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extract

'A brave, brilliant book.
I defy anyone to read it and
not come out a changed person.'

MALCOLM KNOX, author of
The Wonder Lover

THE NATURAL WAY OF THINGS

CHARLOTTE WOOD

Everyone's already raving about
The Natural Way of Things

'Charlotte Wood's book is a howl of despair and fury; but it is also that most rare and powerful of creations, a dystopian novel that is perfectly judged, the writing controlled, the narrative engrossing and the language both searing and sensual. You can't shake off this book, it gets under your skin, fills your lungs, breaks your heart. As allegory, as a novel, as vision and as art it is stunning.'

Christos Tsiolkas, author of *Merciless Gods*

'As a man, to read it is as unsettling as receiving one piece of bad news after another. It is confronting. Yet anyone who reads it, man or woman, is going to be left with a sense that a long-hidden truth has been revealed to them. *The Natural Way of Things* is a brave, brilliant book. I would defy anyone to read it and not come out a changed person.'

Malcolm Knox, author of *The Wonder Lover*

'This is a stunning exploration of ambiguities—of power, of morality, of judgment. With a fearless clarity, Wood's elegantly spare and brutal prose dissects humanity, hatreds, our ambivalent capacities for friendship and betrayal, and the powerful appearance—always—of moments of grace and great beauty. The book's ending undid me through the shape of the world it reveals as much as its revisions of escape and survival. It will not leave you easily; it took my breath away.'

Ashley Hay, author of *The Railwayman's Wife*

SO THERE were kookaburras here. This was the first thing Yolanda knew in the dark morning. (That and *where's my durries?*) Two birds breaking out in that loose, sharp cackle, a bird call before the sun was up, loud and lunatic.

She got out of the bed and felt gritty boards beneath her feet. There was the coarse unfamiliar fabric of a nightdress on her skin. Who had put this on her?

She stepped across the dry wooden floorboards and stood, craning her neck to see through the high narrow space of a small window. The two streetlights she had seen in her dream turned out to be two enormous stars in a deep blue sky. The kookaburras dazzled the darkness with their horrible noise.

Later there would be other birds; sometimes she would ask about them, but questions made people suspicious and they wouldn't answer her. She would begin to make up her

own names for the birds. The waterfall birds, whose calls fell tumbling. And the squeakers, the tiny darting grey ones. Who would have known there could be so many birds in the middle of absolutely fucking nowhere?

But that would all come later.

Here, on this first morning, before everything began, she stared up at the sky as the blue night lightened, and listened to the kookaburras and thought, *Oh, yes, you are right*. She had been delivered to an asylum.

She groped her way along the walls to a door. But there was no handle. She felt at its edge with her fingernails: locked. She climbed back into the bed and pulled the sheet and blanket up to her neck. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps she was mad, and all would be well.

She knew she was not mad, but all lunatics thought that.

When they were small she and Darren had once collected mounds of moss from under the tap at the back of the flats, in the dank corner of the yard where it was always cool, even on the hottest days. They prised up the clumps of moss, the earth heavy in their fingers, and it was a satisfying job, lifting a corner and being careful not to crack the lump, getting better as they went at not splitting the moss and pulling it to pieces. They filled a crackled orange plastic bucket with the moss and

took it out to the verge on the street to sell. 'Moss for sale!' they screamed at the hot cars going by, giggling and gesturing and clowning, and, 'Wouldja like ta buy some moss?' more politely if a man or woman walked past. Nobody bought any moss, even when they spread it beautifully along the verge, and Darren sent Yolanda back twice for water to pour over it, to keep it springy to the touch. Then they got too hot, and Darren left her there sitting on the verge while he went and fetched two cups of water, but still nobody bought any moss. So they climbed the stairs and went inside to watch TV, and the moss dried out and turned grey and dusty and died.

This was what the nightdress made her think of, the dead moss, and she loved Darren even though she knew it was him who let them bring her here, wherever she was. Perhaps he had put her in the crazed orange bucket and brought her here himself.

What she really needed was a ciggy.

While she waited there in the bed, in the dead-moss nightdress and the wide silence—the kookaburras stopped as instantly as they began—she took an inventory of herself.

Yolanda Kovacs, nineteen years eight months. Good body (she was just being honest, why would she boast, when it had got her into such trouble?). She pulled the rustling nightdress closer—it scratched less, she was discovering, when tightly wrapped.

