Thread bare: who I am and who am I.

Adventurers learn here; but do not venture

Yet from their circular continuous sweep

From start to start. Where going is home-turning

Nothing is lost, what’s won is all to keep

Adventurers learn here; but do not venture. Yet from their circular continuous

sweep going is home-turning Nothing is lost, what’s

won Adventurers learn here; but do not venture
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We sometimes underestimate the decision to write. Perhaps because there is so much writing it seems like the most natural thing in the world for someone to wish to add to the general store of it. This issue of *Westerly* was conceived as an attempt to draw attention to the complicated relationship that writers have to their work. We approached a number of writers with the question of how they consider the ethics of writing. We did not offer much more guidance than this, preferring to leave it to each to answer the question in the way it pertained to them and their work. We have been rewarded by a rich variety of responses which show the way that writers negotiate complex, often quite painful, issues as they attempt to put into words the matters that are nearest their hearts and often involve those closest to them.

In a range of essays and articles, and a memoir, as well as in much of the poetry and fiction chosen for this *Westerly*, writers raise and wrestle with, sometimes allusively and sometimes more directly, those ethical issues which underlie many forms of writing. In response to our invitation to contribute to this issue, Alice Pung replied thanking *Westerly* for the opportunity to reflect on her own recent work, in a
way that defines the topic of this *Westerly*. She wrote: ‘I usually get asked to write about food/refugees/culture/identity and belonging, [but] this is the first time a magazine has asked me to consider the ethics of writing, which were the whole point of *Her Father’s Daughter*.’ She goes on: ‘Published “migrant stories” are generally just meant to be a chronological trajectory culminating in success/happy assimilation, but I couldn’t do that in this book and you’ve given me a chance to explain why.’

The question of why it is right to write at all is put into acute relief by the colonial history of Western Australia, something which emerges sharply in the contributions of Blaze Kwaymullina and Kim Scott, as well as those of Tiffany Shellam and Clint Bracknell. Kwaymullina’s evocative image, ‘frozen colonial soldiers’, seems among other things to be a statement about the muteness of the archive in the face of historical atrocity. Scott’s own work in attempting to rebuild the Noongar language, to make it a living language, is a movement against the capacity that language has to kill and render extinct that which does not fit within its purpose. But the problem he addresses for us is even more personal, which is his innermost search for a reader, an imagined reader, for whom his writing is of vital importance. So he has written an open letter, in every sense.

Inasmuch as writers are often trying to express their most personal struggle with truth, writing also strains against the prohibitions that protect intimate life. Rachel Robertson has written a memoir of her life raising her autistic son. In her essay, she considers carefully the question of why this might be a proper thing to do. The embargo on family life is also a question that is touched upon in the reflections offered by Frank Moorhouse, Alice Pung and Rozanna Lilley. Lilley’s mother Dorothy Hewett did not shy away from speaking frankly of family affairs.

Lastly, the very question of writing in the age of ‘new’ media is addressed in two essays. Benjamin Law considers the still evolving ethics of writing in social media, where it comes much closer in both tone and immediacy to actual speech and has become a continuous
source of problems in the current age. Against this we have the account by Alison and Graham Kershaw who have painstakingly produced a book via the almost obsolete technologies of the age of print, setting the type and hand-pressing an edition of West Australian poetry.

Delys Bird and Tony Hughes-d’Aeth

An Apology

Westerly editors wish to apologise for the errors that crept into the Randolph Stow poems that opened the last issue, 57:1. In ‘Miss Laura Wellborn’s Song’, in the line at the end of the first stanza, ‘drop’ should read ‘dropped’. In ‘Mrs Chiffle’s Song’, in two places, the ‘stars in ladies’ eyes’ have been referred to as ‘the starts in ladies’ eyes’. In the fourth stanza, second line, ‘the’ should be deleted, so that the line reads ‘see melons half the size of man.’, and in the penultimate stanza, third line, ‘lamingtons’ should be capitalised.
I had written you a letter which I had, for want of better...

But I am not writing to Clancy of the Overflow, even though my desired reader is similarly remote and isolated. Instead, I want to send a message of encouragement and support to a prison inmate, an Aboriginal man and—as we say—a Wirlomin brother.

It’s probably unwise—let alone ethical—to use his name or that of the prison that holds him.

Initially, I thought of writing an open letter beginning, ‘Dear X’ but, since I’ve already mentioned Clancy of the Overflow, let’s call my ideal addressee Clancy (junior). I’d realised that prison staff would probably be the first to read any private letter to Clancy, whereas an open letter would at least allow for other readers to potentially enlist allies. And of course, eventually, Clancy would still get to read it.

I gave up on the letter, but not on the idea of writing something about, and indirectly to, a very special reader. Writing is such an intimate form of communication that every reader is important. However, on this occasion I intend to emphasise just one reader in particular and it is unlikely to be you. That may seem offensive

A whisper in stone

Kim Scott
enough, but—even worse—I will also be shamelessly boasting. For all of this I apologise profusely.

However, as a fair-skinned Aboriginal person, it’s not for me to apologise for my concerns being reduced to:

a whole new fashion in academia, the arts and professional activism to identify as Aboriginal (Bolt, 2009)

I also can’t apologise for sympathising with those of whom it is said: they write for their conquerors, write in the coloniser’s language and write for an audience of which their home community is but a tiny minority. In such a context even such the success of publication, let alone the winning of literary prizes can be strangely debilitating. ‘Let us mistrust applause,’ says Galeano. ‘At times we are congratulated by those who consider us innocuous.’ (1988, p. 116)

All of which might help explain why a reader like Clancy matters so much.

Last time Clancy was on parole he called my name across a busy street, and I turned and waited as he danced through the honking traffic. When he arrived he named a book of mine and said, ‘I thank you for that book and your journey and you make me proud. I want to shake your hand, Kim Scott my brother.’

I made him proud?

I have already apologised for boasting.

There’s a story from the early days of the colonisation of Fremantle. An Aboriginal man (a Noongar, in this part of the world) was locked up. Under cover of darkness, the Noongar’s family and friends crept up to the thick stonewalls and knocked and tapped and scratched on the stone to communicate with him. Chased away, they sang their voices across the wall to comfort him in his isolation. I’d like to think reader and writer can do that too: share words of comfort not only
across razor and steel-capped stone walls but also across the vast, yawning chasm that sometimes divides us.

Clancy came to his father’s funeral handcuffed and chained to a security guard. His children wept to see him. They hung from his shoulders and hugged him and he had to shift his arms awkwardly this way and that to keep the shackles away from their bodies.

One at a time, people walked to the space where they could face the mourning crowd and recount their memories of the old man. Many sobbed as they did so. I saw Clancy’s frustration, saw him lift his head like a chained dancer measuring his leap...

Handcuffs held out in front of him, he pivoted and, jerking the chain between him and the security guard, walked to the room’s power spot. Walked? What is the word to say how he moved? It was too tentative and too graceful to be called a strut or swagger. He hesitated for an instant between each step and held his cuffed hands before him as if the cuffs and looping chain were the stuff of ceremony. The guard, surrounded by Clancy’s children, meekly followed as the other prison staff impassively watched from where they stood among Clancy’s brothers.

All eyes were on him as he stood at the small lectern and began calling out names of those who had been important to his father. Then: ‘Kim Scott, my brother, dad loved you and what you and him were doing, our history and language.’

Yes, I am boasting, telling you this proudly. Clancy is a reader who matters.

Clancy’s father and I spent a lot of time together in the first decade of this century. Clancy’s father, Lomas, and aunties Hazel and Audrey Brown offered me stories and sounds indigenous to our ancestral country, and took me to places from where those same stories sprang. We joined their words with fragments in the archives, linguists’ word lists and transcriptions and, gathering with other members of
a ‘community of descendants’, began to breathe life into them. ‘Too sad and strange,’ someone said. ‘We mostly only ever get together like this at funerals nowadays.’

We had sent the results of our work to Clancy, and he began sharing his growing body of Aboriginal (Noongar, in this instance) language and stories with a few other inmates. For over a year Clancy, with the help of another long-term Noongar inmate, held ‘classes’ attended by other, mostly younger inmates. They came to be called ‘culture and healing workshops’, and had the support of senior staff at the prison.

Clancy’s father was a generous man who grieved for what he had not been able to leave his children, though of course Clancy carries something of his father’s legacy of being a black man in a little country town, even after the arrival of citizenship (or ‘drinking rights’). It’s a legacy that includes the experience of drinking with a farmer at the end of the week you’ve spent slaving to clear your ancestral country for him, and then being arrested as you enter town. Imagine it, if you will: the policeman locks you up, grins through the bars, talks about the weekend he’ll spend with your wife.

Clancy and his brothers asked me to be a pallbearer at their father’s funeral. One of the brothers—Geoff—was so free a man that he had no Centre-link number, no bank account, no fixed address. I relied upon Geoff in many ways, and was honoured to be one of those carrying his father’s body that very last time.

Several months after the burial we held a workshop in the prison to generate some illustrations for some bilingual stories we’d put together. The prison allowed Clancy to select inmates to participate, most of whom had been attending the classes he had organised. One inmate was invited because, although ‘one of us’, he was particularly estranged from clan and country.

For two days inmates and family from outside the prison walls shared the ancient language and stories of their ancestors, those who had created human society in this part of the world. (Diamond 1998, p. 321)
At the end of our time together, Clancy addressed the group.
‘Last bit of time, as you know,’ he said, ‘I’ve been in solitary.’
He’d spent the time reading, he said, and then listed all my books.
Yes, again, I am boasting.

Wiping his eyes as people prepared to leave, Clancy said, ‘What you doing to me, Kim? I got a reputation to look after in here.’

Those who remained when we left the prison were entrusted with finishing the illustrations. A few days later the inmate who’d been invited because he was ‘lost’ asked Clancy what was in it for him. How much money was being made, anyway?

‘I nearly hit him,’ said Clancy. ‘You don’t know who you are, I told him. That’s why we’re here, and we’re angry. This is our old people talking, and this is for when we get out of here.’

‘Healing’ and ‘identity’ and ‘culture’ are words he uses.

Clancy talks about how he must control his anger, his drug-taking and violence. His short-fuse lets other inmates, and security officers too, goad him into a reaction that gets him back in solitary and delays his release.

We had left some art materials behind after the workshop—good paper, paints, good quality brushes—to finish off the job. Next day all that material had disappeared from the storeroom. Weeks later a security officer told Clancy it had been replaced, and held out a paintbrush.

‘A 50c brush,’ Clancy told me. ‘We both knew it wasn’t like what was left for us, not proper brushes. He wanted me to be grateful. I didn’t say nothing. I let it go.’

Clancy has spent a lot of time in solitary. They want you isolated from society, he says, that’s why we’re here. And then they isolate you again. He was in solitary for two weeks. But it didn’t work. ‘I wasn’t alone,’ he said, and named characters and people I’d written about. ‘Man, I was with all my family and friends in that book you and Aunty Hazel did. Bobby too.’

Clancy choreographed dances from some of the stories we shared, and he and other inmates performed at the prison’s NAIDOC celebrations. That made people proud, too.
Clancy’s paintings were propped at centre stage for the launch of our bilingual picture-books. Afterwards and elsewhere, we sat around a flickering campfire. Clancy was at a distance, but is intrinsic to these pulsing, concentric circles.

And my shameless boasting? An Aboriginal person who would like to be inclusive of his other heritages, I am trying to speak of what it means to be a descendant of the people who first created human society in our part of the world, and trying to tell a story of recovery.

I told Clancy of how Kayang Hazel made us stop the car at the edge of the bitumen road, beside an over-cleared paddock. Despite needing a walking-stick she crossed the wire fence and led us across the shifting soil to a rocky outcrop. She pointed, there: a series of neat circles in the rock that grew small, then larger again. ‘Yongar and Miak’, she said, and told the old story of Kangaroo and Moon. Kangaroo complains of inevitable death, and how his bones will turn grey and crack in the sun as the hill grows around them. And Moon? Moon gets very sick and wastes away, but doesn’t die: the moon always returns, and grows strong again.

It is both a responsibility and a privilege to stand beside where that story is imprinted in stone, and hear its ancient utterance. Either side of a stone wall capped with razor wire, at least one reader and writer lean forward, listening, hoping.

Works Cited


In 1826 a British military garrison was set up at King George Sound, the modern site of Albany, Western Australia. This British presence on Mineng country has been commonly narrated by historians and the Western Australian community as a ‘friendly frontier’ where the passive and peaceful Mineng and British newcomers lived in peace and friendship. However, this conciliation narrative is currently being destabilised in a variety of ways by the Albany Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, while historians continue to inscribe the ‘friendly’ trope, albeit ambiguously.

By continually re-inscribing the ‘friendly frontier’ narrative and replicating imperialist representations of Aboriginal people we keep repeating the ways of the colonisers. This is particularly troubling when friendship tropes or ‘ritual gestures’ promoting peace and conciliation were often in tandem with Indigenous dispossession and violence. Such constructions of past Aboriginal behaviour can be read as a process of ‘othering’ by European explorers and settlers and were central to the colonising process. As Australian Indigenous
Tiffany Shellam

scholar Pat Dudgeon has written: ‘In addition to establishing that the colonised were inferior in every way, the process of colonisation also determined who [Aboriginal people] were and what their realities were (12).’ Dudgeon suggests that Indigenous scholars recognise that even the most progressive texts about them still have power to distort them, to make them ‘other’, and therefore, she argues, an anti-colonial approach to research is the only way to avoid further oppressive stereotyping by non-Indigenous scholars (13). This research issue is present in other settler colonies: Ingrid Huygens has offered a decolonising model for researchers that has been a process of reconciliation between Pakeha and Maori in Aotearoa New Zealand. She states that Pakeha have made adjustments to their research practice in response to Maori analysis. A major part of the decolonising process, Huygens argues, is revisiting history and undertaking collective cultural work.

