She found the skeleton intact down in the valley—intact except for the head, which was separated off but not by much. The whole thing was almost glowing white surrounded by long, drying grass. She had last been down there at the beginning of the Big Heat, and it wasn’t there then, so it had died in the past nine months and the sun and insects and birds and other creatures had picked it clean. . .not even a skerrick of fur remained. How was that possible? And everything was as it had fallen, with spaces between vertebrae and ribs and leg bones exactly as they would have in the living body but minus the tissue and stuff that filled in between—its hinges and coverings entirely gone. As she studied the ground beneath she imagined that she’d find a slug, a bullet lowered down slowly in the rot and sitting like the permanence of death, gloating. And she did.

She thought of carrying the skeleton back to the house, maybe into the garden shed and wiring it back together somehow, but she decided that wasn’t what was needed. No, she would take each bone and hide it in a different place around the valley. It would take a long time to do this and she had so many demands on her that it made her tense and upset—schoolwork, chores, worrying about friends who were mucking up and getting themselves into trouble and looking to her for help when she didn’t know the first thing about how to help—but it seemed the necessary thing to do. She didn’t want to spend time thinking why, wanted to do it, then wonder.

She thought her compulsion to disperse the memory of the fox over the valley, place parts of it in all those spots she imagined it had roamed, to hide it away, was driven by the fox itself—to protect its spirit through dispersal rather than concentration, which served as a reminder to its exterminators that others of its kind might be around, and that gunshot and baits awaited. Yes, loud and clear, it would be spread over all the valley that had been its life, even if its life had
made a mess of other lives, even if it had mucked up without knowing it was mucking up.

She used to argue with her cousins who said, Foxes are destroying the native animals and you defend them, you who go on about the native animals so much. And hot under the collar, stirred up, which made them laugh at her, she yelled back, It’s you . . . we . . . who brought them here and we who have destroyed the valley and the native animals. We we we! Maybe you, you mental case, they’d say, but we didn’t bring them here. And then the oldest cousin who had just got his own car and a girlfriend to go with it, put her in a headlock and rubbed a rabbit’s foot from his keychain in her face and said, Now the fox will smell ya and come and eat ya up, you silly girl!

And she knew this would infuriate her uncle and auntie who had taken her in after her parents had died overseas, but there was no choice, was there, and they wouldn’t know about it anyway. They never came up here. . . though the cousins did. . . and she examined the odd-looking slug again and thought, If I knew forensics, I could definitely link this to one of their rifles.

Each bone had a special place, but the skull had the most special—the bottom drawer of her bedroom dresser. The thigh bone was placed in a hollow that was used by galahs each year for nesting, high up in a flooded gum—but she climbed back up and removed it and hooked it over a dead branch as far up as she could reach—galahs would not nest with a fox thigh bone and she wanted them to return. Leg bones and ribs were inserted in crevices and gaps between granite boulders, and vertebrae found resting places at the bases of trees and fence posts. It took her the whole day and she forgot to go home for lunch, which made Auntie really mad at her in that nice Auntie-angry-on-the-face-but-not-inside way; and given this vanishing-for-the-day thing happened every now and again when her niece got distracted, no search party had been called for. It’s a good thing your uncle is away driving trucks, she said, because if he was here he would have given you a flea in the ear. A flea in the ear. Foxes get mange.
Foxes get killed and impaled on fence posts. Foxes get strung up from fences. Foxes get fleas. Fleas in their ears.

Her uncle would often argue with her about the feral animals needing to be exterminated. But I am a feral animal, she would say. Don’t be absurd, missy, it’s a sin to compare yourself with any animal, let alone a feral animal.

Don’t try arguing with him, warned Auntie, laughing that odd nervous laugh, . . . he’ll always get the better of you. She wondered why Auntie was proud of Uncle’s arguing—she called him a bull at a gate, a shoot-from-the-hip kind of guy who liked a day’s shooting if it was shooting at the right sort of animal. Auntie didn’t agree with this, she was sure, and said it to make excuses. She loved Uncle but hated him, too. “Hate” was not the right word—she didn’t like him, which to her mind seemed even worse than hate. And she felt the same about her cousins, though they were not Auntie and Uncle’s kids; they were from down the valley and were the kids of another uncle and auntie with whom she had nothing at all in common. She had nothing in common with the uncle and auntie she lived with either, but they had taken her in because they’d never had kids and felt it was their “sacred duty,” and she’d been staying with them when the accident happened and it would give her the strongest sense of belonging and continuity, wouldn’t it. They told her that their family always did the right thing in the best possible way. Of course. Neither of them, even Uncle whose brother had been her father, cared for her parents very much, and in hiding what they felt made it all the more obvious. Auntie created such a fuss about keeping the dust off the picture of her parents she kept on her dresser—one emailed from an unidentified part of a war zone where they had been working with a relief organization of some sort. . . . as NGOs or something. . . . Auntie wasn’t really sure and said she didn’t want to know and that she wasn’t political herself and politics just lead to trouble. Auntie didn’t know or care what an NGO was and saw all stuff that happened overseas that wasn’t holidaying as “political.” One of her cousins dropped into an argument that her parents were spies, and she swore at him and was “told on” and Auntie
grounded her for a weekend. The valley grapevine was a loudspeaker, like rifle shots echoing. And her cousins were informers.