One mother, one brother, living. One father, unknown, dead or alive. One boyfriend, Robbie, who no longer believed her (at poor Robbie, the rush of a sob in her throat. She swallowed it down). One night, one dark room, that bastard and his mates, one terrible mistake. And then one giant fucking unholy mess.

Yolanda Kovacs, lunatic. And that word frightened her, and she turned her face and cried into the hard pillow.

She stopped crying and went on with her inventory. Things missing: handbag, obviously. Ciggies (almost full pack), purple lighter, phone, make-up, blue top, bra, underpants, skinny jeans. Shoes. Three silver rings from Bali, reindeer necklace from Darren (she patted her chest for it again, still gone).

Yolanda looked up at the dark window. *Oh, stars. Stay with me.* But very soon the sky was light and the two stars had gone, completely.

She breathed in and out, longed for nicotine, curled in the bed, watching the door.

IN A patch of sunlight Verla sits on a wooden folding chair and waits. When the door opens she holds her breath. It is another girl who comes into the room. They lock eyes for an instant, then look away to the floor, the walls.

The girl moves stiffly in her weird costume, taking only a few steps into the room. The door has closed behind her. The only spare chair is beside Verla's, so Verla gets up and moves to the window. It is too much, that she be put so close to a stranger. She stands at the window, looking out through a fly-spotted pane at nothing. There is bright sunlight coming into the room, but only reflected off the white weatherboards of another building just metres away. She presses her face to the glass but can see no windows anywhere along the length of that building.

She can feel the other girl behind her in the room, staring at her peculiar clothes. The stiff long green canvas smock, the

coarse calico blouse beneath, the hard brown leather boots and long woollen socks. The ancient underwear. It is summer. Verla sweats inside them. She can feel it dawning on the other girl that she is a mirror: that she too wears this absurd costume, looks as strange as Verla does.

Verla tries to work out what it was she had been given, scanning back through the vocabulary of her father's sedatives. Midazolam, Largactil? She wants to live. She tries wading through memory, logic, but can't grasp anything but the fact that all her own clothes—and, she supposes, the other girl's—are gone. She blinks a slow glance at the girl. Tall, heavy-lidded eyes, thick brows, long black hair to her waist is all Verla sees before looking away again. But she knows the girl stands there dumbly with her hands by her sides, staring down at the floorboards. Drugged too, Verla can tell from her slowness, her vacancy—this runaway, schoolgirl, drug addict? Nun, for all Verla knows. But somehow, even in this sweeping glance, the girl seems familiar.

She understands fear should be thrumming through her now. But logic is impossible, all thinking still glazed with whatever they have given her. Like the burred head on a screw, her thoughts can find no purchase.

Verla follows the girl's gaze. The floorboards glisten like honey in the sun. She has an impulse to lick them. She understands that fear is the only thing now that could conceivably save her from what is to come. But she is cotton-headed, too slow for that. The drug has dissolved adrenaline so completely it almost seems unsurprising to be here, with a stranger, in a strange room, wearing this bizarre olden-day costume. She can do nothing to resist it, cannot understand nor question. It is a kind of dumb relief.

But she can listen. Verla strains through her sedation. Somewhere beyond the door is the judder of some domestic motor—a fridge, maybe, or an air-conditioning unit. But the place is stinking hot, primitive. She has no idea where they are.

The room is large and light. There are the two wooden folding chairs—empty, the other girl did not sit—against a wall painted milky green, and a blackboard at the other end of the room with a rolled vinyl blind high up at the top of the board. Verla knows without knowing that if she tugged on the ring dangling from the centre of the blind she would pull down a map of Australia, coloured yellow and orange with blue water all around. The map would be faintly shiny and faintly creased from all the years of rolling up and down, and would somewhere contain the truth of where she has travelled to all those hours. When her mind

is in order again she will be able to think. She will work it out, she will take charge of herself, will demand information and go to the highest authority and not rest and somehow get to the bottom of this fact of appearing to have been abducted right into the middle of the nineteen fucking fifties.

Outside, a single white cockatoo shrieks, closer and louder until the sound of it fills the room like murder. She and the girl lock gazes again, and then Verla peers back outside, up at the slot of sky. The bird flaps across the space between the buildings and then is gone.