Doing Indigenous history raises many methodological and ethical issues due to the nature of the colonial archive. While traditionally archives were viewed by historians as storehouses of historical ‘facts’, they are now understood as sites of knowledge construction, where information about the colonised was made by the colonisers, within an unequal power relationship (Stoler). Archival sources were almost always constructed by the colonial power – foreign observers of the Aboriginal world. Asymmetry in written sources is a challenge faced by all historians. The nature of the textual record inevitably constructs colonisers as initiators and Indigenous people as those acted upon. Searching for Indigenous people’s presence and agency in texts is challenging but not impossible with counter-colonial readings of traditional archives. Ethnographic history—an epistemology and a method—a ‘knowing and a doing’, with its focus on actions construed in context and in their significance to protagonists rather than as causes or outcomes, is the most useful method for countering the shadowed and deformed actions and meanings of indigenous people in the lens of colonial discourse (Douglas, ‘Doing Ethnographic History …’, 100–101).
In this paper I attempt a counter-colonial approach to this past through a critical reading of the colonial archive which produced this narrative. I explore the creation of the friendly frontier trope at King George Sound, how it was re-worked and expressed and how it contributes to the Albany community’s imagination about its past and present. In re-visiting the early European texts that represented and circulated this friendship trope, and through conversations with Noongar people from the Albany region, alternative emotions about this past are revealed. Taking its lead from Indigenous scholars, this counter-colonial approach raises the possibility of a decolonising history of early cross-cultural contact in the south west.

The garrison at King George Sound had four commandants who oversaw the settlement between 1826 and 1831, when the settlement came under Swan River jurisdiction and open to free settlement. The last commandant, Collet Barker, had an intimate and unusually close relationship with a young, single Mineng man named Mokaré. Barker wrote down a conversation that he had with Mokaré in June 1830 about the first arrival of white people at King George Sound. Mokaré explained to him that ‘blackfellows knew nothing about them or their reasons for coming and were suspicious of them. When they found they had no ill intentions, but on the contrary were kind and friendly, they readily became friends (‘shook hands’) with them and would always continue so’. This story by Mokaré must have been handed down from his family and countrymen because he was not born when his ancestors experienced their first encounters with whites. The Mineng had over three decades of encounters with European voyagers from 1791 before the garrison was set up – and it was during this pre-settlement period when Mokaré and his countrymen began to be typecast as ‘friendly natives’ by explorers and seafarers.

Revisiting these early encounters between the Mineng and European voyagers enables us to get to the roots of the ‘friendly frontier’ trope. In her work on conciliation narratives around the empire, Penelope Edmonds has revealed the benefits of undertaking genealogies of the friendship ‘motif’ in inter-racial encounters, and
the stories that further cemented them into strong tropes of peace and friendship. Voyagers’ textual representations of these encounters, particularly by Matthew Flinders in 1801 and Phillip Parker King in 1821, were frequently reinforced by subsequent visitors to the region. Such predecessor texts were invaluable for the garrison commandants in their expectations and characterisation of ‘native’ behaviour. They were read by Europeans as manuals or mental models for how encounters were to be played out with a particular indigenous group. Flinders made King George Sound his first landing place in his circumnavigation of the continent in December 1801. He spent three weeks there and several local men engaged with him, coming to his tent and receiving presents each day. Flinders wrote that they ‘behaved peaceably’. One old man included himself in a military drill on the beach.

Maritime hydrographer Phillip Parker King was employed to follow in Flinders’ wake, and between 1818 and 1822 King visited King George Sound on three separate occasions. However, it was not until his second visit in December 1821, that he and his crew met with the Mineng. King stayed for two weeks, allowing for a long and intimate encounter. Descriptions of these daily engagements by King and his botanist Allan Cunningham cemented the Mineng as a ‘friendly’ and ‘peaceful’ tribe in the growing European narrative about this place and its inhabitants. King was the explorer most responsible for this depiction of the Mineng people, influencing later visitors and armchair travellers.

In their descriptions of the Mineng, King and Cunningham utilised strong tropes of ‘friendly’ native behaviour. This was a common construction in voyager texts and often corresponded to the way in which indigenous groups were categorised in racial terms. For example, Bronwen Douglas has noted Flinders’ ‘relief at approved conduct by indigenous people to positive depictions of their essential character or appearance and explicit distancing from a standard compendium of supposedly negro [and therefore negative] traits’ (‘The Lure of Texts …’, 17). Closely linked to the representation
of ‘friendly’ was intelligent. Indigenous intelligence was judged by European explorers by how effectively indigenous people could communicate or comprehend the Europeans, their confidence in the European’s presence, their desire to trade with them as well as their physical appearance and customs.

On first sighting nine Mineng men in Princess Royal Harbour, Cunningham noted that these men laid aside their spears ‘in order’, he thought, ‘to reassure us of their peaceful constitution’. While King noted his weariness as they rowed closer to this group, he also acknowledged his expectation that these people would be ‘amicably disposed’, given Flinders’ descriptions of them as friendly. When their whaleboat reached the shallows of Oyster Harbour, King recorded that three men ‘took their seats in it as unceremoniously as a passenger would in a ferry-boat’ (122). Cunningham also noted their ease, writing: ‘They jumped on our boat with…liveliness of joy, which is usually manifested upon meeting old esteemed friends’. Cunningham described the men as ‘fearless’ and ‘friendly’, writing that even though they were ‘within the power of strangers, they exhibited the most cheerful disposition, surrounding us with their songs…’. Three men were rowed out to the brig, King noting that they were ‘totally free from timidity or distrust’ (122).

By the time these men had entered the British world of the brig, King referred to them as ‘our friends’. Two of the three men were rowed back ashore, but the third man stayed. While on board he participated in an intimate exchange. He was fed by the crew, his beard was shaved and he swapped his kangaroo skin cloak for a pair of trousers and a red check shirt. This man was singled out for special attention by King and his crew. Cunningham wrote of him: ‘One native present who (is shaved clean) has spent the whole of his time (in the day) aboard and who really appear’s [sic] attach’d to the Expedition, was truly remarkable for his mild manners, great native intelligence, and special communicative dispositions, and so much had he engaged the esteem of Lieut. [King and his crew] that they (without consent from him), gave him the hackneyed name of
‘Jack’, to which title he soon answered on all occasions. King also designated special treatment for Jack, as a reward for his friendly and superior behaviour: ‘The natives’, he wrote, ‘were not permitted to come on board until four o’clock in the afternoon, excepting Jack’ (130–31) who came and went as he pleased. Jack was referred to as the ‘friendly Indian’ by the crew and was described by King as ‘certainly’ the most intelligent ‘native of the whole tribe’(134). The naming of Jack and descriptions of his actions epitomise European voyagers’ hopes and expectations of ‘friendly native’ behaviour.

The brig was anchored in the narrow entrance to Oyster Harbour for the duration of the visit, with groups of Mineng assembled on the opposite shores. Each day groups from each shore were given turns to be taken out to the brig. While on board, or whenever a whaleboat reached the shore, a vigorous programme of trade began. Cunningham wrote of this trade: ‘The natives had been exceedingly merry on board, and thro’ the medium of Biscuits our people had made some considerable Exchanges of spears…[and]stone hammers…which they cheerfully gave up, assuming us thereby of the confidence restored in us’ (26th Dec 1821). Here Cunningham draws a connection between Aboriginal willingness to trade with their trust for these seaborne strangers. However, he and King did not reciprocate that trust: King judged that the exchanged items were made just for trade purposes, while Cunningham likened the items to ‘Jews’’ Hatchets and only made for sale.

Cunningham and King constantly described the Aboriginal men as friendly and peaceful. Cunningham referred to them as ‘familiar people’, comparing and categorising them alongside other indigenous groups he had encountered elsewhere. After five days with them he wrote: they are ‘a hail in the definition of strange natives’ (25th Dec 1821). In polar tension with this friendly discourse, however, was the constant undercurrent of fear; these explorers frequently expressed
anxiety about their safety and security while in the company of these supposedly amicable men, always noting how close they were to the safety of their vessel, how many guns they were carrying and whether they were in range of gunfire from the brig. On their departure from King George Sound Mr Bedwell took ‘the precaution’ of buying all the spears on offer to avoid any violence as they set sail. The frequent descriptions of friendly and peaceful natives in the explorers’ journals sit uneasily alongside the currents of fear and insecurity. The fear reveals how this friendship was forced or imagined by the explorers, and is telling of the uneasiness they felt in the presence of the Mineng. Friends can betray and be betrayed, strangers cannot.

King’s typecasting of the Mineng as a passive and peaceable people had significant repercussions when the garrison settlement was established five years later by Major Edmund Lockyer in December 1826. To prepare himself for meetings with the local people Lockyer read the journals of Flinders and King. From my reading of Lockyer’s journals it is clear that he had King’s encounters firmly in his mind when he first met with the Mineng. His first meeting with this group is heavily shaped and informed by King and Cunningham.

Lockyer called out to two men and a little boy and they approached him. The younger man signalled that he was keen to go on board the brig, which Lockyer allowed. In his ‘fair copy’ journal Lockyer wrote that this young man was later named Jack. An addition to this sentence is in a red ink and it reveals that Jack’s naming was from a ‘supposition that he is the Jack of Capt King’; a later thought acknowledging that Lockyer’s expectation came from the texts of this previous visitor. King’s ‘Jack’ was also ‘friendly’ and had been keen to board King’s brig. Lockyer recorded that Jack answered to the ‘native name of Monga’—a name Lockyer found in the vocabulary that King collected during his third visit to King George Sound. Lockyer would later discover, however, that several men answered to the name ‘Monga’ and so he finally settled on the native name ‘Mangril’ for Jack, although he continued to call this young man Jack (Rough Copy). Lockyer also referred to Jack as his ‘friend’ after
his first meeting with him. In further repetition of King’s encounter, Lockyer’s Jack is clothed in a shirt and trousers and given gifts by the crew while on board the brig, and, just like his namesake from King’s encounter, Jack had a particular position dictated by Lockyer. Lockyer choreographed him in his journal as acting out of step from his countrymen.

**Shaking Hands**

It is not clear how or when the practice of hand-shaking began at King George Sound, but by the time Lockyer arrived in 1826, it was an action that the Mineng instigated in their first meetings with him. Lockyer recorded that a group of men ‘came and exchanged the usual salutation of shaking hands’ (Rough Copy), and that they ‘appear to understand [it] to be friendly’ (Fair Copy). The gesture might have been usual and friendly to Lockyer, and he assumed the Mineng used it with the same social meaning as he did. However, not long after this peaceful handshake occurred, one of the prisoners in Lockyer’s settlement party was speared by this group of ‘so-called’ friendly men (Shellam, ‘Making Sense …’).

When the fourth commander, Collet Barker arrived three years later the hand-shake was a clear and powerful symbol, used in the same symbolic fashion by both the Mineng and the British. To the newcomers it had become something more than a polite greeting. Mokaré, who shook hands with many people in the settlement, also talked about shaking hands with neighbouring Aboriginal groups as a way of explaining to Barker that he was at peace with his neighbours.

Seeing the Mineng participating in this familiar ritual, and from the publication of King’s *Narrative* in 1827, European visitors to King George Sound wrote and talked about these Aborigines and transferred to other colonies an image of ‘friendly natives’ (‘Emigration Advertisement …’). Indeed, the focal point of Robert Dale’s now famous immigration propaganda sketch, *Panoramic View of King George’s Sound, Part of the Colony of Swan River*, is of a
soldier shaking hands with a Mineng man. However, the handshake ritual held more meanings than just friendship. It was a complex symbol at King George Sound and its absence could signal animosity; withholding your hand could denote disapproval. Barker refused to shake hands with certain Mineng to show them his disappointment with their behaviour, particularly during violent encounters with the Mineng’s hostile neighbours, the ‘Wills’ people. Nakinah, Mokaré’s elder brother also used the hand-shaking in a symbolic fashion. After the death of their youngest brother, Taragon, Nakinah avoided shaking hands with Dr Davis, the medical assistant, whom he thought was in some way responsible for the death of his brother (Barker, throughout March 1830). The hand-shake ritual, images of which have become the defining trope of this frontier, revealed tensions and animosity as well as friendship and suggests how this fragile relationship was managed.

**History and Inscription**

The ‘Friendly Frontier’ historiography has been guided by the scholarship of Neville Green who used the term in the title of an article in 1983. This ‘friendly frontier’ was framed in opposition to the more explicitly violent encounters in the settlements further north where notorious racial conflicts occurred at York and in Perth (Austen and Green). Green argued that, ‘the violent frontier had been held in check [at King George Sound] because the relationship between the Aborigines and Europeans was based on mutual respect and trust’ (‘Friendly Frontier’, 72). Just as predecessor texts influenced later voyagers, Green’s own preconceptions are present in his narrative. In Green’s history ‘Jack’ from both King and Lockyer’s encounters not only become the same person (as Lockyer also imagined), Jack now becomes Mokaré. Whereas ‘Jack’ was the ‘friendly native’ during the exploration period, ‘Mokaré’ is Jack in the historiography. Acclaimed Noongar novelist, Kim Scott, also conflates these men in his novel *That Deadman Dance*: Wunyeran’s character, is based on Mokaré and
Jack as described by King and Lockyer (79–81 in particular). There is no evidence in the historical record besides the trope of ‘friendly’ to suggest these men were the same person.

Following Green’s history, historian Bill Ferguson wrote admiringly of Mokaré stating that ‘he was a peacemaker...and all Australians of the southwest, both white and black, owe him a debt. Without him, their history would have been a great deal bloodier’. Such comments have helped shape the community’s understanding of their past. Other historians who have helped build this narrative include John Mulvaney and Don Garden, however, they focus more on the enlightened ‘native policies’ of the commandants, rather than the trope of the friendly natives.

