

Comments on RULES OF SUMMER

Shaun Tan, September 2013

Introduction: beware of commentary

The first thing to say is that I always feel a little ambivalent about commentary. On one hand, I do have a lot to say about each painting or story, given it has been developed over a long period of time. On the other hand, I think a painting is most effective when it remains quite silent and mysterious, open to the personal interpretation of others. Good work aspires to a kind of autonomy that requires no introduction, explanation or afterword. And it's a problem too that anything an artist or author has to say about intention is taken as a kind of authoritative meaning, when really an audience's own imagination should flow as freely as possible.

For instance, it may be distracting that I refer to the central characters in *Rules of Summer* as brothers, even though we know little about their relationship in the book (the story could be about best friends, or any close partnership that is able to be read on a metaphorical level). 'Brothers' was a helpful way to describe the characters of my own imagination, since I grew up with a close relationship to one older brother but do not think of this book as autobiographical, even though it draws on some personal memories as all creative work must do. The fact that nothing in the book looks entirely real - stylized figures, odd perspectives, painterly effects - means we don't have to worry about a literal interpretation. Ideally we might study this story the same way we search for meaning in dreams.

Like many of my picture books, *Rules of Summer* had a long gestation over several years, and changed forms a number of times. One version was quite comic-book like, telling a very specific story over some 80 pages. Another broke off into several narratives, eventually evolving into *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008, which explains why that book contains a stories narrated by two brothers). The final book, completed in 2013, reverts to one of my earliest concepts: a short sequence of pictures showing two people in odd situations, without any explanation, beginning with a huge, menacing red rabbit and the line 'Never leave a red sock on the clothesline'.

Each picture might be seen as the chapter of an unwritten tale that can only be elaborated in the reader's imagination, something that suits the picture book medium very well. The simple word-and-picture format roughly follows another book of mine without a clear storyline, *The Red Tree*, and in some ways the two might be considered companion volumes: where *The Red Tree* is about the strangeness of an individual's inner life, *Rules of Summer* is (for me at least) about the strangeness of any close partnership - it cannot be adequately explained to the third party. But we can all imagine our own versions, our own meanings, conflicts and resolutions.

In the notes below, I've commented on each individual picture, attempting to explain the ideas behind each one, both initial inspirations and some more reflective thoughts after completing a picture. It's important to note that I don't often understand what a work 'means' until quite late in a creative process, and don't always know my inspirations consciously either. I'm mainly guided by the feeling that something is just very *interesting*, on more of an emotional than

intellectual level. It can be very interesting for me to then think about them a little more, some time after everything has been painted and written.

Cover Illustration: 'Grassland'

This image that came to me very quickly and intuitively, partly in response to my editor, Helen, suggesting I should paint something that gives the feeling of 'high summer'. I spent a lot of long, very hot childhood summers wandering with my brother and friends through West Australian landscapes, either on holiday in the country or at home in our still mostly undeveloped coastal suburb. It felt like a very static and eternal place and, in hindsight, even a bit primeval or mythological. We were always finding bits of junk and playing with them; people often dumped cars, busted white goods and TVs in bushy fields or dunes, so that memory partly informs the image of junk lying in grass, out of which something unexpected might be constructed.

The distant crow or raven appearing throughout this book (and also in a lot of my other paintings and stories) was a common sight within this landscape. The Australian Raven has a particularly long and drawn-out call, often quite unnerving, like an animal dying of thirst or experiencing an existential crisis; 'waaaaaaarrrrrgh!' I've always been fascinated by these birds, gliding and hopping about electrical wires like omnipresent observers of all suburban human folly.

The factory in the distance is an interesting element too, suggesting a kind of industrial world operating at the margins. I think it relates to having grown up in a world where nature is always compromised, it's not a 'pure' landscape, but there's still beauty in all these things, and the residual junk it leaves behind. I realised much later that this image might have been partly influenced by the well-known Andrew Wyeth painting *Christina's World* of a lonely girl lying in a field, looking away to a distant house (which also helped inspire Terrence Malick's film *Days of Heaven*, the atmosphere of which really appeals to me). Wyeth's image feels like one moment in an unknown narrative: simple, unsettling and hard to explain. Those are qualities that to which I often aspire with my own images.

