

eat my shadow

LINDA COCKBURN

Book I
Eat My Shadow Series

'Eyes up, take a breath.
Remember, it's just a book. A
literary gem. Evocative. Intense.
Profound.'

E.Brodie - Bookclubber

'Sleep became a secondary
consideration.'
Katie Devenish

'This was a book that needed to
be read, savoured, digested,
and go back for seconds.'
Linda Woodrow





Book I eat my shadow

LINDA COCKBURN

together
PRESS



1 FINN

*Antiscian (n.) When people on opposite sides of the world
cast shadows in opposite directions at noon.*

Most days, when I stare up at the sun and figure it can go no higher, I think of my antiscian who will be casting a shadow in the opposite direction to mine. I like to think the stranger knows the word too, and they wonder if there's anyone else who stands beneath our shared sun, thinking on it, thinking of me, a shadow with a shadow.

Father had been an etymologist at a university in Tasmania for seven years before he moved away from the city. He says he brought nothing from his past life apart from books and a bunch of useless words. Words like *antiscian*. A word that winds itself up in a poetic cocoon and comes out all butterfly. But you can't eat words.

I've lived in Father's shadow for twenty-two years. The phrase, *living in someone's shadow*, used to have a different meaning.

Father once thought of words as defenceless civilians and he'd assigned himself as their protector against nations of people bent on subverting them.

'Decimated,' he'd say, 'means to kill or destroy one in every ten of something. It came from a mutinous Roman legion that was decimated as a punishment. They killed one in ten men. It's not a word that should be diluted to mean just another word for destroyed or damaged.'

But, he reluctantly agreed; 'All words change, it's what I study. Not much point in trying to hold back the tide. Everything changes.'

A few years back, when it was finally cool enough to go outside. We were pulling up potatoes in the west garden, the sun resting on the broad peak of Mt Bickford behind us. We'd spent the day sheltering inside and separating radish

seeds from their pods, Father soaking their empty husks in lye water. Another attempt to find the perfect substitute for paper. He wanted something finer, something that didn't catch the nib of his pens and spray walnut ink.

He'd crouched some feet away, dust on his patched knees, and told me his occupation was no longer an etymologist.

'My job's been to stand between you and the sun for years now,' he'd laughed. 'I guess you've grown up in my shadow.'

It was the year the potato scab was bad; as we followed the withered stems to the pale-skinned nuggets beneath, I'd been anticipating nothing more than peeling off the worst of the scab and eating them. Unnoticed, Father had been positioning himself so he cast his shadow across me, blocking out the sun. After that, I took note and realised—he always did.

Father removed a yellowed newspaper from a box stuffed with neatly indexed editions. He read out an article quoting Alan Winchester, the last Prime Minister of Australia. Winchester's indiscreet comments made in front of a journalist at a party had caused a national uproar.

'Climate Change and talk of mass starvation don't worry me; as far as I'm concerned, future generations can eat my shadow and swallow my echo.'

Later, when asked to comment, Alan Winchester said it resulted from a gastric attack due to an adverse reaction between veal and scotch. Father tapped the article several times, drew in his breath, then carefully folded the newspaper and tucked it back in the box.

'His was a shadow which cast no shade.' And shoved it to the back of the shelf. He didn't explain. Perhaps, I thought, Father had grown up in Winchester's.

Father doesn't talk much about *The Slope*. I know it was bad. The economy collapsed. For years I thought it was a big building till Father explained it wasn't an edifice, but an abstract human invention to allow people to exchange things, but it had become a global addiction, and like most addictions, it eventually killed the host.

There'd once been plastic notes of different values exchanged for goods. But mostly the money didn't exist other than in computers. The computers moved them around at your request, usually with a different kind of plastic called a card. But the system strained under the weight of so many people all wanting to live like kings.

When the land, which people had been robbing for centuries, had nothing left to give, both the environment and the economy broke. People lost their jobs. They forced many at gunpoint from their homes. In the first years many people died of exposure, their bodies found huddled between garbage bins, wrapped in cardboard, the inky stain of hoarded newspapers printed in reverse on their skin.

Their homes stood empty and grim.

Winds wrenched off roofs and toppled trees over power lines. Eventually, the cost could not be borne, and the trees lay where they fell and the power was not reconnected. Parts of the country grew dark.