The ‘friendly frontier’ is now celebrated publicly in a memorial of Mokaré in which he is remembered as the ‘Man of Peace’. A life size bronze statue of Mokaré was erected in 1997 as part of a Reconciliation project by residents of the Albany community and funded by Aboriginal Affairs and the Albany Council. The plaque beneath the statue reads ‘in recognition of the role that Mokaré played in the peaceful co-existence between Noongar people and the first European settlers’. This memorial inscribes the friendly frontier publicly, appropriating Mokaré into the colonial British and postcolonial Australian worlds. As I have already mentioned, this peaceful past has been frequently compared to the more violent interracial history of Swan River; and peaceful Mokaré is contrasted with Yagan – who is memorialised in a statue in Perth as a more powerful, aggressive Noongar warrior. In stark opposition to Mokaré’s gentle pose, Yagan is unmistakably a warrior, spear held high above his head. While the memorial acknowledges Mokaré, the Mineng and the Europeans are separated in the public inscription of this narrative. Mokaré’s memorial stands alone in a park while a few kilometres away a replica of Lockyer’s brig, ironically named *The Amity*, dominates the harbour foreshore.

Just as the theme of peace and friendship went hand in hand with fear and insecurity in King and Lockyer’s encounters with the Mineng,
Mokaré’s memorial sits uneasily as a symbol of reconciliation in this rural centre. Two months after the memorial was erected it was vandalised in overtly racist symbols. Swastikas and the letters ‘KKK’ were drawn on the figure, battery acid was poured onto it and the spear was snapped from Mokaré’s hand. The local papers reported the vandalism, blaming racist youths for the outrage. However, the irony of the violent performance against the ‘Man of Peace’ was not publicly acknowledged.

Conversations with members of the community have revealed further tensions with the enduring ‘friendly frontier’ narrative. Mineng man, Oscar Colbung told me of the ambivalence felt by some members of the Albany community about Mokaré’s reconciliation statue. A peaceful warrior? What did that say about Mineng resistance, he pondered. Kim Scott suggested a similar sentiment to me in 2008 when we were discussing our likeminded historical projects: ‘If this is how it was then what a failure we have become’. Oscar Colbung wanted to see a shift in the narrative to focus on his ancestor Colbung who showed more resistance to the British who were camped on his country (Personal conversation, Albany, 2008). Scott suggested a new approach for non-Indigenous historians, like myself, who are engaged in cross cultural history-making: work-shopping archival stories with descendants as a way of value adding and including an otherwise neglected contemporary indigenous perspective. He explains that ‘cross-referencing the archives against the views of members of a community that has relied on oral rather than archival history can, if nothing else, help ‘shake up’ and ‘unsettle’ the sureity of the archives’ (‘A Noongar Voice, …’ 103). Another way of engaging with Nyungar knowledge has been suggested by Nyungar scholar Len Collard. He has combined archival stories of early encounters with his own reimagining’s, informed by Nyungar cultural knowledge. He offers stories that have their ‘origins in Nyungar accounts and in that sense’, he says, ‘are true’. These methods should be taken seriously by non-indigenous academics as they complicate the colonial narrative in interesting ways. (Collard and Palmer, 182).
The friendly frontier trope has recently been used in a more complex way by historians and writers. In 2005 the Single Noongar Land Claim was handed down by Justice Wilcox. This landmark claim covered the entire south-west portion of WA, including Albany. A historical report on the claim was published as a book in 2009: *It’s Still in My Heart, This is My Country: The Single Noongar Claim*. The authors of this report, the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, John Host and Chris Owen, find the friendly frontier narrative a complex one and they are torn between embracing and discarding it. The intimacy of some of the frontier relationships, particularly between Collet Barker and Mokaré, were vital for the land claim to go ahead: as close confidant Mokaré told Barker (and Barker recorded) stories about ‘traditional law, custom and Aboriginal rights and interests in land’ (Host and Owen, 64). Without such records this proof of Noongar connections to land could not have been established. However, the authors also had to prove that this close friendship ‘did not signify a renunciation of traditional ways’ (62). Further destabilisation of this narrative is witnessed in *That Deadman Dance*. Scott beautifully fictionalises his ancestral country as he writes about the relationships between Mineng and the British at the settlement. While Scott acknowledges that the inter-racial friendships on this frontier are what fascinate him about this past, he steers his story beyond the simple tropes of ‘peace’ and ‘friendship’ and writes about the nineteenth-century Mineng as being ‘postmodern people’, a term he thinks fitting of a people who sought benefits for themselves, were innovative and creative in the new context in which they found themselves; ‘a people so sure of their place in the world that they welcomed the new’ (Keenan, 26).

My own history of this place, *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George’s Sound*, covers the same historical events and characters as Scott’s and offers similar representations. Rather than reducing these Noongar people to passive and friendly caricatures, I read their actions as entrepreneurial,
utilising the British and all they had to offer, to their own advantage; violence, humour and moments of danger are also part of the story. I reflect on how the close and ‘delicate’ friendship contributed to the deaths of the Mineng—the close living, the sharing of space, food and clothes led to the spreading of disease and had a devastating effect on the Mineng. The now iconic hand-shaking ritual was also a dangerous act as bacteria in the droplets from coughing and sneezing passed from one hand to the other.

This essay has attempted to construct a genealogy of the friendship trope at King George Sound in an attempt to critique the imperialist nature of its origins. While Mokaré’s memorial and other public expressions of this narrative show a destabilising of this story, by focusing on the journals of early explorers I suggest that even in its construction the friendship trope has always been unstable; the emotion of fear frequently expressed in the same breath as friendship. Revealing this instability, and by suggesting other ways of framing this story of encounter, I am suggesting a historiographical shift which moves away from the colonists’ constructions of Aboriginal ‘behaviour’. Indigenous scholars, such as Pat Dudgeon, point to meaningful ways of engaging with indigenous perspectives; and discussions with Kim Scott and Oscar Colbung have encouraged me to be attentive to contemporary indigenous perspectives as well as the entrepreneurship of the Mineng in the colonial archive.

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In her first book, *Shaking Hands on the Fringe*, Tiffany Shellam examines early historical incidents of cross-cultural interaction in the southwest of Western Australia (WA). Shellam focuses directly on the once fledgling colonial outpost of King George’s Sound, known today as the City of Albany. The frontier history of this area has often been characterised by historians as ‘friendly’ (71) due to the relative ‘peace’ in the region, compared to other, more overtly violent sites of colonisation in Australia. Shellam critiques this oversimplification, suggesting that the term ‘peaceful’ conceals more about the past than it reveals.

Like Shellam, I believe words such as ‘violent’, ‘peaceful’ and ‘friendly’ do little to help us understand the complex experiences of people in the past or, indeed, our own experiences in the present. I was born in Albany and am a descendant of both European newcomers and Aboriginal people from the south coast of WA who are known collectively as Noongar. Accordingly, I find the historical period Shellam examines and its enduring legacy to be of particular interest. Indeed, the *story* of early cross-cultural interaction in Albany has shaped, and will continue to shape, the way Noongar and
non-Noongar people in the region view themselves today. However, rather than construct an overarching narrative, Shellam reads archival sources closely, analysing a series of specific episodes in the early 1800s, and attempts to decipher the intentions and motivations of both the Noongar and colonial participants.

Neville Green (1989) has published historical research on the Albany area using many of the primary sources Shellam draws upon. However, *Shaking Hands on the Fringe* is firmly within the tradition of ethnographic historical writers like Greg Dening (2004) and Inga Clendinnen (2005), who have each considered moments of contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people elsewhere. *Shaking Hands on the Fringe* was adapted from Shellam’s PhD thesis, and the methodological discussion included in the book may seem too ‘academic’ or unnecessary for some readers. Even so, Shellam’s direct writing style and the unique nature of the historical episodes she reconstructs makes for very engaging reading, especially for one familiar with the coastal landscape of Albany.

From its instigation as a military garrison in 1826 to 1931, when it became part of the Swan River Colony, the small outpost known today as Albany was very isolated, and aware of its vulnerable position relative to its Noongar landlords. In this historical context, Shellam reveals Noongar people’s propensity to take to the sea with British sailors, to appropriate new cultural forms and technologies, and to form alliances with colonial newcomers. The confidence, talent and initiative of such individuals is intriguing, especially in contrast to more readily available interpretations, which would position them as, alternatively, passive victims or resistance warriors. As an example of Noongar ‘agency’ and willingness to use opportunities offered by newcomers for the benefit of their own community, Shellam argues that Noongar people valued ships, as they provided new means of ‘extending kin networks and enhancing geographic knowledge and perspectives of country’ (177).

Shellam explicitly seeks to include interpretations on historical events from Aboriginal perspectives. I share her curiosity, and also
understand the difficulty of ‘grasping something of the ways in which past people made sense of their worlds: that is, their cosmology and its pragmatic enactment in actions and behaviours’ (22). Shellam’s method of using archival texts written by colonisers to reconstruct the meaningful actions of Aboriginal people of the past is not without flaw, notably in its reliance on the values and interpretive skills of the researcher. Many would advocate Aboriginal oral history as a valuable additional resource for understanding the motivations and thinking of Aboriginal figures in the past, although others would concede Shellam’s point when she dismisses oral history, reasoning as follows:

The great distance in time from the present and the subsequent dispossession, disruption and dispersion of Aboriginal communities in south-western Australia mean that modern Aboriginal memories of particular events during the period in question are fragmentary or non-existent (20).

However, given that even ‘fragmentary’ memories add helpful material unavailable elsewhere it seems unwise to completely dismiss oral history. While privileged knowledge may not necessarily be granted by membership of a specific ethnic group, ‘being Noongar’ can bring a sense of responsibility to ancestors, a contemporary ‘community of descendants’ and a shared cultural heritage. Additionally, many Aboriginal people find the archives extremely marginalising, and believe some of the most important truths are not necessarily found in historical records.

Shellam states that both the Noongar and British worlds of the 1800s are foreign to her, apart from linguistic similarity with the British (22). This linguistic difference, reliance on colonial accounts and the exclusion of Noongar oral history results in a few questionable suggestions. After discussing a range of possible alternatives from the archives, Shellam decides to ‘name’ the Aboriginal people of King George’s Sound encountered in the archives as ‘Kin Ya-nup’ (32).
Many people living in Albany today would claim connection to those historical Noongar, but not the name *King Ya-nup*, and so by selecting it for the people she is researching Shellam effectively distances them, and herself, from the contemporary situation. This is problematic for a Noongar community living in Albany today and seeing itself as a continuation of that earlier one. Still, in the process of searching for a name, Shellam considers Noongar language as a means of determining something of the motivations of historical Noongar people. This could prove a profitable area for future research.

Additionally, Shellam appears to tentatively agree with other commentators’ conclusion that Noongar spiritual and cultural heritage does not include the sea (44–45). I believe there is considerable evidence to support a contrary view. Noongar songs transcribed by Daisy Bates in the early 1900s and oral accounts of Noongar Elder Hazel Brown (in Brown and Scott) describe Noongar people singing out to the sea and aquatic animals. Additionally, the ancestral Noongar story of *Mamang* (Woods and Scott) details a journey through the southern ocean. The sea and its shifting boundary since the last ice age is part of the spiritual and cultural heritage of Noongar people, which may have made it more attractive for some historical Noongar to travel on colonial ships.

*Shaking Hands on the Fringe* is an intriguing, meticulously researched investigation into the nature of the supposed ‘friendly frontier’ at King George’s Sound. Tiffany Shellam uses ethnographic methods to expand on the archives and offers new insights on a fascinating period of cultural contact, cohesion and conflict. I would heartily recommend engaging with *Shaking Hands on the Fringe* and complementary literature written by southern Noongar authors including (but not limited to) Kim Scott, Hazel Brown, Iris Woods, Lomas Roberts, Lynette Knapp, Jack Williams and Averil Dean and Carol Pettersen. *Shaking Hands on the Fringe* was inspired by a Reconciliation statue in the centre of Albany honouring historical Noongar ‘man of peace’, Mokaré. Shellam aims to ‘go beyond’ (214)
such symbols to reveal and celebrate specific moments of cross-
cultural friendship, reciprocity and respect. However, ongoing public
use of this particular statue as a ‘canvas’ for continuing some sort of
cross-cultural dialogue indicates past colonial tensions are still very
much alive today.

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sit in front of the words on the paper, frozen soldiers standing in formation awaiting the order to march. Composed of simple elements—ink and pulp, made of nature and yet separated from it by a process and turned into something else. The soldiers converge to convey a meaning—letters bleed into words and the words become a story. At first glance the paper looks smooth, unbroken—constant. I close my eyes and run my hand over it. Slowly. It is only then, in this tentative state, that I feel the slight permutations in the paper. It’s not unbroken after all, but filled with invisible indentations and disjunctions around the textual army. They seem powerful these warriors, but it is only an illusion. They are frozen, incapable of change, linear-bound.

The story sits in the soldiers’ barracks, in the scrawled notes, in the books and reports of colonial administration. An archive of knowledge intentionally disconnected in time, separated from the men whose hands formed these soldiers and laid a heavy duty upon them. They must stand still, until the paper they are written on falls apart, until all the copies turn to dust, until no one speaks their story anymore. Only then can they move, march into the
silence and rest, their duty to protect and obscure lifted from their shoulders.

The story I hold is like many I have found in here. Page after page reveals the sound of the soldiers’ voices, speaking of the chaining of Aboriginal men across the vast expanse of the north-west of Western Australia. Some of these men are my family. Soldiers debated the chaining of these men—what weight should be used? What is the most appropriate method to chain the native? It’s a strange debate akin to asking a man which level of hell he would feel more comfortable in. The stories employ terms like humane treatment, but these are merely clever soldiers serving as scouts to mask a hidden army. ‘Humane treatment’ is simply a term for productivity and control. The slave master will ensure the freedom of his slave is tightly bound—but not too tight, the slave must still be capable of fulfilling his reason to exist—productive work. For a slave is not a man, he is only his function. If he is asked to clean the Gaol then he is a cleaner, if he builds a railroad then he is a labourer, and when at rest he is a criminal, bound in chains to an iron ring in a small room.