The mechanical creatures here appear later in the painting 'Never be late for a parade'. I imagine this scene as a bit of a prelude. The older brother has made his first mechanical companion while the younger brother is still playing with found parts, either because of a shorter attention span, a lack of expertise, or that he just doesn't understand the peculiar rules, whatever they might be in this instance. He has yet to figure out his place in the world, and is for the moment little more than a bemused, innocent eye. He looks directly at the reader (the only time that happens in the book), inviting us to make sense of something fundamentally irrational. The debossing (indentation) of the eye's pupil on the hardback cover is a way of drawing some attention to the viewpoint of the unseen younger brother.

Rabbit: 'Never leave a red sock on the clothesline.'

This was one of the first images conceived for the book, before I knew what it might even be about. I originally sketched children cowering behind a fence, hunted by a big black dog, but the familiarity of fairytale wolves felt too 'loaded',

so I transformed the antagonist into a big rabbit. This actually feels more unsettling to me than a wolf - a soft herbivore turned predator.

An earlier version of this image was published as the cover for a comics collection *Flinch*, published by Gestalt in Perth, set in a leafy suburb. The landscape later evolved into something more industrial, not unlike the inner Melbourne suburbs where I live. The red sock adds a mysterious narrative to the picture and offering a natural (if inexplicable) title; and when it came to colouring the rabbit, a deep crimson felt right. It's not necessarily a demonic rabbit, but might be part of a local mythology known only to these boys. All you know is that it's probably not a good thing - a contemporary opposite of Clifford the Big Red Dog (a popular children's character from the 60s): an anti-Clifford!

The water tank and building are compositional details that suggest a fairly dry and bleak backyard, and I get a vague sense of drought when looking at this picture. The light illuminates the space but also seems to trap the figures, pinning them down like insects to a board: nobody can move. It's like some kind of terrible deadlock, punctuated by restrained breaths and heartbeats, each waiting for the other to make a move. The biggest risk is that the younger boy can't keep his mouth shut. I think this general feeling of domestic strife is open to all manner of interpretation.

Falcons: 'Never eat the last olive at a party.'

This is a scene I've been sketching for some years, and probably has something to do with a personal anxiety about formal parties. I was particularly moved to paint it after going to the Oscars, where I often had the strong feeling of being completely out of place and worrying about social mistakes, even though the environment was fascinating and exciting. The atmosphere in this painting is inviting too, but it's also intensely claustrophobic, and the stillness of the falcons - like the rabbit - suggests the possibility of sudden violence. Like most of the pictures in the book there are these internal tensions between things that are pleasurable and painful, bright and dark, funny and sombre, and these opposites typically guide all of my image development.

The brightness of the table and plates is inviting, and I wanted to paint them to look 'delicious' even though they are empty. I also spent a lot of time trying to get the background lighting right, a kind of smoky, sparkling recession into a possibly infinite ballroom. The eyes of the falcons are the blackest parts, reflecting the lights of the room with a crystalline sharpness. I did not want to anthropomorphize the falcons too much (an earlier sketch had them holding wine glasses which I later removed), I like the way these birds naturally look, not particularly evil or calculating. As with many animals, it's just impossible to know what they are thinking, a mystery I find always interesting. They remind me of barristers in a courtroom (from my one experience of jury duty) silently passing judgement, enjoying a certain superiority and contemplating when best to strike; a little inspiration here also came from 19th century French artist Honore Daumier's satirical paintings of lawyers and other contemporaries in high office.

Fishing: 'Never drop your jar.'

The 'fishing scene is another I've been playing with for years in sketchbooks, originally just as scenes of people fishing the sky, often at night. It's based partly on childhood memories of catching migrating prawns from under a traffic bridge in the regional town of Mandurah, WA. My parents loved catching all kinds of fish, mussels, octopus, squid, crabs, and almost all of our family holidays were fishing trips. The prawn catching was particularly strange and meditative, scanning a black river for telltale pinpricks of light (prawn eyes) and occasionally catching other small iridescent fish by accident, a quiet world interrupted only by trucks rumbling overhead. The inversion of this feeling into a daylight 'ocean' accessible from precarious urban structures - here water tanks from New York City, which I loved photographing on the occasions I've visited - feels like a natural transition.