Mail deliveries stopped and rural areas went without fuel. People who'd never grown anything before tried to grow their food under an unforgiving sun. It was not unusual to hear families survived a harsh summer by eating dandelion leaves and zucchini. The rat population plummeted.

To begin with people stood by each other and made sure their elderly neighbours ate too. But when there was nothing left to give they hoarded what they had beneath boards, in false backed cupboards and plastic tubs in holes dug in the backyard. Nothing was wasted.

The elderly were the first to go. The economy didn't care if it was a baby on the street or a ninety-year-old with no shoes. If you didn't have economy, you had no food.

Things wound down till the increments of loss were barely noticeable. The beauticians and hairdressers, the shoe shops and travel agents, all their doors closed. Next came the bookshops, the clothing retailers, and the interior decorators. The hospitals were the last to go, like a fish left on a bank, the last gasp.

Starvation was no reason to go to the hospital; the emaciated were turned away. If you broke a leg, required stitches, or suffered from jaundice, perhaps then. Hospitals no longer provided food, families of the ill were to bring it with them.

One doctor, a hero, Father said, ran courses on how to deliver a baby, how to stitch wounds, set bones. He was widely criticised by many who said he was undermining the medical profession. But within a year, there wasn't one.

When my parents left the city I was three years old. I place the words in the same order Father gave them to me. I have no pictures to match them with. A retailer—was it someone who stitched on detached tails? Interior decorator—an alien phrase.

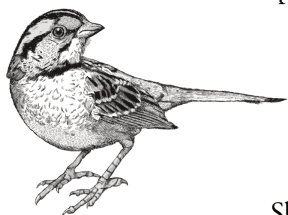
I don't remember much about the oil days. Sometimes the feel of them comes in wafts. They smell like vinegar and flowers. Shiny, plastic-wrapped. Clean. Cars were strangely muscleless, with no rolling haunches as they moved. I recall being in the back seat of Mother's car. It was blue. She buckled me in; her necklace, a gold cross, tapped against her chest as she reached over me. The buckles were tools to reduce the likelihood of death from any sudden stops, because cars travelled faster than humans were designed to. But things stopped suddenly anyway, and in the end it was driving that increased our likelihood of dying.

My mother played the piano. Father said she'd been gifted. I always thought it meant her music had been given to her. I found articles about her saying she was

a talented pianist who'd played at concerts. People knew her name.

It always struck me as odd that people knew my mother. She was a practitioner of invisibility: she was small, she was quiet; I never saw her shout, only ever smile or laugh. I never saw her angry. But when she sat at the piano stool, her eyes focussed on the wall beyond it, I would wait to hear the music she chose. A playful mood and I'd creep closer, lean against her leg and feel the shift of muscles beneath her clothes as she pressed the foot pedal. If it was a dark storm cloud of sound, something Russian, I'd retreat. The cords in the back of her thin hands stood out like piano wires. I remember thinking she was related to it, they were distant cousins, communicating.

The piano, subjected to heat, then cold, contracted and stretched till the sound became discordant. Mother tinkered with its dusty innards in a futile attempt to tune it. The intricate arrangement of strings fascinated me, the dampened keys like bloodless ligaments stretched out in rows and pinned.



Mother used handmade implements to operate on the piano, I angled a mirror from the living room window to illuminate her work. At first optimistic, as the day wore on, her frustration grew. My arms ached from holding the same position.

She loosened and tightened and plonked on keys, listening for some subtle magic in their sound. It was a spell she could not cast.

Father and I went for a walk to check traps and returned to find the piano lying on its side in the front yard, its lid half torn from its hinges.

'Recumbent,' I said. Hoping the use of the word would ease Father.

'I believe your mother has suffered an autoschediastic* moment,' he smiled, and together we struggled to lift its dead weight—and failed. We marvelled at how the bird-like body of my mother had rolled this wooden beast across the room on its rusty castors and challenged it to cross the threshold. Once it was more out than in, its own weight had taken care of the rest, Father explained. We settled its lid as best we could.

Mother avoided looking at the pale shape on the wall where it'd once stood. She made no mention of it. Father, taking her cue, said nothing either, and when I made to, he compressed his lips and rested his finger against them.