She tries again, and this time through her sticky, jellied recollection Verla drags up the looming shape of a vehicle in the night. Is this recall, or dream? A bus. Gleaming yellow in the gloom. Purposeful, firm hands lifting and pushing at her. Waking at some time in the dark, unfamiliar velour of upholstery against her cheek. Headlights illuminating a long, straight, empty road. Did she stand up, swaying? Did she shout, was she pressed down? She rubs her wrist at the dream-memory of handcuff and rail.

Impossible.

Another dream sense—being hauled from the bus, held up, trying to speak, rough hands gripping, tasting dust in the dry and staticky night. She was far from home.

Now here she is, in this room.

Verla listens hard again. It now seems listening might be her only hope. She hears the creak somewhere of a door, a bird's cheeping. There will be a car engine, a plane, a train, something to locate them. There will be footsteps, talking, the presence of people in other rooms. She stares out the window at the weatherboards. There is nothing. The motor jerks—it is a fridge—and clicks off.

Now there is no sound at all but the other girl's slow, solid breathing. She has moved to sit, on one of the chairs. She sits with her legs apart, her forehead in her hands, elbows on her knees. Her black hair a curtain, reaching almost to the floor.

Verla wants to lie down on the floorboards and sleep. But some ancient instinct claws its way to the surface of consciousness, and she forces herself to stay upright. Minutes pass, or hours.

At last the other girl speaks, her voice thick and throaty. 'Have you got a cigarette?'

When Verla turns to her she sees how fresh the girl is, how young. And, again, familiar. It seems to Verla she has known this girl once, long ago. As if Verla had once owned then abandoned her, like a doll or a dog. And here she is, returned, an actor on a stage, and Verla there too, both of them

dressed in these strange prairie puppets' clothes. It could all be hallucination. But Verla knows it isn't. The doll opens her mouth to speak again and Verla says, 'No,' at the same time as the doll-or-dog girl asks, 'Do you know where we are?'

There are voices beyond the door in the hallway and in a sudden rush of clarity Verla realises she should have asked the girl where she has come from just now, what is outside the door, realises she has squandered her last chance to know what is to come. But it is too late. The voices are men's, loud, cheerful, workaday. Just before the door opens the other girl darts across the room to Verla's side, so they stand together facing the door, their backs to the window. As the door opens the two girls' hands find and close over each other.

A man clomps into the room. Sounds of life and movement bloom up the hallway behind him: another man's voice, the sound of moving cutlery, or knives. Delicate metal sounds, instruments clattering into a sink or bowl.

Verla's legs weaken; she might drop. The other girl's grip tightens over hers and Verla is surprised to learn this: *She is stronger than me.*

'Hey,' the man calls mildly, as if he is embarrassed to come across them there. Thick brown dreadlocks fall to his shoulders, framing a hippie boy's vacant, golden face. He shifts in his blue

boiler suit, big black boots on his feet. The suit and the boots look new. He is uncomfortable in them. He stands with his arms folded, leaning back now and then to look out the door, waiting for someone.

He looks at them again, appraising them in their stiff, weird clothes. Curious objects. 'You must feel like shit, I s'pose.' A husky, lazy, pot-smoker's voice. He stretches, raising his arms high above him with his palms together, then dropping from the waist, head touching his knees, palms on the floor, he breathes, long and smoothly. *Salute to the sun*, Verla thinks. Then the man straightens up and sighs again, bored.

'It'll wear off soon, apparently,' he murmurs as if to himself, glancing out the door again.

The girls stay where they are, hands gripping.

Now another boiler suit strides into the room. Bustling, purposeful.

'Right,' he says. 'Who wants to go first?'

PROPPED UP against the windowsill, holding that other girl's hand to stop her falling to the ground, Yolanda felt her throat raw and thick as though something had been forced down her gullet while she slept. It hurt her a little to speak, but she heard herself say, 'I'll go first.'

For what, she didn't know. Only prayed they would crank up the dose of this shit first, and if not she would spit and claw until they did. The man came to her and bent to clip a little lead to a metal ring at the waist of her tunic (she hadn't noticed it until then), which made her let go that chick's hand. For the first time she looked at the other girl properly, standing there against the window with the light haloing her soft reddish-brown curls. Her blue eyes widening in terror, her freckled cheeks paling even whiter than the light outside. Yolanda wanted to say, *I'm the one being taken, you dumb bitch, it isn't happening to you.*

But she knew she was taking the easier path: she would find out what was coming while that girl endured another minute or hour or year in that room, waiting.

When the man sat her in the next room and clipped the other end of her leash to that heavy pedestal chair and then left, she looked around for wires and plugs, for fuck knew what else. She was facing death, maybe torture first. She began screaming for drugs.