Most outings with my brother involved local rock fishing, and he was always much better at this than me. I was always snagging my line, dropping fish or jamming my reel, and Paul would have to stop and help me (which could be particularly inconvenient when the fish were suddenly schooling). In the painting, the older brother has the wisdom to tether his jar and remains preoccupied; his less competent brother is left to his own problems and regrets. He should have been more careful! The separation of tanks suggests a kind of distant intimacy that many brothers might recognize: you can be completely together in your separateness by sharing a common activity.

The creatures in the sky were inspired by kite festivals often held on wide beaches. These always make me think of sea animals that have taken to the air to enjoy a fleeting, almost immaterial existence. I imagine these creatures swimming on tides of air more delicately than butterflies, dangerous and difficult to catch and preserve. As with other pictures, I tend to imagine this scene as a hot summer afternoon; you might hear the popping of iron sheets and baking concrete, snarling peak-hour traffic below. But the things migrating across a bottomless blue sky are cool and languid, swimming far above it all, and just out of reach.

Early Life: 'Never leave the backdoor open overnight.'

I always love images of external nature intruding into domestic spaces, there's something very interesting in a psychological way about this rupture in the order of things (think of the bedroom jungle in Sendak's 'Where the Wild Things Are' or Van Allsburg's 'Jumanji'). I also often wonder when I go to bed if I remembered to lock the back door, so it's fun to imagine the most absurd consequences of not doing so.

Why the prehistoric plants and animals? I'm not entirely sure. In part it's taken from pictures in books about fossils that my brother kept in his room - he loved paleontology, and was only interested in very ancient crustaceans and shellfish (dinosaurs fossils were 'not old enough' for him). The way these book illustrations and museum dioramas are traditionally presented always look slightly religious to me, as if they are modern creation stories with a scientific aspect. So in the painting, the open door seems to have triggered a genesis of sorts - life forms have only started to evolve, the door having been open for just one night after all, as if nature is colonizing the lounge-room from scratch. Things are growing, metamorphosing, creeping, crawling, spawning, and lounging about, all quite at home in this sheltered little Eden. It's either wonderful life or a big mess, depending on how you look at it.

The annoyance of the older brother suggests that it's the little brother's fault: more so for having been previously warned to check the door. And somebody has to clean it all up. Originally the younger brother held a mop and bucket, but I realised a shovel might be more effective as the embankment of material enlarged over subsequent sketches.

Tornado (Never step on a snail)

At first glance, I think the picture 'Never step on a snail' is simply amusing, a bit like a cartoon with a caption, and that was really my initial idea. But the concept of an irrational world governed by arbitrary rules is one that children especially can appreciate, given reality is so full of surprising inconsistencies. That might explain a vulnerability to superstitious thoughts, such as the fear that stepping on a pavement crack might 'break your mother's back'; within the silliness is an awareness of one's own basic ignorance when it comes to how the world works. Even for an adult, there are often disproportionate consequences following innocent actions, from social gaffes to car accidents. Ideas of fault, blame and guilt follow, but it's hard to absolve regret about something that's actually blameless, or deal with the frustration of a law that's either unknown, entirely illogical or both (like a snail-avenging tornado). Not that it would necessarily stop a close companion from making the most of it! The simple opportunity to point the finger can so easily trump all other considerations: *it's your fault this happened!!!*

I spent a lot of time with this painting adjusting the colour of the sky, originally it was dark and brooding as would be normal with an approaching twister, but there was something appealing about the cheerful blue behind the black tornado that emphasizes the absurd quality of the event (and this sometimes happens in real life storms, the weather around them seems fine). Looking also at the trees, it's as if everything in the landscape is very still, quiet and sunny, so the funnel seems all the more supernatural, coming out of nowhere like the finger of God - one that favours molluscs - and selectively destroying a particular house. I imagine it's an otherwise perfect day, though boringly suburban with neat lawns and cell-like housing: there's some suggestion that the drama of a tornado is not entirely unwelcome in this dull place. And there's certainly a thrill in knowing that you can so easily trigger a disaster.