This story I’m reading concerns the men at a Gaol in Roebourne—a place of small rooms each with an iron ring, where the chains could be attached at night. The story proclaims its own age—1892. This number is not a date, but rather another clever tactic, an intellectual skirmish between me, the frozen soldiers, and the man who penned it. That date, boldly outlined in four simple numbers, is a sophisticated manipulation of time and space. It is a weapon that says:

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ am distant from you.} \\
I \text{ am disconnected and far away.} \\
You \text{ can see me but you cannot touch me,} \\
I \text{ exist elsewhere.}
\end{align*}
\]

But I am not fooled by the whispered chant. The soldiers are frozen, but I am not. I am powerful, I move and as I touch relationships around me I become a part of them as they become a part of me.
There is no distance between me, the chained men and the man who penned the story. There are only relationships colliding.

This particular story is about prisoners working outside the old Roebourne Gaol in the Pilbara, Western Australia. A man was sent to investigate the use of chains and determine if the practice was suitable and he wrote the words that I now hold. Carefully I lift the soldiers from the page and move them around, taking pieces from different pages and placing them within a new order. This is the weakness of frozen colonial soldiers, they can only stand and deny, but their denial only makes sense when they stand close to each other, obscuring the grooves and permutations in the paper. I stand back and look at my altered arrangement and give it a title.

**The Method of Chaining Natives**

Each native has round his neck,  
a leather covered chain collar,  
A numbered label.

This collar is connected,  
By handcuff lock,  
To a chain,  
Seven to eight feet long.

We cannot,  
Dispense with the chains.  
A native has no thought,  
For consequences.  
His one idea,  
is to escape.

The hardship of chaining,  
Is more apparent than real.  
I gather,
From close observation,
There is neither inhumanity,
Nor cruelty,
In the chain as now used.

I have moved the soldiers yet they remain unmoved. But I have forced the soldiers to speak two stories. On the surface they tell the same tale, but my arrangement makes more apparent the hidden story they always contained, the false logic of colonisation and the broader context of a camouflaging rhetoric. Numbers present themselves again. The men bore a numbered label; the chains were numbered as were the prisoners. An attempt to turn living flesh into a frozen soldier, not a man that loves, laughs and lives in the world, but a number, something fixed, reduced, abstract and inhuman. The soldiers tell us there is no inhumanity in the practice of chaining and yet they also speak of how the native holds the one idea of escape, regardless of consequences. The soldiers stay frozen. But now they speak differently. They stand still, but the world moves around them, changing how they are seen and heard, disarming the traps buried into their form. I have enlisted them in my cause and made them men of two countries.

‘It’s time to go sir.’ A voice calls over my shoulder. The archive is closing for the night. I stand and leave the paper on the table. The frozen soldiers whisper at me desperately.

*We cannot dispense with chains.*

Sadly, for them, this seems true.
Anaïs Nin wrote that: ‘If you do not breathe through writing, if you do not cry out in writing, or sing in writing, then don’t write, because our culture has no use for it.’ Writing my second book took a lot out of me. In 2008, I went to Beijing as part of an Asialink residency, to try and write about my cultural roots. Roots of a culture begin with the ground, and so I was hoping for an epiphany of sorts, hoping that when I reached my grandmother’s Chinese ancestral town of Jie Yang, ChaoZhou, that I would be able to see the earth as sacred and feel a connection. But when I arrived I saw that a modern developed city - complete with its own MacDonalds store - had grown out of the foreign country that my grandmother had described to me in my childhood. L.P. Hartley wrote that ‘the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.’ It felt impossible to write about a place in which I had no immediate connection, and so I returned back to Beijing. Even though I tried to write ‘cultural’ stories during my stay, they ended up being amusing anecdotes with no substance, like a qipao without a body. One or two of the stories ended up being at the very beginning of Her Father’s Daughter; my editors liked them even though I was embarrassed by them. In retrospect, they
needed to be there to mark my development. They are there to show that progress requires letting go of this idea of perfection. Ironically, they are also the pieces I worked on the longest—I was polishing something that did not have much mettle.

The real heartbeat of the story emerged when I called my father up in the evenings from my small flat in Peking University. He wanted to know that I was warm and safe, and he also wanted to tell me about the bushfires that were raging through Victoria at that time. Even though we lived nowhere near Kinglake, and even though my father had never been there before, he was deeply affected by the government allowing residents to ‘stay and defend’ their houses. ‘How can property matter more than people?’ he would lament. That evening when I got off the phone, I thought about my father preparing for bed, and how he would lock every door of the house and close every window. He would make sure all the knives were in their proper place in the drawers. And every knife would have had its tip deliberately filed to a blunt nub. This is when I realised that instead of trying to set my story in an ‘exotic’ location (which rendered all descriptions two dimensional and florid) the tale was meant to take place in Melbourne, my place of birth and home. And I also realised that the story was going to be completely character-based, about my relationship with my father.

After working out that the story had to firstly be from the perspective of a sixty year old man, I knew that a first-person narrator with my father’s ‘voice’ would not work. Firstly, because I am a thirty-one year old female, it would be presumptuous to think that I could write in the voice of someone with over sixty years of life experience. Second, because my father thinks in a different language than I, I would have had to translate his thoughts, and I could find no way to do this that would not make him sound like he was speaking ‘broken’ or incomplete English in first-person. I also discovered that the more I wrote in third person, the freer I felt as the narrator. A first-person narrator is not going to be noticing how the streaks of sunset looked like a claw across the sky when they are ploughing the fields as a
Alice Pung’s parents soon after their arrival in Australia
slave labourer with an AK47-toting soldier standing next to them. All of a sudden the world of 1975 Cambodia emerged in its technicolour horror because I could use a wider lens.

Since my father’s voice was in the third person, and this book is a ‘conversation’ between a father and a daughter, I could then not put myself, the ‘daughter narrator’, in the story in first person. To write about myself in first person while leaving my father in third is to try and own a significantly larger portion of the story than I was due: a reader would probably then read the book as me telling a story about my father, from my perspective. I wanted both voices to have equal weight and gravitas. Interestingly, Dorothy Lessing observed that it is actually the first person narrator that alienates, because the capital ‘I’ is specific, whereas the third-person voice is general—the reader could be ‘she’. I wanted the reader to feel like this could be any daughter, and any father, if trapped in the particular set of circumstances of this specific father-daughter relationship.

Many people have assumed that I wrote about the character of myself in the third person as a distancing technique, but this is not true. I saw much more of myself and my flaws in third person than I ever did in first. Unhindered by my previous voice in my first book, which was the voice of a twenty-something-year old armed to the teeth with caustic wit and black humour; I learned to lay down these weapons and be more vulnerable to the reader. As a result, I have not read back over, or even looked at, the ‘daughter’ parts of the book since it has been published. To me it is almost like reading back on a private diary I thought I had shredded years ago.

Lastly, the most confronting chapters of the book, the chapters that have given writers like Alex Miller nightmares and disturbed reviewers no matter how kind the review, seem so jarring to a reader because I did not follow a conventional, chronological structure. Year Zero in Democratic Kampuchea (April 17, 1975, a date etched forever
in my parents’ memories) does not happen at the start of the book but only two thirds of the way in. In fact, this is the inverse migrant-success story: it begins with the fulfilment of the Great Australian Dream, about a man who is so comfortable in life that he lives in a mansion on top of a hill in one of the safest suburbs in Melbourne and runs a thriving electronics business. His children can travel the world and he can Skype them. Yet everything he does is permeated by inordinate levels of anxiety.

This story is about a paring back to the bare bones of the narratives that shape a man’s life. You find out that he lived for four years without modern technology, running water, medicine, and often, without food. Yes it is a story about privation, but the privation chapters could not come first. This is because no writing ever exists in isolation of the social and political context in which it was written. I do not set out to write ‘refugee’ stories, mainly because a refugee is ‘one who seeks refuge’ from both a Buddhist perspective, and an international law perspective (‘owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted’, Article 1, United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees). Yet the ‘refugee-turned-success’ narrative works
because it garners people’s sympathy and affection, particularly when humour is used to enhance the poignancy of the narrative. I know how to tell this story—I have been doing it for over seven years in my talks to rural groups and inner-city book clubs and schools. When I do tell it I am entirely sincere, but I am also aware of my audience: I know that tacitly certain audiences do not want to hear tales of hardship. In fact, my father’s concern and his only comment about the book, during all the chapters I emailed him, was, ‘do you think there is too much suffering in this part? White people don’t want to hear about too much suffering. It depresses them.’

Yet I had to take risks with this book. I wanted to counter this narrative that the only migrant or refugee story worth telling is one that leads to worldly ‘success’ and assimilation at the end. Chaim Potok wrote beautiful, intensely deep stories about the Hasidic Jewish community in the United States who were distinctly ‘un-assimilated’, yet his books opened our worlds to a richly developed and nuanced culture. It is deeply disappointing to me that we are a nation of immigrants and yet we need to keep our complex and multifaceted true selves apart, in order to be a part of this national narrative.

If I placed the more shocking ‘Killing Fields’ chapters of the book first, the book would inevitably and simply follow the migrant trajectory of ‘success’, but my father would always be seen as an eternal ‘refugee’ because our current mainstream discourse about ‘those who’ve come across the seas’ is polarising and unsophisticated. And I am well aware that no one will take literary non-fiction seriously in this political climate if it is about a contentious political issue. One of my favourite poets, Robert Cording, says this very useful passage about writing poetry, which I believe to be equally applicable to writing creative non-fiction:

If the poem feels like it has sifted and arranged received ideas, then it will fail. The person has to feel, I think, as if there’s a real person struggling with real experiences that will not yield some
handy lesson, but nevertheless is not entirely without meaning. The voice that convinces will always be the voice of an individual, not as a spokesperson for this or that idea.

So this is not a story culminating in grand triumph over adversity—if anything, it is about very ordinary things beneath which lie the true character tales: a father who does not believe in post-traumatic stress yet who files the tips of every knife in the house to a blunt nub, and a daughter who goes to an inner-city dating agency because her parents are setting her up before she is ‘on the shelf’ at twenty-five. I wanted to combine the everyday Anne-Tyler-type events of my father’s current life in suburban Australia with the blinding flashes of unimaginable apocalyptic hell, to create a new kind of art that says quietly but clearly—this is how survivors live and love: slowly, patiently, and doggedly.

To write a grandiose heroic tale about my dad would be true but annoying as most people think their fathers are heroes: how could any of them compare to a man who survived genocide? Yet to write a book that is more true, I had to write about the parts of my dad in which a reader would find every dad. You don’t need to survive trauma to fear for your kid’s safety. You don’t have to be cut off from modern civilisation to be in childlike awe over emerging new technologies. And you don’t have to be a hero to be able to love wholeheartedly.
The First Negotiation, Amorality, and Temerity

Frank Moorhouse

Publius Terrenius (195/185–159 BC), better known in English as Terence, a playwright of the Roman Republic, said: ‘I am a human being and all things which concern human beings concern me.’

The Three Negotiations

I tell new writers that the literary writer has three ever-ongoing negotiations in their life by which they gain the privilege of a literary vocation, that is, the privilege to write what one wants to write, in a way he or she wishes to write, and to spend most of one’s time doing it at one’s own pace.

I want to write about the first negotiation. The second and third negotiations which face the writer do not concern us here—the second negotiation is with the public sector—funding bodies, universities, and patrons—and the third is with the commercial publishing sector. Both deal with gaining the resources to do one’s work.

The first negotiation is perhaps the most difficult. It is the negotiation with one’s intimates, family, and friends, and, if it exists, one’s partner in a domestic relationship (and especially ex-lovers and their current partners and their lawyers who may be your closest readers).

The first negotiation is centrally about ethics but it is also, in part, about resources. In the case of shared domesticity the writer has to negotiate a space to write, the freedom to go into reclusion, the freedom
to work from midnight to daybreak, the use of shared financial resources of the relationship for research, travel (alone), and time to write, and release from some of the routine demands of domesticity. In Australia lovers and partners are often the main source of arts patronage.

But the ethical negotiations are at the very fundamentals of your relationships as a writer. Once you begin writing and publishing your relationship with reality and with those around you is changed forever. There is a cautionary joke, ‘tell me all about it: you can trust me: I’m writer.’

As a very young writer when I received my first grant, I rushed to tell my young lover the good news and then as we toasted with champagne I remember telling her solemnly that while we could now set up house together—the expression then was ‘shack up’—my writing would come first in my life—it would have priority even over her. I think I told her that if a writer writes well and honestly and as a consequence loses friends or if your intimate partner objects to what you are writing, then you have the wrong friends and you have the wrong partner.

She could’ve replied—‘Frank your writing stinks, and you are in the wrong relationship’. She didn’t. She was a young romantic too who worshipped literature and, as I remember it, she said, ‘of course, of course, your art must always come first.’

So in a writer’s most important relationships the question inevitably arises ‘will you write about us?’ And in all honesty the answer has to be, ‘very likely.’

As an example of the punishing repercussions which can occur in, say, memoir writing, I will, later in this essay, draw on my own experiences. Meanwhile, the Czech writer, Milan Kundera, says ‘When a writer is born into a family the family is doomed.’

For a start, parents can expect little mercy from their children who choose to become writers; of course, if one or both of the parents are writers the children can be in for a tough time as they find that their lives are used in the parents’ writing. The fine Australian humorist, the late Ross Campbell, wrote a column called Oxalis Cottage, about
the day-to-day goings on in his own household but when the children were adolescent they ganged up and demanded not to be written about anymore.

One of the families which really suffered was the Mann family—that of the German writers, Thomas and Heinrich Mann—although ultimately the extended family contained seven writers. Both Thomas and Heinrich used the family in many ways in their novels, more than once, sometimes satirically, to the pain of their parents and brothers and sisters.

Thomas received the Nobel Prize for his work. Perhaps that was sufficient compensation for being shunned by his family.

Privacy

The rules of privacy (if there are any stable rules of privacy) apply to everyone except the committed literary writer—the US Supreme Court’s rule of thumb is ‘those places or situations where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy.’ As we know, ‘reasonable expectation’ varies from culture to culture, family to family and for the writer ‘those places where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy’ are just the places the writer wishes, and is expected to go.

As readers we expect our serious writers to be our spies, well, our ‘observers’, out there in society looking and listening and then returning to tell us how things really are. We expect them to be voyeurs and trespassers and eavesdroppers.