Over the months the piano faded, sparrows took to shitting on it, the sun to bleaching it, and the thin veneer cracked and retracted. Late one night I heard its muffled keys beneath the shattered lid. Father heard it too and said it was nothing more than a mouse. The next morning I found the black pellets of rat shit. Father

removed the wires from the piano, the screws, thin strips of metal, robbing its helpless carcass. It made no sound after that. I'd raise the lid and press the loose keys, listening for a sound that never came.

Father asked if I wanted the keys. Perhaps they might prove useful? He pried them away like dead fingers and dropped them in a wooden box. But I didn't. I told him to burn them. 'I can't son, they're made from a type of plastic, Ivorite; they'd give off fumes.'

He told me they were once made from thin strips of ivory, stolen from the tusks of elephants. Elephants have been extinct for a long time. I have images of them in a book. They were grey, immense, with ragged blankets for ears. Father attempted to move and sound like an elephant, raising his head, rocking it from side to side, and waving his arm like a trunk. Mother looked up from shelling beans and quickly bent her head.

I remember watching a drop of water from a tap. As it grew, the world viewed through it did too. Suspended, upside down, was another world within. A bird flew through—mirrored. The drop, so gently close to falling, the light-trapped prisms of colour shimmered with the breeze. The shining world fell too quickly.



I don't remember my mother dying. Father told me later it was a matter of grinding months, the loss of her by degrees. A stroke paralysed her. She found it difficult to eat, to move, and talking was impossible, her words slurred, soft, and covered in drool. Her quietness was exchanged for silence. I filled it for her. Read her books. She stared past me.

It was wild outside the day she died. We'd both startled when a bird was thrown against the window, sliding sodden and dark down the glass. After watching it from inside—its still and gaping beak, its loosened claws—I decided it was beyond my help. I didn't want to step into the wildness anyway. Father once told me if you opened your mouth into the wind, it would inflate your lungs like balloons, and you'd blow away. I didn't believe him, but I wasn't so sure I'd risk trying.

I turned my attention to a tin of wooden pegs, slotting them into one another, making a circle of them around a scrap of cotton. Making towers. I'd turned to smile at Mother. Her lips twitched wanly in response. I placed a peg on the tip of each finger, turned my fingers into the claws of a bird, and turned to show her, my fingers dipping and rising in waves. But she wasn't there.

I remember Father covering her shrunken frame with a blanket. First, he tucked it around her neck, smoothed it over her shoulders, and leaned against her.

Rocked. The salt of a last tear drying across her cheek. When he pulled away, he drew the blanket from her, straightened it, and laid it over her face. When I could no longer see her eyes, I thought of them, the flat, drying sheen. The weariness. For me, she died in moments.

Memories are like that. They rise above the river like flattened rocks, and when you think back on your life, you jump from one to the next, never peering too deeply beneath the water's surface, not wanting to stir the muck, to dredge up those sodden things best left beneath. You never plunge in lest you go over your head, become so mired in them the present is lost. Instead, you leap between pivotal moments, either good or bad. The electrified flashes in time. Like the moment of my mother's death, like the clarity of a drop of water.

I think it's where mother lived, in the water, always trying to pull herself from it. The river left her chilled, and although she struggled against the flow, it inundated her. She drowned by degrees. She'd lived in a different world, one I'd not inhabited, and couldn't understand.

Once she told me, 'I worried about other things then, silly things. Never about whether we'd be safe or have enough to eat. I worried about how long the grass had grown, how I'd find time to clean the car, and whether, when a visitor came, the sheets were clean. It was stupid.'

She did not stop worrying, she merely changed what she worried about.

I've read of worry beads, some people used to count them. Mothers were looped around her neck so many times they choked her, yet still she'd counted them, on a closed string that never ended.

2 FATHER

18 years earlier

Chantepleur: (n.) Singing and weeping at the same time.

It was about three years since things had gone pear-shaped and the fruit, well-rotted. It was oven hot, and I was making a rare expedition to the Huon River in search of flag rush and river mint and to see if it had flushed clean. Its current had slowed years earlier and its hypoxic waters were curdled with algae. When the wind came from the north, you could smell it. The de-oxygenated waters held only the bloated bellies of fish and an assorted ballet of jellyfish. There's little nutrition in jellyfish.