As for the relationship between the snail and the tornado, there's nothing really deep or meaningful here. They both have a spiral form, but moving in completely different time universes, a slow and gentle uncoiling versus high-speed carnage. And of course playing with scale shifts between big and small things, as with many other pictures in this book, is always fun. Again the crow looks on from the sidelines, only interested in the next mistake. As with many paintings in this book, I'm interested in how words and pictures can build an interesting context for each other: the text refers to an invisible snail, the picture is dominated by an unmentioned tornado. Neither word nor image actually explain one another, yet they are an inseparable parts of the same idea.

Tin Toys: 'Never be late for a parade.'

While the younger brother works away at his 'robot' companion, the eldest is always far more advanced when it comes to this kind of alchemical engineering. This image is a leftover from an earlier version of 'Summer' which was more of a comic-book story about two kids competing to create 'better friends'. I wondered

if kids could easily construct lively beings out of junk, how quickly might it dissolve into power games, jealousy and corruption? By itself, however, I found this image could be read more openly in a number of ways - the main element being that the older brother refuses to wait for the younger one, and, more deeply, the idea of fun and the anxiety of *missing out* on fun so often exist side by side.

The nature of these creatures and their 'parade' is open to imagination. I based them on my study of old tin-toys; clattering, rigid and a little awkward, but full of weird character. I wanted them to look more like wind-up puppets than robots - more shell than substance. Two of the machines / animals are waving to each other, so there is a sense of kinship there, maybe achieving some independent thought or feeling. Each creature is meant to look as if it has a very specific personality.

The suburban setting is very important, though I'm not sure why - it could just be that it looks like a place from some childhood memory, a peaceful, uneventful place. I was very interested in the brightness of the lime-yellow hill upon which the younger brother is working, and the strange darkness of the sky (almost like night), which adds a surreal effect, adding an ominous discord to an otherwise whimsical afternoon.

Strawberry: 'Never ruin a perfect plan.'

The composition of this painting is a rough reversal of the previous one, 'Never be late for a parade', and also shifts from day to night, though it's more for visual contrast than any other meaning. Although you could say that in one picture the boys are hoping to go somewhere, and in the next they are hoping to leave as quickly and quietly as possible.

The image of a giant strawberry is one I've often played with, as a kind of elemental prize that appeals to all senses - better than any gold or holy grail because you can actually eat it. It also relates to the giant fruit at the end of the book, although I only realised this connection long after I'd finished all the paintings. In any case, the circumstances of the painting are intentionally mysterious. I don't know what the creatures are, or even much about the boys' actions and motives, except perhaps that it involves some kind of theft - or rescue - using home-made disguises. But perhaps what this picture is really about is the younger brother making a mistake as a result of trying too hard. This trope would be familiar to many readers, particularly from adventure films like *The Wizard of Oz* (sneaking into a castle as a witch's guard), *Star Wars* (sneaking into the Death Star as a stormtrooper), *Lord of the Rings* (sneaking into Mordor as an orc), and the cover is always broken at a critical moment. The idea of a flawed disguise within enemy territory is probably very archetypal, going back thousands of years, it appears in so many fables, trickster tales and myths. It's also a broader a metaphor for many situations in life where we must pretend to be someone other than who we are, either for altruistic or selfish reasons. In this case, for the purpose of getting your hands on that once-in-a-lifetime giant strawberry.

As an illustration, it's most effective in implying drama outside of its own moment: we sense that a lot of things may have happened up to this point, and a lot more are likely to follow as the duo make their escape. Here is just one snapshot of a much larger adventure, as implied by the steps and path leading in and out of the picture. The scattering of bones on the ground add a sense of real peril that felt

missing from earlier sketches. The guarding creatures brandish a knife and fork, so maybe they belong to a dark culinary empire (which happens to have the best, freshest ingredients - a 'forbidden fruit' idea familiar to many tales, from the Bible to *Hansel and Gretel*). The stone steps descending without rails seem to me to be part of a larger building from which a warm light is cast, probably a vaguely religious temple, and the avenue of cypresses in the distance might add to this impression. The autumnal landscape contrasts with the vibrancy of the strawberry, and grey moonlight always gives me the feeling of an alternate, surreal world, the flipside of daytime reality.