I remember how appealing it was to me when as a young writer (and for a while a cadet journalist) I became aware that I had taken on the social role as an Observer with an implied license to inquire, and that this carried with it a Way of Life, even shaped a type of personality—a superior orientation to reality, seeing human behaviour as God would see it—surreptitiously watching people at parties through narrowed eyes—carrying a notebook. It was also somewhat of an antidote to my shyness and gave me breathtaking authority to go places and, notebook in hand, question people with audacity. In fact, it implied I had
the right, even obligation, to infringe on the privacy of others. I would unobtrusively observe, or even request, that I be permitted to observe my lovers in the toilet and the bathroom and take notes. To put it in a more appealing way: the French novelist Honore Balzac described himself as ‘the secretary of society.’ Later when I saw myself, not as a journalist, but as a storyteller I coined an expression to describe my life, saying ‘I was on a fiction-finding assignment.’

I was quickly aware that this detached stance was not altogether attractive to others. The English novelist, Graham Greene, said of the writer’s detachment. ‘There is a splinter of ice in the heart of a writer.’

It could hamper fully-felt involvement with others—but fortunately for me, some situations and involvements with others overwhelmed my ‘cool’ detachment and I would find myself in the thick of things, engrossed, undetached, and even unhinged. There are emotional pains which clutch us in their fingernails deeply and as Observers of Humanity, ‘we too bleed’.

It is more that the writer feels the pain but uses dispassion to record it. Wordsworth gives his famous definition of poetry as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquillity…’ Poetry may be emotion recalled in tranquillity; much of my writing is powerful emotion recalled with an almost suffocating ache.

The Very Data of Existence

Unless we are a recluse, we daily exchange and communicate details of ourselves to other members of our species through an increasing number of channels; we spend most of our day in interaction. We are observed by others and our new technologies almost sanction, if not, urge us to record and we do all this interaction and communication increasingly in recorded contexts of closed circuit cameras, phone cameras, recording devices, texts, tweets, blogs. At the Perth Writers’ Festival this year I became aware for the first time, in conversation with a group at a reception, that one of those in the conversation was
tweeting to his newspaper and it was appearing on line as we talked and drank. Oddly, I felt at the time that for me to object would be against this new ethic.

As we converse, touch, love, laugh, and cry—as we live—we emit and scatter information about ourselves—the data of our very existence—without trying, without shaping.

Yet we still try to control and shape this data of existence by using loose conventions, implicit and explicit informal treaties, which we make among ourselves and by which we try to live with varying degrees of compliance—this is between you and me and the gatepost; you must not tell a soul; promise me that you will not show this to anyone else. Some try stronger ways to control this data of existence. We place legal injunctions, we try to lock our emails by placing bogus legal demands for confidentiality at the bottom of our messages—we plead with newspapers that publication not happen—we bribe—we use spin doctors, agents, publicists—we sue if we can—we demand ‘correction’. We burn letters and diaries. One of the saddest cases of destruction of a personal archive was the burning of James Cook’s letters by his wife. On the other hand, Charles Dickens’ wife, Catherine (who Dickens had not treated well) on her death bed bequeathed her letters to the British Museum saying, ‘I do so to show the world that he once loved me.’

I feel that the destruction of private papers by people who have played a part in public life—or anyone’s personal papers, for that matter—is a crime against the human spirit and an attempt to frustrate our understanding of the human condition, a sad fear of being known as we were, even after death.

These informal, ad-hoc treaties—as with international treaties—dissolve with the changing of our circumstances and are breached as the intimacy or trust upon which they were based—say, friendship, or an employee-employer relationship, or love—collapses.

I am inclined to think the loosening of attitudes to privacy is a good thing. There was a time in the 1970s when the counterculture rebelled against privacy and the concealed life, we tried to
tell all about ourselves, even the most painful and disgraceful and humiliating information, we exclaimed, ‘let it all hang out’, ‘put everything up front’ and the gays created the beautiful expression ‘coming out’—proud self-revelation.

I have a theory that much more than the internet, nineteenth-century realist fiction and naturalism, that is, the depiction of human behaviour without moralism, began to dismantle formulaic models of human personality and to offer a picture of a deeper diversity of human behaviour without judgment by the author. It led the way to making us feel more open about ourselves, encouraging us to drop our deceptions, poses, and masks. The movement finally expressed itself in the exuberant candour of the writings of the 1960s and 1970s, the genre of confessional poetry and ever more candid memoirs, biography, and autobiography which continues to the present.

This fiction drew on the author’s private life or the private lives and secrets of others known to the author, as well as on the observation of the world around the writer, and of course, on the imagination. Realism permitted the author to have their characters show their innermost secrets and their darkest souls. For some time, this new fiction was opposed as being amoral because it seemed to be endorsing, or at least accepting, the unconventional or irregularities of life without comment. In turn, these literary movements loosened journalism with the emergence of the frank, mass-media profile, exposé, and the long, personal interview.

One of the positive results of these movements is a weakening of stigma and move to a tolerant diversity.

From the opposite point of view, my anarchist ethical-compass has great empathy with Herman Melville’s wilfully private person, Bartleby (Bartleby the Scrivener, 1833) who gave no explanation for his behaviour and who, when questioned for explanations would not answer, saying simply, that he ‘preferred not to.’
Bartleby was making his own treaty—the opposite to coming out. That should always be an option (though not for me, I once pronounced in a newspaper interview that I held that anyone should be able to ask me anything about myself and I would answer honestly. I later quietly added the proviso ‘If I feel in the mood’). I respect though, with some sadness, the need in some us at some times to be discreet, to be indirect, and to be reticent.

Bartleby, I fear, lived inside a shell of fear: the fear of being known.

Then we have our story-tellers, who by more permanent and more dramatically powerful mediums of memoir and fictionalisation involve us in their artworks and thus, we become part of the social record.


In the book I used different lenses to tell a story about my life: I used fiction in the form of a short story which I unpacked to show the reality behind the fiction; a dialogue with a fictional character created partly from myself and partly from a friend; actual letters and emails; research; reminiscences of friends; and I attempted to intertwine details about myself, trying to turn all this into an artwork.

The literary writer may seek confirmations or elucidations from those mentioned in a book being written but (as distinct, say, from the family historian) not grant right of veto or amendment of their writing to those mentioned in the memoir. To concede the right of veto would eliminate candour, honesty, rancour, and negative reality. Blandness would rule. The reader would be sold a dishonest book. After publication those mentioned in the book may reject or publicly deny events in the memoir. Or worse.

The work of fiction and memoir can itself be an exploration of the writers’ self, a self which is only revealed to the writer after publication—only after the creation do we realise what we have said about ourselves, for example, a journalist interviewing me about my

Our vocabulary contains words which carry within them the intention of inhibiting the freedom of writing and to restrain candour — words such as voyeuristic, ghoulish, disgusting, prurient, inconsiderate, indecorous, and inappropriate.
work pointed out that in my books I have metaphorically slain my mother three times.

Most readers, then, expect that the writer is in the service of higher gods than the God of Decorum, and if necessary the writer does not subjugate their writing to the personal sensibilities of those about whom the author writes, an attitude which is sometimes misunderstood as malice but it is often just the expression of a curious sadness about ourselves and those around us. I wish to return to the questions of necessity and of harm in the practice of the literary vocation. The Hippocratic oath says that in medicine the aim is to do no harm, but doctors sometimes do harm when necessary to do good. There is something called military necessity—a medieval cathedral may be destroyed if the spire is used as an observation post or a sniper position. I would argue there is something called literary necessity.

The Literary Necessity rule works both ways. The writer asks themselves ‘is this startling information about someone I like necessary for the purpose of the work, for the art of the book, or could I leave it out?’ The art of the book is the arbiter.

**Temerity**

William Blackstone (1723–1780), an English jurist who wrote a treatise on the common law which still remains an important source on our principles of common law, said that ‘every freeman has an undoubted right to lay what sentiments he pleases before the public: to forbid this, is to destroy the freedom of the press: but if he publishes what is improper, mischievous, or illegal, he must take the consequence of his own temerity’.

He was arguing against pre-censoring, before publication, of a work by the State or Church. He argued that works should have free and unhampered publication. Then the society reacts and the writer must deal with the outcome of his or her temerity.

In the case of Salman Rushdie’s fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), death threats were made against him, including a *fatwa*
issued by Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, requiring Rushdie’s execution. A bounty was offered for Rushdie’s death, and he lived under police protection for several years.

More mildly, the writer always publishes in fear of harsh criticism and ridicule; fear of serious error; fear of a failure to find a readership; fear of the loss of his friends; and always with the doubt about whether he or she had sufficient talent to undertake the creation of the book and thus to have unforeseeable impacts on the lives of others.

Writers who live with the ethic of the Western literary tradition take upon themselves the dangers and courage of temerity by sometimes going beyond the law, beyond conventional restraints, and choose to create and to live and to believe in the ethical supremacy of serious writing.

Yes, there are categories of information if circulated can cause actual physical endangerment to individuals and measurable harm which varies from culture to culture decade to decade as the ethos changes. For example, at one time in some places, a person could lose their job if it is revealed, say, by a memoir, that they are homosexual. The writer has to make decision as to the literary necessity of making this revelation, yet to omit it is also to endorse the intolerance and the stigma against homosexuals.

Some revelations of memoir and biography and autobiography may bring indignity, embarrassment to those mentioned in the work. A fashionable term in our society is the notion of ‘boundaries’—we should not infringe a person’s sense of their boundaries, we should have a sensitivity to ‘boundaries’ in personal relationships—‘let’s not go there’ (I think this is a suspect term and is responsible for the reemergence of the sadness which lies behind the idea of decorum).

Our vocabulary contains words which carry within them the intention of inhibiting the freedom of writing and to restrain candour—words such as voyeuristic, ghoulish, disgusting, prurient, inconsiderate, indecorous, and inappropriate. The literary writer only heeds the demands of these words if literary necessity accepts the fairness of the exemptions the words demand—that there is really
no need to offend or to reveal if it is not required by the integrity of the work.

That spirit behind serious writing and the reader-writer contract is that the writer promises to share with the reader what he or she, the writer, has experienced of the human condition, to tell stories as well as our talents allow, in the traditions of the great mission of the Enlightenment—to use science, scholarship, and the arts to investigate without inhibition, the human condition without malice, that is, without private motives of attack, cruelty, revenge, or mischief.

This brings us to the question of amorality in art and its relationship to the imagination.

The Enlightenment Commitment premises itself on the idea that free wanderings of the imagination, especially into dark or taboo zones of human sensibility, is not only the privilege of art but also its primary imperative and that the exercising of it will yield riches to the making of civilisation—will somehow take the human spirit to a plane of awareness, or, in its more limited claim, will somehow confirm and comfort us in the misery of our species (Dr Johnson said the purpose of literature was ‘to help us endure’).

The faith of this empirical tradition is that we all, individually, those who create untramelled works of the imagination as practitioners but also those who engage with it, the readers, will contribute, together, to the creation a more tolerable, compassionate and enhanced life because our way of life will be grounded on data which will lead to sound, safer decisions in the arrangements that we make for our living together on the planet (leaving aside, for now, the philosophical difficulties of ‘knowing’ and ‘reality’).

It is the authority of this posture as a Western literary tradition which for some centuries now has maintained that the serious artist alone determines the subject of their art and pursues it in his or her own way to the natural conclusion of their creative enterprise and who then offers their work to the world. The only ethic, then, is for the writer to tell it as it is.
And what then of the memoir I wrote? What then of my temerity? After the book came out my ex-wife attacked me on the front page of *The Australian*. We separated forty years ago—she was my high school girlfriend and we had grown up together in a country town—she is a journalist and lives in London—she did not attack me for inaccuracy, but for having written the book the way I did (less than one chapter is about our relationship and I consider it gentle). She is not identified by name in the book. After the attack she broke off contact.

Then my mentor from my teenage years who was also my lover for over fifty years on-and-off, cut off relations with me for reasons he did not explain. He too is not identified by name in the book and I consider what I had written about us, gentle. There was no question of legal action whatsoever from either of them, that is, the works are not defamatory.

In retrospect, I would not have written the book any other way. So, is this essay then, ‘self-justifying’? No it is justifying. It is written with an ache of loss and an awareness of the risk of serious sadness in the art of writing.
Disclaimer. First of all, an apology. Over the next few pages of this esteemed literary journal, you will read about ‘social media’, that horrific techno-social phenomenon you’ve heard all about and probably the very thing you were trying to escape and/or avoid by picking this publication up in the first place. (Oh, the cruel irony of it all, etc.) Look, I already said I’m sorry. And yes, you have my permission to skip all this and head straight onto the poetry if you like, but I would like to point out that many of the stanzas you will encounter will be 140 characters or less anyway, which mean you will be technically reading something that would work very well on Twitter, and are therefore as culpable as the rest of us in this whole social media caper. Onwards.

The Future Is Here. When you were a child, what did you imagine the future would look like? Because I grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, all my assumptions about the future ahead were largely informed by The Jetsons and Back to the Future 2, versions of the world in which town planning, mechanical engineering and physics itself had evolved to a point that we would largely live in the skies, be waited
on by robot slaves and sail around town on floating skateboards. The Future was a world in which food could be expanded, rehydrated and heated from miniature versions to their full-size, piping hot ones. Instead, what has happened is we largely live in the same world—same houses, same food (more or less)—but with significant technological changes inside our walls. An iPod recharging on your mother’s dining table; someone tweeting on a smartphone in a 1970s worker’s cottage: this is what the future looks like. It is as ordinary, intimate and monumentally exciting as all that.