I heard someone singing, a thin sound—a warbling. A woman on her own was no real threat, but if she was accompanied, it would be a concern. I considered leaving, but my feet were already stepping over dead branches and my eyes scanning for movement as I approached. Perhaps it was a siren, released from some watery prison and singing for a man. But the warbling organised itself into Elvis Presley's, *You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog*, but pitched too high to be pleasing.

I saw her, a flash of torn denim and faded t-shirt sagging over a sharpness of bones. An isthmian head that kept no secrets, eyes which protruded. Thinned, translucent lids, razor cheekbones and a lantern jaw. More skull than face. This was thinness to an extreme I'd not seen before—emaciation. As she danced akimbo; a bloodless marionette, she swung to her own words, spidery fingers splayed to the sky, mere bone and stretched tendons, blue-worm veins like braided rivers. A cadaver, yet here she was, singing, dancing, listing from side to side on spindleshanks.*

Just as she closed her eyes, I stepped from behind the tree.

'Crying all the time...' she trailed off. Her limbs slackened and fell, her head drooped—her batteries drained. Her dirty-blond hair so thin I could see her

scalp, a globe of reddened, blistered and scabbed countries. She held the pose for a long moment. I was considering stepping back behind the tree when her eyes snapped open, and she stared glassily at me from between greasy strands.

‘Are you here to kill me?’ she asked, her voice husky, her head cocked to one side, like an inquiring dog.

I shook my head.

‘Pity. I’ve been waiting. Long.’

Her voice was raspy with a texture of smoke, unlike her reedy song. Her eyes were dark and slow in her head, but she saw everything of me. She stood, her bare feet shod in grey dust, her ankles and calves the same diameter to the knee. I’d span her calf with my thumb and forefinger.

‘Are you a dream?’ she asked.

I shook my head.

‘Are you William Shatner? You look like him—thinner.’

I smiled. ‘No, David.’

‘I’m Everleigh, Everleigh Blandell-Collins, formerly of Sandy Bay.’

I knew her. Or I once had. We’d worked at the same university for a time. I think she was in law, so our paths rarely crossed. She’d impressed me—she arrived at work suited and remained well-armoured against friendly approaches. It’d been rumoured she was rich and horrendously bored. Her work there was voluntary. She excelled at it, but was disliked for the impenetrability of said armour. She’d once described the teaching methods of the head of her department as *quaint*. She’d been unapproachably beautiful.

Now she stood before me, a sylph-like statuette, an ode to approaching death, and asked me if I’d come to take what little life she had left. Asking as though it were a favour.

‘Well, if you’re not going to kill me, do you mind if I sit down? My feet hurt.’

She raised one ragged foot, and I caught a flash of raw flesh. The things were in tatters. She’d walked a long way in those fleshless shoes.

As she stumbled through trees I saw her dismal camp tucked in against a rock wall, a natural alcove the size of a closet with a small overhang of rock. The floor carpeted in grubby bedding. She shambled to it. Rather than seat herself, she crumpled into the space and lay there, staring blankly.

‘A cup of tea? Something to eat? I have Tim Tams somewhere.’

A soft wheeze of laughter.

I spotted a tattered book at the back of the alcove. *Native Bush Food of Tasmania*. Perhaps it’s what’d helped her survive. A gatherer society of one. I waited for her to quiet and glanced around her camp.

She’d built a large contraption, a wide-mouthed assortment of plastic bottles, funnels, and ice-cream containers tied together at the rim and bound in a

pentagonal shape with a rim of straight branches. These were neatly bound with faded baling twine. This eccentric collection was suspended above a blue plastic drum. Tubing came from the base of the outer containers, which all led to it. It's a water collection point. In a place where the natural water sources had either dried up or were polluted, it was a unique way to collect water when it rained. Rainfall was polluted too, but, we assumed, less so. It was rough, flimsy, yet ingenious.

'I used tarps first. They blew away,' she whispered.

'It's clever.'

'You can have it. I'll draw up the papers. Worth more than my houses, my rings.' She waggled her unadorned fingers. 'Lost those.' She picked a scab on her wrist. 'Fingers got thin, rings fell off, tied them on a string. String broke.' She shrugged.

'How have you survived?'

'My book,' she flicked a finger at it. 'Leaves and berries. My contribution to seed dispersal. Most of the birds are gone. I call it shit and spit,' she cackled. 'Most days I could shit through the eye of a needle.'