When she came to again—she was getting used to the fade, out and in—she became conscious of several things. That it was the stoner with the dreads standing in front, then behind her, and that in his hand flashed a glint of steel. She closed her eyes in the thundering slosh of nausea—and then adrenaline exploded into relief, her innards turning to water, as she understood her throat was not to be slit.

She was getting a haircut.

In the relief she slumped and yes, nearly shat herself but didn't, just went out to it again until it was over. For those moments she felt only the oily, woolly tips of the stoner's dreads brushing against her neck and shoulders as he worked. Felt her head tugged at and released, tugged and released, surrendering to the touch as the scissors ground away at her hair, and she felt each new hank of cooler air arrive on her skin where hair used to be.

In the flooding relief—it was a liquid, heavy and cold and silver like lead, like another kind of drug—she thought, *that poor girl* back there. But also despised her for the way her fear had leaked and spread. *Find someone else's fucking hand to hold*, was what Yolanda thought then, there in the chair, closing her eyes again.

She heard the stoner murmur, 'These scissors are fucken blunt.' And Yolanda swore there were footsteps, skittery female footsteps, behind her on the lino floor. She could smell a woman, a cosmetic female smell, and heard a soft giggle, and then that all sank away and Yolanda with it, until the cold burr of an electric razor began at the nape of her neck, shocking her awake once more.

If there had been any woman she was gone. There was only the stoner again, breathing down over his work, *shaving* her head now, tracing her skull, making wide tracks with the razor on her fine, fine skin. Yolanda gasped aloud at the feel of her own half-shorn head. The razor stopped for a moment, held in mid-air. The stoner looked at her, irritable. He frowned and said, 'Shut up.' And then experimentally, as if testing the word, as if he'd never said it before, had just learned it, added, 'You slut.'

She looked down at the floor. Hair was only hair, as it fell. But there was so much of it, first in long shining straps, then

little glossy black humps so the floorboards were covered in small dark creatures, waiting to be brought to life there on the ground.

When it was done the man stepped back, flexed his shoulders and stretched his arms high above him again, like he'd done in the other room. The razor glinted in his hand—he was bored again, and tiring. He unclipped the leash and shoved at the chair so it jolted forwards, tipping her out. She fell but stumbled, recovering, upright. All the stoner's placidness was gone now; he shoved at her, his strong hands at her back, yelling, 'Next,' as he forced her through a different door and Yolanda went sprawling, exactly as a sheep would totter down a slatted chute into the shocking light and shit and terror of the sheep yard, until she found herself in yet another room. Full of bald and frightened girls.

THE SECOND man, pale and pock-faced, is back in the room with Verla. He turns towards the door. When his hand is on the doorknob he glances back at her and says, 'Coming then?'

Her mouth is dry, she understands nothing. Even the girl led away seemed to understand, or else why say in that flat surly voice that she would go first? What did she know? After the girl let go of her hand, Verla's fingers flew to the windowsill; she must concentrate now to uncurl her grip.

Finally, some instinct rises. She runs her tongue over her teeth, furred like her mind. She hears her own thick voice deep inside her ears when she says, 'I need to know where I am.'

The man stands there, tall and narrow, hand still on the doorknob, surprised. He says, almost in sympathy, 'Oh, sweetie. You need to know *what* you are.'

And he draws from his pocket a slender little lead like the one he attached to the other girl. He steps back across the room towards Verla, and bends to clip the lead to the metal ring at her waist. She smells him: sour, like old milk.

‘Come on,’ he coaxes, as if she is a small dog, and gives a little tug on the leash. She lurches forwards, follows him outside.

On her blurred, faltering trot behind the man she tries to take in her surroundings. *Outback* is the first word that comes to her. Then *rubbish tip*. There are a few faded colourless fibro buildings, jagged black holes punched here and there in the panels. Roofs of mottled grey tin; crooked, hanging gutters. Narrow black slots of windows, paint peeling from frames. There are piles of corrugated-iron sheets and rotting timber, and old petrol drums on their sides. Tangles of wire. There is a rusted tractor, a jumble of metal pipes and prongs with dead white grass spiking through the gaps. No trees. And—she looks everywhere, quickly—other than the corroded, immovable tractor, no cars. No yellow bus.

They keep walking, the great hard leather boots—too big—scraping at her ankles.