In My Pocket, Right Now. Here are some things I currently can do using the wallet-sized device I carry in my pocket: call my mother; find the contact details of everyone I’ve known for the past five years; time a perfectly boiled egg; browse real estate; convert metric measures to imperial; hurl virtual birds into pigs as a leisure activity; read The New York Times; find men who want to perform oral sex on me within a 10 kilometre radius of my current location; check into a flight; catch up on last night’s current affairs program; see friends’ baby photos (more on this soon); take photos and broadcast them to ‘followers’; generate light during a blackout; listen to radio stations from the other side of the earth. Soon, I will be using the same device to pay for things at physical points of purchase, like a proxy credit card. If I were to go back in time and tell the 10-year-old version of me all this, that kid would tell my current version of me to shut the hell up and call him a liar, which is completely understandable, though I should also point out that the 10-year-old version of me was sort of a jerk. But the fact is, Beyond 2000 never saw this stuff coming. And they definitely couldn’t have predicted social media.

What Even Is a Social Media? Because what is social media anyway, really? Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, whatever. All platforms people use every day, but would have been baffling to explain even a decade ago. Who could have anticipated the need for it all? Who could have even explained what social media even was?
**Possible Explanations for Facebook.** Facebook is a very fun website where you tell each of your friends things about your lives. Facebook is a great way of keeping in touch with friends on the other side of the country and/or world. Facebook is the world’s largest advertising company into which users willingly and prolifically generate tons of personal data in order to share and be *advertised to*, a system whereby around a seventh of the world’s population willingly surrender once-private information about their lives to a multibillion dollar company for free. Facebook is essential. Facebook is a waste of time.

**Possible Explanations for Twitter.** Twitter is like a ticking newsfeed you see at the bottom of a 24-hour news channel, except you curate that feed by selecting people/companies/organisations/products to follow. You can be followed too—which is always good for your self-esteem—and unfollowed, which can feel absolutely crushing, especially when you’re unfollowed by Very Important People, like the one time ABC managing director Mark Scott followed you after you tweeted something particularly timely, resonant and intelligent, then promptly unfollowed you after discovering you also liked to tweet jokes filled with filth and rot and farts, not that I’m speaking from personal experience or anything; look I said I just don’t want to talk about it; it was a very painful period in my life; just leave it alone.

**Hurt Feelings.** Facebook is not even 10-years-old and Twitter is even younger. Neither platform has even gone through puberty yet, so that might explain why you encounter a hell of a lot of childish behaviour on both, resulting in various heightened playground emotions. Because social media is also a reservoir of hurt feelings, a world where the construction, destruction and erosion of existing relationships plays out for all invited/accepted friends to see. Behold: the crush of a divorce! The slow reveal of an extra-marital affair! The crushing, existential defeat of the ignored person, whose comment is neither liked nor responded to! A world in which accepting or
denying a new friendship is confirmed by a clinical push of a button, where—by default—you share the exactly same information about your life with your current lover, your ex-partner’s father and that girl from high school you haven’t seen in seven years. Relationships have never been so clean. Relationships have never been so messy.

**Things I have been called on Twitter.** All varieties of racist and homophobic epithets. ‘Douchebag.’ ‘Obnoxious.’ ‘A left-wing inner city gay author with an arts degree.’ (That one really hurt.) All of which are probably true, but it does feel like bad manners to say all this out loud, doesn’t it?

**Things I have called other people on Twitter:** ‘Sorceress’ (Miranda Devine). ‘Douchebags’ (Queensland LNP). And all sorts of things that shouldn’t be repeated here. What I’m trying to say is, don’t feel sorry for me.

**A Simple Rule.** Earlier this year, the ABC’s Annabel Crabb outlined the ABC’s social media policy succinctly. ‘Don’t be a dickhead,’ she said. A rule for life, really.

**It’s a Design Problem.** As Zadie Smith wrote in her *Atlantic* essay about Facebook and *The Social Network*, no software is neutral. ‘Different software embeds different philosophies, and these philosophies, as they become ubiquitous, become invisible.’ Before social media, very few people—outside the realm of the desperately pathetic or characters from Todd Solondz films—actually counted and quantified how many friends they had. However, all social media keeps tallies and scores on this stuff. Counts of friends and followers can be compared, and how often those people circulate your data to *their* friends can be quantified too. We are all data now. Twitter is designed in such a way that information becomes viral quickly, spreading in blooms of influence and infection. For a whole lot of us, socialising nowadays is a process of endlessly campaigning in
the constant, low-level existential drone of a neverending popularity contest. It is equally exhilarating and exhausting. It is the stock market for people who don’t understand the stock market. Some days your stocks go up; other days they hit rock bottom. But in the end, it’s all just numbers.

**New Lows.** Here are some hideous things you can find on both Twitter and Facebook: complaints about flight conditions; people discussing/broadcasting/retweeting compliments they have recently received*; what people think about celebrities’ sex lives and bodies. Some days, it’s like being buried under a steaming hot avalanche of people’s shit and judgement, to be completely honest. It is a king-tide of other people’s neuroses, an open parade of mental tics and illnesses. Some people you might unfriend/unfollow because they get you down so goddamn much, and you’ve decided you have enough mental illness in your real life already without having to willingly subscribe to it in your virtual life. But you know this act of unfollowing will only exacerbate this person’s depression further (they check on these things), if only a little bit, but you do it anyway because you’ve weighed up the options and the extent to which each will make you lousy.

**It Takes a Long Time to Construct a Personal Code of Social Media Ethics.** A legitimate question: What did people do before they spent hours pondering this exquisite mess?

**One thing I, surprisingly, do enjoy about social media.** Baby photos. Whatever anyone says, don’t stop posting baby photos. I could look at your baby photos all day. I am not even joking. I am addicted to your babies.

**Ethical conundrum.** But what if I, say, steal those baby photos, and use them for private and/or commercial purposes? Because that is very easy to do, especially if I work for Facebook, or actually am
Facebook (if you can extend your imagination that far without your mind exploding). Listen up. When you upload personal photos to Facebook, you are effectively creating content on the site. You own copyright of that raw data, but Facebook can and may use those photos in any way it sees fit, whether it’s to alert your friends to something, or to complement actual advertising. So whatever anyone says, don’t stop posting baby photos. We could look at your baby photos all day. We are not even joking.

**A Short Message From Facebook.** ‘Yes, you retain the copyright to your content. When you upload your content, you grant us a license to use and display that content. For more information please visit our Statement of Rights and Responsibilities, which contains information about intellectual property, as well as your privileges and responsibilities as a Facebook user.’ Got all that?

**An Interesting Case Study.** Recently, Chuck Klosterman—an American freelance journalist and columnist for the *New York Times* magazine—was asked by a reader whether they should report someone who was posting racist rants on Facebook, to their employer. Klosterman responded that while it was okay to report the incidents to the employer (after all, ‘a Facebook page is a public extension of someone’s self-generated, nonprivate persona’), he also pointed out if you really want to let people see how an individual thinks, you should let them leave it out there for the world to see. This is the basic conundrum for all of us: how to maintain ‘privacy’, on a platform designed for public consumption, and how to call people out, when they’re privately/publicly violating Annabel Crabb’s rule of not being a dickhead.

**Hypotheticals.** Here are various hideous questions to ponder. Should a columnist for a broadsheet metropolitan newspaper be sacked for something tasteless he or she wrote on their personal Twitter account, considering the account is public and read by thousands of
people? Should posting photos of your genitals on Twitter—albeit to another consenting adult party, via private direct message—be reason to be sacked from your job? If someone says something defamatory about someone else on Twitter or Facebook, should the aggrieved individual be allowed to sue not only the person, but the platform itself? One problem is that few people in charge of these decisions know how Twitter and Facebook even work. ‘The reality,’ said Professor Catharine Lumby recently, ‘is that the average person now has the means to produce and distribute media. Even my 10-year-old makes his own media and distributes it on YouTube. That’s the world we’re in. And the law—particularly the common law, the judicial law—is a very ancient and slow beast. It’s very sluggish. The law needs to catch up with society.’

Why Bother. This is a question I’ve asked myself a lot actually. When the ethical and legal implications are this tangled, why wouldn’t anyone simply bow out? Well for starters, you literally can’t. Even if you left Facebook, that information would remain in the site. People who have disabled their accounts have demanded the right to wholly retrieve their content back from the site, only to be met with silence. You couldn’t leave even if you wanted to. It is a horrifying thought, isn’t it? But come on now: why would anyone want to leave this glorious future when all of it is so damn fun?
Why, in this digital age, would anyone spend a year printing and binding a book by hand, typesetting small pieces of lead, etching copper plates, mixing inks, cutting paper and board, treadling a half-tonne piece of Victorian machinery, sewing foliations, gluing and nipping day after day? There are many letterpress practitioners absorbed by the craft and its associated paraphernalia and many others satisfied by the decorative nature of deeply embossed printing. There are also a number of private presses, chiefly in Britain and America, producing exquisite and hugely expensive collectables. Our primary focus, however, was the content—providing a platform for contemporary poems emanating from the south coast of Western Australia. Could we not then have used a publishing program and a laser printer, or perhaps bypassed paper and ink altogether and published electronically?

Perhaps the name we chose for our fledgling press goes some way to explaining (even to ourselves) our impulse to pursue this laborious route. We live near Mount Hallowell, a landmark on the edge of the small town of Denmark. Traversing Hallowell you pass through massive granite boulders and dells of tall karri, cross
high rocky heathland with wondrous views over the surrounding farmland, forests, estuary and ocean, and descend through soft leaved undergrowth before making your way through pasture and peppermint groves to Lights Beach. Hallowell, Lights and Denmark were all named in the late nineteenth century for notable Royal Navy personnel, some of whom never set foot in the place. The allure of the name Hallowell lies not in this history but in the fortuitous beauty of the word itself, by chain of association: hallowed well, a sacred well of inspiration, the well of ink that gives shape and form to the thoughts of the soul. And turning it around—well hallowed, well blessed by the touch of our hands.

There seemed to be an important connection to be made between the words of the poets touched by this place, and the manner of their manifestation. It seemed important that a book (which began life as a tree) be made here, in our basement in the forest by the inlet, by ourselves, and not outsourced to strangers for printing and binding. It seemed only right to eschew a flickering plastic box in favour of typesetting by hand—holding each unique letter before placing it, with all due consideration to the aesthetics of kerning (subtle adjustments to the spacing between letters), the composing stick nestled firmly in the palm.
Many times, setting type or sewing in that dim room, it felt like a farewell to the world of books, rather than a new chapter; some sort of epilogue or epitaph, or love letter to a dying friend. We catastrophised about the whole edifice of bookshops, libraries and academies crumbling overhead as we worked. But when was the last day we spent reading or writing? We were deeper than that by then, down in the DNA of words and letters, feeling the patterns of assonance, dissonance, consonance, noticing how certain poets use particular letters more, others less, how some poems don’t lose their shape or integrity, or even their sense, no matter how small you break them down; how others fail that test; realizing that the beauty of words has the endlessly regressive symmetries and patterns of natural forms, of geometry itself; realising, in fact, that we really needed to get out of that basement more.

We used brand new type from a foundry in California: fine Arrighi italic, designed in the Sixteenth Century, and its early Twentieth Century derivative Centaur (we’ll say no more about typography—it’s the domain of fanatics). The press itself is called an Arab, and we’re not sure when it was built—its design dates from 1872, but thousands were made in Halifax and exported around the world for half a century, in kits of parts for reassembly. Ours was formerly used by Collins in Perth and rescued by collector Geoff Moor, who we heard about from Graham Moss of Incline Press, in Oldham, Lancashire. Our journey into printing began with Graham showing us through his narrow Dickensian maze of three floors of rescued letterpress treasures before tea in the attic, and inviting us to a small gathering of printers in the ancient and quirky John Rylands Library in Manchester. Weeks later, we lugged the Arab down Albany Highway from Kelmscott. Then our friend and landlord Illya hoisted it through the air with his tractor, before we rolled our well-travelled and battle-scarred machine into place.

Continuing the very personal story of the press, we were helped to understand its ways and requirements by Claire and David Bolton of Alembic Press, Oxford, who have visited us during their regular stays
in WA. They initiated us into the world wide web of suppliers who really know and love their stuff, so we could begin to assemble the once ubiquitous tools of the trade now only available from specialists, scattered around the globe—London, San Francisco, Enmore, West Lothian, Colorado, and Melbourne.

The Arab is a treadle-powered platen press, utterly reliable, but very fastidious; it will do whatever task you set it, exactly as you tell it, so you have to tell it right. It works on minuscule tolerances (literally; ‘minuscule’ means lower case)—a millimetre is a mile, when type hits plate; the gauge of a page can crush solid lead. Within that millimetre, a range of aesthetic experiences is on offer from the sublime to the ham-fisted. It’s a different poem or story or statement in different type or wider margins, over-kerned or under-inked. Everything matters, on a page. Or can. The attitudes, the assumptions, the particular attentions of the reader are conditioned by a million details, requiring infinite pains.
A good book printer does not allow an impression to strike through to the reverse of the paper. The best imprint brings an immense potential power to bear in the lightest, yet fullest, most perfect kiss—the very embodiment of the writer’s, the reader’s, and the printer’s attentiveness and skill. Yet even the most subtle impress says that this is real, this is the thing itself—lead, ink, paper—not a pixelated image of the thing, but thought incarnate.

Perversely, but intuitively, we have served a belated apprenticeship in letterpress printing, just as the era of the e-book takes off. We are not luddite fanatics—e-books have their function and advantages, but their production would give us no pleasure, in the full sensory meaning of that word. Nor are we precious about lead type—we intend to integrate a range of technologies into future publications—but our priority is the enfleshment of words, in forms independent of plastic devices with built-in obsolescence, enduring textured forms—living books.
The day I went to collect the pre-publication copies of my first book from the post office, a quote from Geoffrey Wolff was running through my head: ‘No one who writes an autobiography can possibly know what they’re in for until that book comes out’ (qtd. in Cooper). Of course, it was way too late to be having cold feet. After four years writing a memoir and one year working with a commercial publisher, there is no way you can change your mind about the whole thing two months before publication. But still, I found myself wondering, ‘what have I done?’, or more particularly, ‘what have I done to my son?’ Strangely, the last time I remembered this feeling of ground-shaking doubt was the day my son’s father moved out of our family house. Separation was one thing; writing about separation was turning out to be a repeat performance. Except of course I hadn’t really written about separation—it is mentioned, but my memoir is really the story of my relationship with my son Ben, his diagnosis with autism and what that meant for him and for me.  

