Charlotte is furious and hopes Levi’s burns hurt—Nicola’s injuries are much worse.

Levi’s memories feel like a dream. The clearest thing he remembers is the confidence he felt when he took the **pelt** from Thurston. Even the memories before that, like when he was planning the **coffin**, are murky; though he considers himself to be a rational person, he knows his actions then weren’t rational. He regrets behaving so selfishly and erratically. Charlotte leaves him lying in bed. When he gets up, he asks for her forgiveness. She replies, “As long as you forgive me too.”

Levi and Charlotte visit Nicola at the hospital later that day. On their way, they don’t speak except to comment on the storm’s wreckage. The huge scale of destruction impresses Levi. He’s surprised when they get to the hospital and Nicola isn’t wrapped up like a mummy—instead, her burns are dressed in a couple of simple bandages. From the way Charlotte embraces Nicola and whispers furiously to her, Levi begins to understand their close relationship, as do Nicola’s family, who look mildly surprised. Levi introduces himself to them, but they remain more interested in what’s going on between Nicola and Charlotte.

Levi begins to apologize. He rehearsed his speech in his head, but it comes out garbled, and when he sees Charlotte’s confused expression, his speech turns into a sob, which becomes a howl. As he cries, Nicola comes up with an idea. Two days later, Levi sits in Karl’s dinghy as it speeds out into the ocean. Levi doesn’t know what Nicola asked her father to do for him, but he didn’t ask any questions. After a while, Karl switches off the dinghy’s engine and tells Levi to put on a wetsuit. Levi refuses but eventually complies, taking off his clothes to slip into the suit. A flash of resolve urges him into the water.

Levi realizes that, in a moment of profound vulnerability, he relied on the help of others to survive, and he begins to accept that he can’t control every element of his life—or Charlotte’s happiness. Now that Charlotte and Levi have survived a life-threatening, monumental event together, they begin to communicate clearly, which suggests that sharing their grief and all its chaos has brought them closer together.



Now that Levi is no longer frantically trying to help Charlotte, he’s realized that he needs support through his grief just as much as she does. In accepting his own vulnerability, Levi is able to take responsibility for his actions and to play a more responsible part in his relationship with Charlotte.



The flood’s destruction gives Charlotte and Levi something to talk about—it allows them to create a shared experience, and no matter how superficial, that’s an improvement on the frustrating, nonverbal communication they engaged in at the beginning of the novel. This is also the first time Charlotte and Nicola enact their relationship in the company of others—here, they confirm their devotion to each other remains strong, even when they aren’t completely isolated and dependent on each other.



Again, Levi tries and fails to take control of his emotions, and his sense of failure only leads to greater emotional distress. It’s clear that he’s still learning how to accept and express his most vulnerable thoughts and feelings and that he’s still in the throes of grief. Even though Levi has no idea what he’s doing in the ocean, his guilt motivates him to overcome his fear and do as he’s told.



The water isn't as cold as Levi expected it to be. Karl points to a patch of water about fifteen meters away and tells Levi to swim to it. When he's there, Karl tells him to wait. After twenty minutes, Levi asks how long he has to stay there. Karl replies, "As long as it takes." Levi begins to think he's there to learn patience. Eventually, he grows exhausted and tells Karl he's going to drown. Karl gestures behind Levi to where something is moving in the water. Levi turns around, terrified, and sees a seal pup poking its head above the waves.

Karl tells Levi to give the seal his hand. Levi holds his hand out. Just as he loses the ability to keep afloat, the seal rests its face on his hand and looks deep into his eyes. Levi keeps his eyes locked on the seal's. He feels buoyed by something he can't identify—something that keeps him afloat for a long time.

Levi expects the water to be colder than it is, and after that, he believes he's going to drown. He's proven wrong on both counts, which suggests that the wild ocean, though it terrifies Levi, actually has some comfort and warmth to offer him, too. Behind every fear is a sign that he'll survive and perhaps even enjoy this uncontrollable experience.



Levi completely surrenders himself to the ocean and the seal pup. It's only in this moment of complete vulnerability that he can appreciate what the seal offers—a feeling of support, connection, and hope that he never expected to find.





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