She was thinking a lot about how she did or didn’t “get along with people.” You need to make more of an effort to get on with others, said Auntie. You need to be easier going...I know you’re not strange, said Auntie with that curling in the voice she sort of had, but others might think you are a bit strange. Why does that matter, Auntie? Because you won’t be liked as much as people should like you and you won’t be respected as much as people should respect you...it would be sad if only I ever know how likable you really are. Does Uncle know how likable I really am? Well, to tell the truth, dear, Uncle isn’t that likable to anyone but himself! And then she left, half shook and half caressed her niece’s arm, and said, I am only joking...he’s a lovable if opinionated rogue, your uncle. Okay, she said to Auntie, thinking about why her school friends kept ringing and asking her to sort their problems when they told each other that she was “strange” and then each of them would pass the accusation on to her—maybe they thought her being strange might help them get a different perspective on things...but when she did offer advice they talked over her and ignored her...Just an ear, she thought...and everyone speaks behind everyone else’s back!

A friend came to stay, but not a friend she had invited and not a friend she would have chosen for herself. Rather, Auntie chose the friend from among the children of her own acquaintances down in the city, thinking what was needed was a bit of urban familiarity, something of the world her niece came from. She’s a nice girl and seems a suitable companion for the long weekend, she heard Auntie say to Uncle about the visitor-to-be, and Uncle grunted, Whatever... Do you like skeletons? she asked the girl of almost her own age, thinking to cut through the small talk, as her mum used to say.
What, spooky skeletons...ghost skeletons of dead people?
No, fox skeletons...skeletons of little birds?
Yuk, I don’t think so!
Well, I know how we can make a fox skeleton.
Don’t you mean you know where there is one?
No, I mean we can get lots of bits and put a fox together—all of its bones and then it will come to life.

Stop telling fibs! I will tell my mum and your aunt, I will. That’s sick. You’re really weird and I don’t like it here and didn’t want to come here anyway.

Honestly, it’s the truth. Look, calm down...if we walk to the creek and peek between the big rocks where water will rush when the rains come, you’ll see a leg bone—a back leg bone. And then, nearby, up a tree, a thigh bone.

That’s nasty and there’s something wrong with you.

Why? Auntie says your father used to come up here and go shooting with my uncle and even helped him slaughter a sheep once and he’s a stockbroker! Why then, being the daughter of such a father, would you find reassembling a fox skeleton scary? She hoped her sort of friend would say something smart like, I am not my father’s keeper or Don’t judge the child by the parent...or something along those lines.

But when this weekend friend suddenly hardened her expression, and got her smarts together and said, business-like, That’s normal...this stuff with skeletons is not normal...she knew something really nasty was coming. Then it was said with a sneer: It’s abnormal. My mum said you were a bit disturbed but harmless, and she made me feel a bit sorry for you given your circumstances...and she made me come here. I don’t want to stay overnight in your room—you’re weird and creepy. And I want to go home now, not because I am scared, but because you’re just not...healthy.

She remembered her father used to say—in fact, said very particularly once when they were in another country and staying in a camp with lots of tents and doctors and sick people, You get fixated on things, darling, and that will be both a good thing and a
difficult thing during your life. She was thinking this when she opened the drawer and pulled out the fox skull and said, There... I am telling the truth, and the truth is never creepy or weird or scary or anything, it's just the truth.

Some years ago, after she’d been away overseas with her parents at a time when they were still homeschooling her, before the dreadful boarding school down in the city, they were driving up to visit the aunties and uncles, the cousins and the valley, when a fox ran in front of the car. It happened at the place where the creek entered the brook and they turned to rise into the highlands that were so low, really, when she thought of the mountains she’d seen while traveling. The fox had run in front of the car and her mother swerved to miss it and the car ran off the side of the road into a culvert. They walked to Uncle and Auntie’s house up the hill, and Uncle used a tractor to haul them out. Ridiculous, swerving to miss a fox! he said to his brother loud enough for his sister-in-law to hear, and to embarrass his niece. And why weren’t you driving? he said to his brother, poking him in the chest. Her father said nothing at the time, but later that evening as they were walking out to the car saying their farewells, he said loudly to his wife, You drive, darling. She remembered that now, and thought with satisfaction that there were at least 170 bones in the fox skeleton and that would mean 170 special places.