She coughed dryly. When recovered, she said,

'No idea what it means. Not trying to be indelicate, but shitting through the eye of a needle isn't what I do. I have a spray nozzle attachment.' She sighed so deeply her chest bones showed through her t-shirt. 'I haven't shit in weeks. Haven't pissed in days.'

She rummaged around in her hair, scratching. 'Got water?' she asked casually, but the look in her eye was not.

'Sorry.'

'The moral of this story is—don't neglect your footwear.'

She glanced uneasily at her shredded feet.

'Euphoria,' she muttered. 'It's coming back. One minute it's like someone's stuck their hand up my puppet butt and they're taking me for a test drive, the next I'm like one of those bags with the air sucked out. What did they call them?'

'Vacuum packed?'

'Yeah, that.'

She struggled to stand. I reached out a hand to take hers. She recoiled, then steeled herself and placed her hand reluctantly in mine. It was icy cold. I'd an urge to rub them warm, but her skin was rice paper. Her fingernails were torn, yellowed nubs, or gone. Where I'd grasped her, the flesh remained indented. Dehydration. She saw me looking and rebuked me with a savage look, but then deflated.

'I's tired, awful tired, Massa,' she said in a low hum. 'Can't remember the movie.'

'The Green Mile,' I said, glad I'd been a vintage movie fan. I lifted her to her feet. She smiled, showing teeth as yellowed and nub as her nails. 'Thanks, Google,' and flashed a rictus grin.

She teetered on her bloodied feet and I released those bone hands, but, thinking better of it, went to take them again. She flicked me away irritably.

'What happened to your feet?' I asked.

'Slid them down the side of a hill. The soles wore through. I should bin them. Red is not my colour.' She was almost jovial. 'Oh, what sweet relief to part with them. I saw a Tassie devil last week,' she added abruptly.

'They're extinct,' I responded.

'Not this one. I'm thinking of leaving my feet to him. Not much marrow left I suppose,' she shrugged.

She puffed out her chest and cocked her arms like a scrawny, featherless chicken.

'My final performance,' she announced and stood still, breathing deeply. She closed her eyes and, just when I thought she'd fall, she mumbled.

'Stage fright.' She wavered a moment longer, then pulled herself upright.

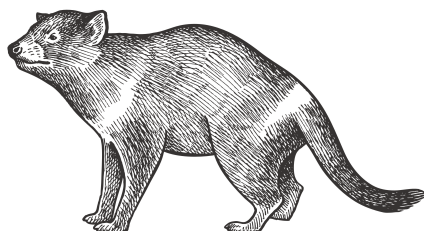
'I likes them sassy black women,' she said in a brassy voice—strong. 'Says it like it is,' she parodied, a frenetic gleam in her eye. She strutted around the clearing; with each step

she gained animation. 'Yo, I am forty-three years old, give or takes. An' I spent most of it being some dumb, white bitch with an add-ih-tuuude. Alls my life I wished I was born black, and I had my black bitch gurlfrens at my back. If some fucker gave me sass I'd sass 'em right back. I'd point my finger at 'em and I'd give'm what for. I'd give'm what for so bad they'd be hospitalised with a bad case of sass poisoning. I'd be like braided up and corn rowed, I'd have me a booty so big it'd be like a big bubble o' lard and I would swing my thing oh-so-proud. An' I'd know whatchu was thinking. I could see it in all your dumb-ass eyes and I wouldn't give me no-two-shits!'

She gave her wasted buttocks a grotesque shimmy.

'And don't you give me no crap about cultural mis-a-prope-ree-ation.' She glared at me over her scapula. 'There ain't no goddamn PC police strong enough to take this gurl down. I might be a little on the thin side, I might be some barely living stick an-him-ation. But I's got me some first class-ass!' She giggled huskily and laughed so hard a dark patch of urine soaked through the thin denim.

'Oh hells,' she muttered. 'That wasn't supposed to happen. This is my grand finale, my death bed performance and I's goddamn pees myself laughin' and I



ain't got me no clean underpants. Just when I thought I'd given up on peeing too.'

'Who was the big, black, beautiful woman in Orange Is the New Black, way back in TV times? The one with more sass than all of them combined?' she asked.