The New Housemate: 'Never give your keys to a stranger.'

What originally began as the novelty of making an unusual new friend took a sinister turn once the younger brother was sketched outside the lounge room, watching TV through a window, which is for some reason a very evocative concept for me, that hard division of inside and outside worlds. The big cat-person, wearing a suit and relaxing as if at the end of an ordinary working day, is very open to interpretation. It may have been inspired by the fact that most of my youth spent on a couch has involved a cat nearby, although more recently this has been a parrot and a budgie (drawings of rooms with big parrots or budgies recur in my sketchbooks too). In any case, like other animals in the book, you can never know what a cat is thinking, in spite of what some owners would have you believe. They are irreducibly enigmatic.

Clearly the new guest has displaced the younger brother, either casually or aggressively, we can't know where the fault lies exactly. That's further complicated by the sentence 'never give your keys to a stranger', so it's quite possible that the cat-person was originally invited by the younger boy. The older one does not appear to mind one way or the other, which may be the most significant failing, either an accidental or deliberate obliviousness. I also like the impression that the older brother may be mesmerized in some way by the television (the programming of which is another mystery - a special cat show?) but the fact that the boy's shadow has become catlike might suggest a slightly sinister psychological immersion. Whether that is voluntary or not remains also unknown; for me these 'blanks' are the most interesting part of any narrative image; they feel familiar to me without offering any explanation.

Game: 'Never argue with an umpire.'

The guiding concept for this illustration is the way older siblings often enjoy controlling gameplay: both the choice of a game and its rules, which can be easily *ad hoc* and subject to change at whim. At the same time, it's also about the way that younger siblings voluntarily participate in such games, even when it seems that a defeat is inevitable (claims of unfairness may follow, but too late to be of any consequence). The winning or losing of games can often be particularly intense emotional experiences in childhood; and probably lays a lot of groundwork for equally convoluted and absurd adult politics, especially at the highest levels.

A secondary concept involves the 'invention' of a doppelganger: the fantasy of literally making a new friend, in this case, from mechanical parts, powered by a car battery: an 'improved' model of the younger brother (it has the same colour and shape). Is the robot actually a better player, or has the older brother been constantly revising the rules of the game to favour the machine, as evidenced by

complicated chalk marks on the ground? Either way the result is the same: complete power can be exercised with the cool remoteness of an umpire. A yellow flag, a comfortable high-chair, a megaphone to drown any protest. No physical exertion necessary.

The brooding background is as interesting to me as the foreground, as I'm often inspired by landscapes full of big electrical wire arrays, especially over desolate country. Aside from often being simultaneously beautiful and ugly, they suggest a fringe universe of industrial sub-consciousness beyond suburbia, largely unseen. I imagine a pervasive electrical hum and other noises of a cruder analog technology; I also imagine the smell of overheated old TVs and bitumen on a hot summer afternoon.

This painting also draws some influence from the Australian artist Jeffrey Smart, himself perhaps influenced by American artists Edward Hopper and Charles Scheeler and Surrealists such as De Chirico. These painters excel at amplifying the stillness and disquiet of painted landscapes, particularly in urban spaces with brooding skies. Characters often seem trapped on a vast stage, playing out singular actions for eternity.

Details to note: the very distant crow again looking on from the highest point (almost as if it is the real umpire here). The robot boy has very rigid joints, you can't imagine moving very gracefully, more like those tennis-ball launching machines. Its head is covered with electronic eyes looking in all directions, and slightly steaming / smoking; it's hands are graceless C-clamps. The cables in its back lead back to a large battery, which is kept near the older brother. At one point I had the older brother holding the battery or even controlling the robot with a joystick, but this was visually too complicated. But I do feel that the older brother has built this machine himself with a particular purpose in mind - to win! Even if it means orchestrating a situation of artificial 'fairness'. Anyone growing up with a sibling knows well what this is all about.