Still, I found myself terrified as I opened the parcel and saw my ten free author’s copies. I gave one to Ben.
‘It looks good,’ he commented and then scuttled off into his room with it, closing the door behind him. I put the other nine books in a cupboard (I felt a strange shame and wanted to hide them) and then wandered about the kitchen, pretending to be doing chores. After about ten minutes, I knocked on Ben’s door and put my head in.

‘Is everything okay?’ I asked.

‘Yes, mum, I’m fine,’ he replied. ‘I’m reading the book.’

‘You don’t have to read it now. You can keep that copy,’ I said. He looked at me in a slightly reproving way.

‘Mum, if you had a book written about you, then I think you would want to read it straight away.’

Every half hour or so, I tapped on his door and asked him nervously how he was going. ‘I’m fine,’ he answered each time. But I kept going in because I was worried about how he would find it reading about himself in a printed book. I had read him bits of the manuscript and we had talked a lot about how he felt about me publishing the book. Now it was really happening and the book was about to be launched and sold in bookshops, it all seemed a bit more real.

‘This was written for adults,’ I said. And: ‘It’s just my version of events.’ And: ‘You can write your own story about our life when you’re older.’

‘It’s okay, mum,’ he said, ‘I like this one,’ proving once again what a generous soul he is. ‘But you got a few things wrong,’ he pointed out. ‘When you say, Twenty cute four-year-olds, that’s not right. It was December so some of us were four and a half and some even five in kindy.’

‘Oh, yes, I’m sure you’re right.’

‘Also, mum, when you say that I write stories about girls with names like Rowena Smithtwinson—actually, her name was Pergola Smithtwinson. It was Rowena Pavingstone.’

‘Sorry, darling. I should have checked that with you.’

‘It’s okay.’

So, it seemed as though he didn’t hate me and he wasn’t traumatised by reading the book. Actually, he enjoyed reading the
scenes about himself and he skipped the bits about me and the more theoretical passages. Six months later, he still likes reading the book and will often refer to events from his early childhood and laugh about them. His enjoyment is similar to kids who like to look at photos or videos of their younger selves. But Ben will also discuss with me some of the more challenging aspects of what I’ve written, like where I expressed my feelings about his difficulties with forming friendships by writing: ‘I imagine a future full of unrequited love for girls and then women who like him but don’t return the full measure of his feelings’. My heart turned over the day he quoted this sentence to me, his head on one side, eyes slightly puzzled. He must have recognised the horror on my face because he said, ‘It’s okay, mum’. To have your beloved twelve year old reassure you that your honesty is not necessarily a betrayal is a terrible but lovely thing.

Of course, I didn’t write and publish this memoir in a vacuum or with a naive view of life writing. Being a literary person I read all that I could about ethics and memoir writing. I read Tom Couser’s work on the representation of vulnerable family members, his warnings that parents writing about children with a disability may reinforce stigma rather than remove it. Arthur Frank, taking another tack, describes parents writing about their children as a moral act, a way to reinscribe value to people who are generally under-valued in our society. Paul John Eakin argues that the central theme of all life writing is ethics; that we write biography and autobiography because we want to understand what it is to live a good life. This is an interesting idea because it suggests that we write (and perhaps read) personal stories partly for reasons of moral or ethical engagement, and yet writing—or at any rate publishing—a personal story is full of ethical challenges.

Now that my own memoir is published, the ethical dilemmas of life writing continue to engage me, particularly those around motherhood memoirs. Here my exploration of the ethics of women
writing about marriage and motherhood is done through a case study, the memoir *Aftermath* by Rachel Cusk.

Rachel Cusk is a well known UK writer, author of three memoirs and seven novels, including *The Bradshaw Variations* and *Arlington Park*. *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (2012) is partly Cusk’s account of the breakdown of her marriage and her own emotional responses to this and partly an examination of the complexities around contemporary marriage, feminism and the responsibility for child rearing, using her own marriage as a case study. It’s a fascinating, and I think flawed, book. And the public reaction to this book in the UK is also intriguing for the way Cusk appears to have transgressed some unwritten ethical (or perhaps cultural) rules.

An important aspect of this book is that it explores motherhood as well as marriage breakdown. I suspect that in most people’s eyes the ethics of a parent, especially a mother, writing about a child is a special case when it comes to memoir. Readers surely have different expectations of mothers writing about children from those they have of women or men writing about any other relationship in their life. Mothers are supposed to protect their children and put their child’s needs above their own; using your child as material may be considered exploitative. A classic example of this is the press coverage Julie Myerson received on the publication of her 2009 book *The Lost Child* which, among other things, explored her teenage son’s addiction to skunk. Minette Marrin, for example, claimed in *The Sunday Times* that Myerson had betrayed her son through ambition and didn’t love him enough ‘not to publish—the real test of the heart for a writer’.

Our culture’s intense idealisation of motherhood also means that mothers who publicly express ambivalence about mothering are likely to be criticised. As Rozsika Parker says, ‘Maternal ambivalence is curiously hard to believe in,’ and can only be safely acknowledged in the context of humour (17). Memoirists who write seriously about the complexities of mothering may be viewed by readers and reviewers with great suspicion. Rachel Cusk’s first memoir, *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother*, received some very negative commentary when
Rachel Robertson

it was published in 2001. *A Life’s Work* is an account of the confusion, pain and doubt she experienced during the early years of mothering. Expressing these emotions with seriousness and in literary prose, Cusk found herself accused of narcissism, selfishness and failing to love and care for her children properly. I found *A Life’s Work* a very beautiful book about a complex issue. This may be the problem. As Parker suggests, ‘maternal ambivalence is viewed askance and defended against by both idealisation and denigration of mothers’ (35)—in this case, the denigration of the mother-writer. It is all the more amazing to me, then, that Rachel Cusk dared to write a third memoir, given that her second, *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy*, also caused controversy when some of the Italian locals threatened to sue the publisher over how they were represented.\(^3\) She has now joined the ranks of writers described as ‘serial memoirists’, a phrase that surely echoes the term serial murderer.

The reaction to *Aftermath* in the UK press followed immediately from the publication of an extract of the book in *The Guardian*. David Blackburn called for book publishers to be scrutinised by the Leveson Inquiry because *Aftermath* ‘raises questions about publishers’ ethics and privacy law’. In a short piece in *The Spectator*, he claims that the book ‘is extremely frank, sparing little of her erstwhile husband’s privacy or that of her children, over whom the warring parents have been fighting’ and suggests that the Leveson Inquiry ‘is the perfect setting for further debate’ about the ‘rights of voiceless children’. In an article in *The Telegraph*, Zoe Brennan asks, ‘How can a mother lay her family so bare, while her husband is so passionately opposed to the public airing of their affairs?’ Rather astonishingly, Brennan then names Cusk’s husband (who is not named in *Aftermath*), tells readers about his life and new career as photographer while berating Cusk for mentioning him in her memoir. Amanda Craig, writing in *The Independent* notes of Cusk: ‘She does love her daughters; a reader questions whether, despite her accounts of trying to maintain normality, she loves them enough’. Comments from readers and in the blogosphere were often similarly critical, condemning Cusk for
her solipsism, intellectualism, breaching her family’s privacy and (once again) not loving her children enough.

Of course, there were also positive reviews of the book and commentary supporting Cusk’s right to write about her marriage. Lisa Appignanesi writes in *The Telegraph*, ‘The facts here are all to do with her own ways of seeing and feeling. There is nothing to embarrass children, even husband, unnamed friends and lover. Readers may want more fact than she is prepared to give, even while chastising her for giving what she has’. Her point is well-made: many comments on *Aftermath* both criticise the author for writing about her marriage breakdown and demonstrate disappointment that she didn’t tell more about why the marriage failed. The only detail provided—‘an important vow of obedience was broken’ (Cusk, *Aftermath* 2)—seems to anger readers into demanding both less and more.

I suspect there are many issues coming into play here, including a misunderstanding about the nature of memoir, an idealisation of motherhood, and an anti-intellectual ethos in public life. The discussion has been framed as an issue about privacy and family. My interest in reading *Aftermath* is how it works to highlight the key challenges of memoir around ethics (including privacy) and truth-telling.

It seems to me that *Aftermath* dramatises the classic liberal feminist dilemma, where the goal of individual emancipation is compromised by liberalism’s foundational division of social life into separate public and private spheres and by the notion of individual autonomy within the public sphere as the key to emancipation. Cusk struggles with the notion that, because her lawyer husband gave up his work in order to ‘help’ look after the children, she has to pay him maintenance after they separate, even though she is ‘only a writer’ (that is, she doesn’t earn much and is a woman) and he has developed a new career as well as being able to practise as a lawyer if he wishes (and is a man). She believes that in swapping the traditional roles of bread-winning husband and childrearing wife, they have somehow come to be ‘unsexed’ or ‘transvestites’. Like many women who negotiate this swap, Cusk found that she still had a second role of
childrearing; as she puts it, she was ‘both man and woman, while my husband—meaning well—only did one’ (23).

Cusk says, ‘Call yourself a feminist, my husband would say to me, disgustedly, in the raw bitter weeks after we separated. He believed he had taken the part of woman in our marriage, and seemed to expect me to defend him against myself, the male oppressor’ (6). Her husband’s questioning of her feminist credentials is repeated by Cusk herself. She suggests that as a feminist she simply adopted the male values of her father. This became a problem only when she had children. She suggests that a feminist ‘acts as an interface between private and public, just as women always have, except that the feminist does it in reverse. She does not propitiate: she objects. She’s a woman turned inside out’ (15). This sense of being a woman turned inside out when the role of mother is added to her identity was first explored in *A Life’s Work* and is revisited in *Aftermath*. When her husband says he wants ‘half of everything, including the children’, she immediately says that the children ‘belong’ to her, and then is shocked by her own reaction (8–9). She realises that one of the unspoken conditions of the pact that allowed her career equality in marriage was that she ‘would not invoke the primitivism of the mother, her innate superiority’ over the father as parent. By ‘swapping roles’ with her husband, Cusk realises that she has unwittingly ceded her special status as main carer of the children while still doing much of the childrearing work, another contradiction that she struggles to accommodate.

Near the end of *Aftermath*, Cusk argues that it is ‘the authority’ of marriage and the ‘manufactured normality’ (105-6) of the nuclear family that causes these dilemmas, though of course marriage and family cannot be divorced from the social context in which we enact them and raise children. She finds life after separation to be full of chaos and says marriage ‘absorbs disorder and manifests it as order’ (122), expressing ambivalence about this authority and order. In an interview with Katherine Viner in *The Guardian* after the book’s publication, Cusk says, ‘what I saw was that in the breakdown of marriage the whole broken mechanism of feminism was revealed. I had expected to
find, at the end of the family structure, at least some proof of feminist possibility, however harsh. But either it wasn’t there or I couldn’t find it’ (Cusk, ‘Divorce is’). The post-familial, post-order life of separation is what Cusk calls aftermath, like the ruins of a civilisation, the Dark Ages explored by her school history teacher, Mrs Lewis. In spite of the pain of living in aftermath, Cusk notes that it is also a place of creativity. ‘Better, in Mrs Lewis’s view, to live the compartmentalised, the disorganised life and feel the dark stirrings of creativity, than to dwell in civilised unity, racked by the impulse to destroy’ (5).

The book itself attests to both the creative potential and the disorganisation of Cusk’s aftermath. At only 152 pages, it is stuffed with metaphors and analogies that aim to convey the pain and confusion of post-separation life. Her life is like a broken plate, a heap of jigsaw puzzle pieces, the aftermath of war, a Greek tragedy, a huge messy cake. A long story about a tooth extraction becomes a substitute for describing the day her husband moved out. Her daughter in an animal mask represents their joint longing to escape from painful emotions. There is a lodger howling in the garden at night and a bizarre holiday episode where Cusk allows herself to be abandoned in a run-down cottage without transport while her daughters take horse riding lessons. The stories of Abraham, Oedipus and Clytemnestra are retold and interpreted in ways that link to Cusk’s own situation and argument. Even as a sympathetic reader, I found this to be overkill. She is trying to convey an experience of grief—and grief is incoherent and disorganised and so must be structured—but the patterning here feels too contrived and elaborate. There is a final chapter, too, called ‘Trains’, which retells some of the separation story from the viewpoint of an au pair. As the au pair has not been mentioned previously (though Cusk paying for child care has), it is unclear whether this is a wholly fictional character invented for the book or if Cusk has imagined and dramatised the viewpoint of an au pair who had been working for her. Frances Stonor Saunders describes this as an ‘utterly disingenuous novelistic trick of resolution’ and suggests Cusk is suffering in this book from a
‘writerly greed, swooping on everything and wringing meaning from it, transforming it into something else rather than just letting it be.’

It is ironic that Aftermath proceeds in this exaggerated way, because one of the book’s key themes is the primacy of ‘truth’ over ‘story’. At the start of the book, Cusk says that her husband believes she has treated him badly. ‘It was his story, and lately I have come to hate stories. If someone were to ask me what disaster this was that had befallen my life, I might ask if they wanted the story or the truth’ (2). She goes on to argue that ‘the problem usually lies in the relationship between the story and the truth. The story has to obey the truth, to represent it, like clothes represent the body’ (2–3). She notes that unclothed truth is shocking while over-dressed truth becomes a lie, and that reconciling the two positions is difficult. Of course, Cusk recognises the contradiction in rejecting stories while writing her own story, an autobiographical act that uses stories from other texts and times to unveil her meaning. She also no doubt recognises that separating truth and story suggests the questionable idea that there is some truth available to us beyond the narratives we use to communicate with ourselves and one another. Writing about Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, she acknowledges that ‘form, in the end, conceals truth’ (55), perhaps reflecting also that the form and conventions of memoir have the potential to conceal truth. This acknowledgement may be one reason she breaks these conventions with her ventriloquist final chapter.