‘Hurry up,’ he says, yanking the lead again. They pass a water tank on bricks with the disc of a lid leaning against it. Rust stains bleed from large ragged gouges in the side of

the tank. The man jerks her along. ‘Christ, you’re slow,’ he murmurs, as if she were an elderly animal he is leading. She is thirsty. In this hard sunlight with no trees nearby, the low-slung buildings—one, two, three that she can see, plus the one they have come from—offer no shade. There is a grassy dirt track, trailing off into the white haze beyond the buildings. Otherwise, only the flat white sky and the dusty ground.

It cannot be the outback, where Verla has never been. Has anyone? The outback is supposed to have red earth. This earth beneath her boots is not red. You could not even call it earth; just threadbare ground, grey gravel, dust.

She swelters in these stupid Amish clothes. She says, ‘I’m thirsty.’

‘Shut *up*,’ says the man. He is bored with leading her around like a donkey. You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink. *You can lead a whore to culture* was something said about her in the comments. Verla thinks of the empty water tank; a weird laugh begins rising up from her belly but dries up before it comes out.

Their feet crunch over a patch of stubbly dead grass, past a long concrete block—animal sheds, or disused toilets—then come upon another low pale weatherboard building. Up three rotting wooden steps to a narrow veranda. The man flings

open an ancient flywire door so it bangs against the peeling weatherboards.

'Admissions,' he says. 'Come on.'

Inside is an airless makeshift office. A desk, a pin board stuck with curling bits of paper so old the printing has faded to nothing. He lets go of the lead and shoves Verla towards a green plastic outdoor chair, then sits down heavily in a torn vinyl office chair. He begins riffling through piles of handwritten pages on the desk. Verla tips her head back, breathing in the stifling air, and stares at the ceiling. Delicate webbed balloons of daddy-long-legs spiders dangle, wafting in the air.

The man suddenly snatches up an old-fashioned ink stamp and stamp pad, begins madly stamping. Verla does laugh this time, out loud. None of this can be happening.

The man stops stamping and looks at her patiently, bottom teeth combing his top lip. 'What's funny, Thirsty?'

'*Admissions!* Do you not even have laptops? What the fuck is this place?' Verla's voice is high and confused. The effect of the drugs has almost left her now, but for her terribly dry, dry mouth.

The man only returns to his crazed stamping, snorting a little laugh.

She persists. 'I need a glass of water, and then I need to make a phone call.'

The man sighs and stops rattling paper. It is as if he is in a play, and his job is to make the sound of paper rattling, and Verla has interrupted his performance. He pays stern, close attention to the page he has in his hand before putting it down and smiling. He leans over the table and talks to Verla in a horrible baby voice. 'Did you have your eyes shut on our little walk then, Thirsty? Why do you think I just *showed* you everything?'

Verla's chest constricts. 'I need to speak to my parents.' She does not say *parent*.

He is annoyed now. 'For fuck's sake, Princess. Do you see any phones? Computers? Phone towers outside?'

Disbelief rises in her. 'No,' she says. She means, *I refuse*. At last she is enraged, shoots to her feet to roar—for it is, finally, intolerable, this stupid, stupid game, performance, this *bullshit*—but the man steps nimbly around the table and in an instant plants his big black boot in her stomach so hard she is slammed back against the wall.

While Verla curls, weeping, on the dusty floor, Boncer returns to his desk and his rattling papers.



Charlotte Wood is the author of five novels and a book of non-fiction, and editor of *The Writer's Room Interviews* magazine. Her last novel, *Animal People*, was longlisted for the Miles Franklin award and her other books have been shortlisted for many prizes including the Miles Franklin and the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction.

For more information about Charlotte Wood and *The Natural Way of Things*, visit www.allenandunwin.com

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Two women awakened from a drugged sleep to find themselves imprisoned in a broken-down property in the middle of a desert. Strangers to each other, they have no idea where they are or how they came to be there with eight other girls, forced to wear strange uniforms, their heads shaved, guarded by two inept yet vicious armed jailers and a 'nurse'. The girls all have something in common, but what is it?

What crime has brought them here from the city? Who is the mysterious security company responsible for this desolate place with its brutal rules, its total isolation from the contemporary world? Doing hard labour under a sweltering sun, the prisoners soon learn what links them: in each girl's past is a sexual scandal with a powerful man. They pray for rescue—but when the food starts running out it becomes clear that the jailers have also become the jailed. The girls can only rescue themselves.

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