Garden: 'Never forget the password.'

The overall feeling of this painting is a simple contrast between soft golden light and grey buildings; an inside world and an outside world, with a small portal in between (very similar ideas are in *The Lost Thing*, with a colourful utopian world hidden within a drab city).

The experience of being so arbitrarily denied access is familiar to everyone, and it's particularly galling when it comes from a sibling who, for whatever reason, is lucky enough to have the upper hand (there are few greater champions of petty bureaucracy than young brothers and sisters, outside of customs, tax and immigration offices). The purpose of any password is to identify a stranger, so to enforce it with a close acquaintance is absurdly punitive. At this point in the 'story' there's a sense that the older boy is actually being mean rather than oblivious, and this leads naturally enough to a fight - the younger boy finally 'asks for a reason', and of course there isn't one.

When painting this picture I was thinking a little about the reports of some early European visitors to the coast of New Zealand, describing a massive 'dawn chorus' of birdsong coming from the forest (which is relatively silent now due to rats and other introduced animals). While I don't think this garden is necessarily so dense, I did imagine it as an enchanted, secret Eden of small birds and insects, and like

Japanese gardens, a place of great peace and enlightenment. In earlier sketches it featured a birthday party for various creatures, the young boy refused entry for forgetting to bring a gift, but this seemed too similar to the 'parade' image and I wanted it to be more open to interpretation. The focus remains a heavenly place you might desperately wish to visit, but probably never will. I'm reminded here of a H.G. Wells short story that left a strong impression on me, 'The Door in the Wall', about a man who spends his life trying to locate a lost green door he once opened as a child to witness 'immortal realities'.

Fight: 'Never ask for a reason.'

The fight scene is an interesting one - a sudden dramatic climax. The boys are animated yet the creatures are very still, not knowing what to do, like puppets without masters. I also imagined the fight as being like a campfire scene in a deep black night, with an immediate feeling of heat and violence; the secondary feeling being a kind of melancholy isolation.

My idea for this scene emerged in sketchbooks many years ago, inspired by a Goya painting of giants buried knee-deep in a landscape swinging clubs at each other - a deadlocked 'eternal battle', the meaning of which is nicely unclear, but conveying a strong impression of colossal pointlessness.

Here, all the entities from previous adventures have gathered to observe the conflict in a kind of bewildered silence. In earlier sketches I had the various creatures falling apart or walking away, as if the magic of a shared imagination has dissolved, but I felt there was something too 'obvious' about that. It seemed much more interesting for them to just watch, like a ritual gathering around a fire, unable to intervene, or frozen in time. There is a sense that they are fading from reality by making them all the same desaturated brownish colour, weakly illuminated within a greater enveloping darkness. I imagine that as the fight goes on unresolved, the creatures might fade from the picture altogether, sinking into the night as if into unconsciousness.

Train Journey: 'Never lose a fight. Never wait for an apology. Always bring bolt cutters.'

Beginning with 'Never lose a fight' and ending with the rescue scene 'Always bring bolt cutters', this set of train paintings differ from the rest of the book, particularly because they form an actual sequence. It's as if the preceding episodic narrative has stalled, or become stuck once the boys are separated, and does not progress to a new chapter until they reunite. In fact the boys become invisible: the older boy steps off-stage completely, and the carriage transporting the younger boy recedes into the darkness of a gradually vanishing landscape, almost slipping off the page. A kind of nothingness takes over, ushered by a murder of crows (the actual name for a crow gathering). Winter quickly replaces summer, so here the seasonal concept becomes especially relevant here as an emotional metaphor.