I shook my head, shocked by her performance. She was right, there was no context for cultural appropriation. She could say what she liked, no one would, or could condemn her for it. The rules had died along with civilisation.

'Oh, you've let me down, Google.'

She teetered and started to fall. Even though I knew she couldn't sustain the drama I wasn't quick enough to catch her. As I crouched to try, her head struck my knee with a crack. Her eyes flickered and closed. I hooked an arm under her knees, one behind her head and carried her bones in their skin bag back to her rags and laid her gently down.

She groaned. Her breath, close to my face, was putrid. She opened her eyes. 'You've been a wonderful audience.'

Up close, the whites of her eyes were yellow. Her kidneys were shutting down. Her pupils were large and black and I watched as the life died in them. But she didn't. She stared vacantly behind my shoulder, her chest continued to rise and fall, and a vein in her neck pulsed, slow, so very slow. I was no doctor, but her last performance had bought her millimetres from dying. It was her goal.

She breathed deeply. A body shudder ran through her and I thought—she's gone. But she took another breath.

'Don't leave me,' she hulled out the words.

I promised I wouldn't.

I found more rags to tuck around her. The heat of the day penetrated the trees, and I sweated, but her body was wracked with shivers. She no longer generated heat. The blankets could not trap it for her. She licked her cracked lips with a reptilian tongue. It caked her mouth with white scum.

I checked her water collection device—empty. I considered the river, but assumed she'd done so too and preferred to die of thirst.

I could do nothing for her but be there. I sat beside her slowly vacating body until dusk. Every breath felt as though it would be the last. The space between each grew longer.

I could not stay there the night. Piper would be fretting. My absence was longer than any I'd yet made. She'd think me dead or injured. She might come looking for me—a risky undertaking.

I agonised over my options. There were only two; to stay or leave. I hoped each breath she took was her last, for there could be no other outcome. Even if

I picked her up and carried her the three or four kilometres back to the house, she wouldn't have survived the journey, or she'd have died soon after. Then there was the thought which rose unbidden and would not lie back down. If I stayed with her till she died I'd be obliged to bury her. The soil was hard-packed and dry. I had no tools but my hands.

I could've eased her suffering by pressing my fingers to her nostrils and holding my hand over her awful mouth. But I knew it for what it was—my benefit. I'd shuffled to my feet and stood over her for long minutes. It was already late. The last of my journey would be in darkness. I looked beyond the trees at the bruised sky. I matched my breath to hers. Laid a gentle hand on her arm. Reaching across her body, I took the tattered book in my hands. Not a theft, I thought. She did not need it. I walked away.

I felt her eyes on me. Perhaps I imagined it. I turned. Those dark orbs were staring. She opened her mouth but managed only a raven's croak. If I walked back then, I'd have stayed. I stared at the slither of thin moon rising above a canopy of burnt trees on the horizon. Their black trunks reflected the red of the sunset. It was beautiful. Doubtless there was a German word for it. I thought myself heartless. There I was, at the point of abandoning a woman, and I wondered about an unknown word in another language. I was procrastinating—I'd made my decision. I had before I'd stood. But there I was, decision made, in a muddy pool of inertia. I opened my mouth to speak. To tell her I was sorry. But closed it. There was no lessening what I did. I had promised to stay. I left the desolate clearing, and a woman called Everleigh to live out her last moments alone and in the dark.

During the night it rained. Hard and heavy. I listened to it on the roof and imagined the funnels filling her drum.

The following week Piper asked me, 'If you could have one decadent thing from your past, what would it be?'

Without a pause— 'A large bottle of Lark Distillery whiskey.'

'A lifetime supply of dark chocolate!' she snapped back with an *I win* punch to my upper arm.

'I've probably used up my share of decadence anyway,' I conceded.

She smiled kindly. 'You are a good man.'

I surprised her by breaking into sobs, raucous sounds which filled up the room and which I could not silence. She held me till I stopped.

'I ain't nothing but a hound dog!' I sang in hiccupping falsetto, 'Crying all the time.'

She laughed while I cried some more.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries were a cornucopia of bad choices—we chose them all. Now we have few options, nearly always bad, and there's no

choice but to take those too.

Leaving Everleigh to die was a collegial betrayal beyond all betrayals. It was even more difficult than killing a man.