The 'crown' scene was a key starting point for the book as a whole, the idea of an older brother selling a younger one to some shadowy merchants in a moment of weakness (betrayal being another standard of mythology). The crown itself does not figure strongly elsewhere; originally I had the older boy give it to the younger at the end, but then realised the crown is not relevant to their relationship. It's

more of a distraction, a symbol for some kind of selfishness, since the idea of a king involves egocentricity, having little to do with partnership and is essentially an unearned privilege. There is also a sense that the boys have passed into a ghost-city: a hollow, empty version of their more familiar environment. Maybe it's the crow's world, a backstage mirror of the human one with dull buildings and silent chimneys; or at least a train station that belongs to them (there's a crow image embossed on the pediment).

The strange train, like a carriage and engine fused into an elemental form was inspired by news images of cars covered in volcanic ash. It seems built only for the purpose of incarcerating a passenger, and has some unsettling resemblance to an oven. There might be a slight resonance here with fairy-tale imagery too; crows, ovens, crowns and unspoken contracts, but with modern industrial aspect. It's not clear what the older or younger boy is thinking, but it's possible that both characters are somewhat resigned to an inevitable situation: neither are particularly enthusiastic or resistant.

The crows themselves are still to me a kind of neutral presence, in the way that animals are neither good nor evil in any human sense. They just exploit opportunities. We don't know what they want the younger brother for - maybe no reason at all. As scavengers, perhaps they prey on emotion more than anything physical, and drawn to the suffering of loneliness, they create its opposite: a bustling crowd. But the repetition of so many black angular forms against a colourless landscape only emphasises a vacuous feeling, a loss of individuality, creativity or purpose, the dissolution of all things that make life interesting.

The first long landscape, the 'white city' feels to me like a world being bleached away, bones in the sun, an empty set after all actors have left, or something just passing from memory. In the following image, darker drifts are burying the remnants, and I imagined here something quite lunar, like piles of ash in the vacuum of a disappearing world. In the final image, a total darkness threatens to swallow everything completely, and there's an impression that the cloud of crows might stretch on to infinity.

The final rescue is implied more than illustrated, but you can imagine quite a dramatic maneuver, breaking the padlock and transferring the prisoner from a blindly rushing train that's unlikely to stop. The crows scatter voluntarily - they don't fight - perhaps this event is also inevitable to them, as it may be for the boys, we might wonder if the older boy has been trailing the train on his bike all along - I like to think so. The image of a completely dark world illuminated only by small headlights or torches has always been particularly appealing to me.

Bicycle: 'Always know the way home.'

This painting, one of the earliest images imagined for the book, is largely inspired by a recurring dream I used to have as a child. It involved walking home from school (either alone or with my brother) and then suddenly noticing it was the middle of the night and nobody else was around, no house or streetlights, no sound, and even after walking for hours we were no closer to home: a dreadful feeling of complete stillness. This painting, however grim, is really more hopeful than frightening - the boys look small and vulnerable, but they are secure in their togetherness and purpose, and the road home is clearly marked. They just need to keep moving, and eventually they will reach the dawn light.

In some ways this landscape is an extension of the 'crow' universe, except that it might have more to do with the boys' inner fears, or some kind of emotional graveyard that could result from a failed friendship. Earlier sketches involved a backyard strewn with half buried and burnt toys and domestic objects, or just piles of garbage that accumulate as a result of ordinary living.

The painted objects are very stream-of-consciousness for me, and not especially symbolic or allegorical. The huge animal skull is just one irrational ruin among many: gutted institutional buildings, a crashed warplane, bombs, machine parts, craters, and spiky growths. In hindsight, I think there is some similarity with landscapes of World War I, such as those depicted in paintings by British artist Paul Nash, as well as photographs of landscapes devastated by mining, or other environmental disasters: the photographs of Edward Burtynsky are particularly inspirational here (look up the film and book 'Manufactured Landscapes'), also less consciously, 'The Isle of the Dead' by 19th century Symbolist Arnold Böcklin. The colour of the image is a little unnatural, a bit poisonous or mineral, in contrast to the more organic blush of light along the horizon. I imagine this place as a kind of borderland between life and death, death being a completely banal nothingness, whereas this place still has a strange beauty to it - although grim, there's some pleasure in looking at its scarred contours and wreckage.

Wall and Fruit Landscape: 'Never miss the last day of summer.'

Reviewers of my work have often noticed my attraction to 'dark' imagery, which I guess is true, although I just as much enjoy painting bright and joyful scenes. That said, I always like them to contain a quiet mystery, a slight ambiguity. The pair of paintings for the statement 'Never miss the last day of summer' I think work well together to that end: two boys ascending a seemingly bottomless ladder against a dark, faceless wall, arriving in a sunlit landscape of giant fruit and cakes where the natural thing to do is march along with musical instruments. The melody is inaudible, it could be a loud celebration of some triumph over previous calamity, or a modest farewell dirge to the end of summer. The fact that the boys are so small, like ants exploring a picnic rug, feels right for such a moment, rather than anything grand. Like most people, I have strong memories of the last days of a long summer holiday (for Australian children, usually running uninterrupted from December to early February), as well as recalling the more regular wistful atmosphere of late Sunday afternoons, wanting to extend indefinitely the slanted light of a sinking sun, railing against the deepening shadows that presage the arrival of Monday morning: school, work, schedules, unwelcome responsibilities.

The image of a fruit landscape developed from earlier sketches in notebooks, involving two characters improvising a little imaginary festival, marching between giant teacups on a colossal dining table; riding on the back of a large cat as it prowls across suburbia at night, or otherwise out in the open and hidden at the same time. This idea has something to do with the smallness of a private universe between two close people. No other person can notice their strange little ritual, a moment of creative play that may well be soon forgotten even by the players. The presence of fruit, flowers and cakes, as well as suggesting a seasonal turn, also implies impermanence - things will not be as fresh or vibrant later on, only in this moment.

As for the brothers, the youngest is now heading the procession on horn, and the oldest is supporting with a drum. I later painted a half-title page illustration to open the book, which is much the same scene with roles reversed. The little brother, struggling with the oversized drum, has dropped a stick while the older brother obliviously marches on. This added prelude offers an extra context to the final spread, suggesting that perhaps the older boy has learned to make allowances for the younger one without frustration.

TV Afternoon: 'That's It.'

This is arguably the only 'realistic' painting in the book, in the sense that there are no overt fantasy elements. Or those that exist are relegated to children's drawings pinned to walls, scattered on the floor, and some other fiction playing unseen on a television that glows unusually brightly, it's not unlike a setting sun (have they been watching the preceding adventure?) A scattering of books and crayons suggests other imaginative activities that might occupy an ordinary summer afternoon. Outside it is already late evening, and we can just see a crow take wing in the distance. (An interesting point about the composition is that the sky would not be visible from this angle - so this maintains a slightly dreamlike feeling to the scene I think.) It's a quiet, low-key way to end a story, no dramatic flourish or clear moral message, and I often like to conclude stories this way.

It's also quite a personally nostalgic image, though I trust it is fairly universal too. I probably spent most time with my own brother watching TV or playing computer games on a beanbag (this being the late 70s and early 80s) and much like the fishing mentioned earlier, this was an ideal way for two boys to spend time together while enjoying an external object or activity - a 'third party' - upon which to focus. Even though we might not communicate a great deal, we are enjoying a shared experience, a communion of thoughts and feelings, depending on what's on. This TV set also looks very much like one we used to watch, an old black and white tube which took about a minute to warm up and gave off a high-pitching buzzing sound. You'd always hear the disturbing *Dr Who* intro music long before the image burned onto the screen every afternoon.

In my memory this is the way most family conflicts would often resolve. Not by overt apology, introspective resolve or discussion, but rather you just end up doing something together. The action itself can be quite arbitrary, but it reveals some deeper continuity in a relationship which, as much as all other good and bad events, can be quite hard to explain rationally. But a picture can sometimes summarise the feeling quite well. A musician friend, Sxip Shirey, who worked to develop a soundscape for the app version of this story, put it very well when he said that it's like the TV 'is singing a future memory of one another back to them.' One thing I do like about picture books, and art in general, is the feeling of collapsed time that sometimes happens, where past, present and future come together. On reflection, this is not just a 'story' about childhood or even sibling relationships, but something more like a daydream about broader successes and failures that come with trying to understand our connections with other human beings.