Questions about truth and narrative are common in discussions about autobiography. Philippe Lejeune, updating in 2005 his 1975 notion of ‘the autobiographical pact’, says, ‘The autobiographical pact is the engagement that an author takes to narrate his life directly (her life, or a part of it, an aspect of it) in a spirit of truth’ (qtd. in Miller 538). Academics may quibble about what this means, but writers and readers appear attached to this ‘spirit of truth’. John Barbour, in his book The Conscience of the Autobiographer, makes a useful distinction here between truth, which he calls a ‘correspondence between human thought and reality’ and truthfulness, which is ‘a process or quality of a person’ (26). The autobiographer, he argues,
cannot tell the truth, but can demonstrate truthfulness, ‘the active search for the most exact and insightful understanding of past experience’ (26). Using this distinction, Cusk’s memoir can be read as an attempt to be truthful in her interpretation and articulation while struggling with the inability to tell ‘the truth’. Her suspicion of ‘story’ as she tells a story makes sense in this context. Barbour suggests that we can understand truthfulness in autobiography as a dialogue between a writer’s conscience and her imagination: ‘The writer’s moral scruples set limits to and orient the imaginative project of self-representation’ (27). Revisiting *Aftermath* in this light, we might argue that the tooth extraction, howling lodger, animal masks and the like are the only way she can represent herself with truthfulness and remain faithful to her imagination and sense of self. If the book at times seems grandiose, this may be a reflection of what Parker describes as our society’s ‘grandiose expectations of mothers’ which, she argues, ‘mothers, with their profound desire to be good mothers, both reproduce and resist’ (34). Cusk’s ‘over-egged effect’ (Burchill) represents this grandiosity while the voice of self-dissection resists it.

Barbour views autobiography as an exercise of conscience, part of the purpose of which is to protect the integrity of the self and maintain the self’s continuity and identity. The representation in *Aftermath* of the disorder and loss that separation entails is accompanied by the narrator’s commentary on the gap between the ideal and the reality of both marriage and motherhood. Scenes from Cusk’s life are constantly juxtaposed with theoretical discussions, complicating and enriching the work, creating the seeds of a post-aftermath identity. By the penultimate chapter, Cusk is seeing a psychologist and a new lover. There is a sense that she is starting to move on from the separation but, ironically, this chapter is in fact less coherent than earlier chapters, being written in fragments with no clear structure. It is as if Cusk has not yet developed the stories she needs to help her interpret or pattern her new life and self. Where is the roadmap for life after the Dark Ages?

This is the context in which we read the final chapter of the book, ‘Trains’. This chapter is narrated in the third person from the focal
point of Sonia, a European au pair working for Cusk and her husband just before they separate. Sonia is young and initially frightened to be away from home. Through her eyes, Cusk—called ‘the woman’—is described: ‘the woman talks about things that don’t exist. There’s something that comes from her, something other than words. It’s as if she isn’t contained in her own skin. She spills out and Sonia can see the spillage’ (133). Soon after she arrives, Sonia tells ‘the woman’ about an episode when she was on a train going to boarding school at fifteen and a man raped her on the train. Sonia’s mother was angry with her for reporting this and so Sonia harmed herself and then spent a year in a psychiatric hospital. ‘The woman’ seems angry that she hasn’t been told about this and talks about sending Sonia back home. However, later that day ‘the woman’ becomes ill and Sonia looks after her and the children. Not long after this, the couple separate and Sonia is sent to live with a relative’s family in London. The chapter ends with Sonia making a stollen and posting half to ‘the woman’ and half to ‘the man’ for Christmas.

It is unclear exactly what Cusk is trying to achieve with this final chapter. Is it an attempt to gain ‘resolution’ as Saunders suggests? Or a way of showing, through an onlooker, how little we know ourselves, as Lisa Appignanesi proposes? Could it be an attempt to give validation to her story or, conversely, a way of acknowledging that in the wider scheme of things, her own traumas are not very serious? Can she only allow empathy (for herself, her husband, her au pair) into her work by stepping into another person’s mind? Is she breaking the autobiographical pact here to suggest that all of her book has been just ‘story’ after all, on a par with her husband’s story that she had treated him monstrously? Perhaps it is the very notion that she is writing about the self that drives this final chapter, an acknowledgement that it is the (feminist) relational self not the (masculine) singular self that autobiography represents. As Nancy Miller puts it, feminist theorists have argued persuasively that, ‘the female autobiographical self comes into writing, goes public with private feelings, through a significant relation to an other’ (544). Indeed, Miller (following Eakin)
argues that this model of a relational self is true of all autobiography, saying: ‘Perhaps it is time to understand the question of relation to the other—to others—as being as important, foundational, to the genre as the truth conditions of the “autobiographical pact”’ (544). Cusk’s final chapter may be a result of this imperative to be seen in relation to or from the viewpoint of another.

Whatever the reason for this chapter, my concern is with the ethics of it. Cusk has been criticised for writing about her husband and children, even though in fact she hardly divulges anything about them, avoids using their names and writes only about her own feelings and experiences. But I have not read any commentary about the ethics of Cusk writing about or from the perspective of Sonia. I wonder if this is because the privacy of a young European au pair is considered less important by the UK media than the privacy of Cusk’s husband and children. If Sonia is based on an au pair who worked for Cusk then it seems to me that Cusk is guilty of a breach of privacy at the very least. But even if Sonia is a fictional character, the fact that the reader doesn’t know this and she is introduced without explanation in the final chapters raises ethical questions. We read memoir as non-fiction and therefore we may expect Sonia to be a real person, just as we expect the other facts told in the chapter (Cusk’s illness, her swollen jaw after the tooth extraction, the *stollen* and so on) to be truthful. Is it then ethical to tell of Sonia’s rape, self-harm and stay in a psychiatric ward as an incidental side-issue to the important marriage breakdown story of this book? To tell the story from the focal point of Sonia herself does not resolve this ethical dilemma. There is little honouring of Sonia’s story—or of similar experiences that many young women have suffered. Nor is there space in this chapter to convey the full richness and specificity of Sonia as a character; she is only really a witness to the Cusk family drama. Given Cusk’s ability to be self-critical, even cruel to herself (125), it may be that my response to this chapter was the intended one; that we are supposed to situate Cusk and her family woes in a wider perspective, to care about the Sonias of this world. However,
it’s hard to see the value of that in this context. It feels like another of her self-indulgent moments; another story that is grist for her mill rather than a genuine consideration of other women’s experiences.

If autobiography is necessarily relational, then part of the struggle for a life writer to be ethical is surely around her characterisation of others (as well as herself). Ethics in writing memoir is not just about protecting the identities of your characters, avoiding telling embarrassing stories or outing people’s secrets in your work. It is more than writing truthfully without claiming you tell ‘the truth’. I would argue that ethical memoir writing is also about trying to convey, through characterisation, the interest and value of other people’s lives and the value of different experiences and perspectives. Barbour, Eakin, Frank, David Parker and others argue that we write—and read—autobiography partly because we want to understand what it is to live a good life, a life of value or worth. If this is the case, then it is even more important that the other characters in life writing are fully developed and do more than simply act as commentators on the autobiographer’s life.

The weakness of Aftermath is perhaps the weakness of many memoirs: by the end of the book we know very little about anyone other than the narrator herself. Her family and friends act as foils to her; her children are more like barometers of her own mothering skills than they are real people. There are no alternative versions of how to live offered. This may be the result of a desire to protect her children (and maybe her husband). By failing to develop them as characters, she avoids invading their privacy. The irony here is that Cusk has been condemned for allowing her children to be ‘counted as acceptable collateral damage’ in her work (Guardian) and portraying her husband as ‘a man emasculated’ (Brennan), accusations I consider unwarranted.

In spite of my reservations about the final chapter and some of the stylistic aspects of Aftermath, I think it makes a significant contribution to the life writing literature on contemporary marriage and mothering. Cusk demonstrates a rare willingness to articulate the complexities
of her relationship with her husband and children and the sense of disorder and fear that separation can engender. She has the courage to represent some of her own primal reflexes and feelings around her children. And she conveys the excruciating pain a mother feels when her own choices and actions result in suffering for her children. Once again, there is an irony in the way the publication of *Aftermath* resulted in a further aftermath where Cusk is condemned for causing more suffering to her children by acknowledging their suffering.

The extent to which children who are characters in their parents’ memoirs suffer as a result is not something we can really know. As a writer, I can only guess how my son may feel about my memoir in the years to come. Will he have his own dark aftermath? Perhaps his experience will be no different from most children, much of whose lives are now recorded and made available on social media sites. A printed literary memoir probably has a smaller readership than most facebook pages. This is not to deny the seriousness of writing about family members, especially more vulnerable ones. As Jane Shilling asks, however, ‘if one may not write candidly about the experience of motherhood, then about what else may one not write? What other human relationships might be deemed unsuitable for exploration by writers?’ Cusk writes about her marriage breakdown as a way to explore the dilemmas around parenting for contemporary women in the UK. My own book was an attempt to explore how one might understand difference and mother across a kind of neurological or cultural divide, as well as a celebration of the value of autistic people. These topics seem to me to be worth exploring in an autobiographical form given the profound interconnectedness of the personal with their political, social and cultural aspects.

If, as John Barbour argues, autobiography is essentially an exercise of conscience, then the autobiographical act of creating a coherent narrative which shapes personal identity through moral self-reflection and imagination is simply a more formal and developed version of every individual’s struggle for self-knowledge and self-understanding. Such self-knowledge cannot come without recognition of our relation-
It is almost impossible for women to write autobiographically about motherhood without writing about their children. To simply argue that it is unethical to write about children at all is an easy response that denies mothers the opportunity to express what may be some of the most profound and complex experiences of their lives. As Carolyn Heilbrun says, ‘power consists to a large extent in deciding what stories will be told’ (43–4). Do we want to prevent readers from accessing literature that expresses some of their own experiences and against which they can consider their own lives? Heilbrun also points out, ‘What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that’ (37).

I can’t predict how writing about my life as a mother may affect my son Ben in the future. At the moment, though, I can see that the stories in my book have been incorporated into our lives in the same way that, over time, holiday photographs come to define the experience of a holiday. At his recent birthday, Ben said to me, ‘Mum, can you believe I’m thirteen now? I used to be that two year old who confused his pronouns, loved numbers and was afraid of loud noises.’ He seemed amazed and impressed that he was growing up, as if reading my narrative had given him a new and different perspective on himself. I can’t say if this is a good thing or not.

All families tell stories that describe and may constrain individual members. I have gone to great lengths in my memoir to identify the narrative as my own, to suggest that other people, including my son, would interpret our lives in different ways. Indeed, I note some of Ben’s re-interpretation of my perspective in my final chapter, when he questions my implication that a fascination with numbers is less valuable than an interest in other people and social connection. Ben also has the last word on how to end the book, hinting that it will be him not me who creates his own future, tells his own life story. Pablo Neruda is reputed to have said, ‘Two things make a story. The net and the air that falls through the net.’

We each have to cast our own net.
Notes

1. ‘Ben’ is the name used for my son in my memoir, not his real name.
2. For the purposes of this essay, I have used the terms autobiography and memoir somewhat interchangeably. In life writing scholarship there is normally a distinction made between a full autobiography and memoir which is often theme or time-limited. See Smith and Watson for more on these distinctions.
3. I recognise that controversy also helps sell books, especially memoirs.
4. Source unknown.

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There's a big black and white cat who sometimes lurks around the edges of my inner-city courtyard. I've tried to charm him, but the most I've managed is to cajole him into a brief finger sniff. He never repeated the favour. Mostly he likes to hide amongst the poinsettia, bought to decorate a dining table one Christmas but now grown leggy and demanding under our orange tree.

My father, Merv, sits in one armchair all day, sleeping. My mother once described him as having 'cat-like eyes', and it's true he is kind of squinty. From the chair, he can look left out through the glass doors to the garden. He's mainly interested in discussing the varieties of citrus fruit. I ask sometimes if he would like to go out there. He laughs, maniacally, as if I'm mad.

One summer afternoon, I'm talking to the big Tom while I'm hanging out washing. There's four of us in the house. We range in age from eleven to ninety-two. Aside from me, it's an all male household. As I'm pegging the underwear, I adopt what I hope is a tempting tone of voice. I'm desperate for company, and I've kept cats before who have wandered in through my doors or windows. But they are all long gone. It's a kind of hope I cling to now, that one day another cat...
will choose me. My high-pitched flattery, punctuated by small kisses, is having no effect. This cat is impervious.

Merv spies the cat, and smiles. How sweet, I think. By the time I get inside, Merv has a plan. He tells me I should get a long piece of wire. I know him well enough to feel reluctant about continuing the conversation. ‘Don’t bother talking to the cat’, he advises. ‘Hook the wire around the cat’s collar, and haul him inside.’ My father’s portly face has come to rest in a perverse grin. I’d like to say that the pleasure of anticipated cruelty towards an animal is a mark of his advancing dementia. But I’ve watched that cheshire cat grin all my life.

In the 1980s my parents lived in a Georgian terrace in Darlinghurst. That makes it sound more house and garden than it actually was. It was grimy and rough and, like all their houses, in a dangerous state of disrepair. My mother, Dorothy, was confined to the upper storey. She claimed arthritis stopped her from leaving the rooms on that level. I suspect a more Victorian explanation, somewhere between heartbreak and self-recrimination. Merv would occasionally break the rhythm of her writing by pointing his rifle out the upper-storey windows and picking off alleycats. I worried he might hit one of the prostitutes next door. Mum would look up from her notebook fleetingly, remonstrating, ‘You are awful, Mervie!’ Almost without pause, she then returned to penning her ritually rescripted romances, mourning her bygone beauty and celebrating her still-desperate passions.

I don’t know if it was the same rifle Merv had when I was a kid in South Perth. He grew up on a dairy farm in Queensland, and thought it natural to use a firearm. His father was an unusually violent man who enjoyed taking to him with a stockwhip. His elder brother, Oswald, inherited this disposition. His penchant for punching men earned him a ban from every pub in Yeppoon. He reserved a strap for his only daughter. Merv still dreams of defeating Ossie, now deceased, in a final bout on a mythical mountain. Given this savage lineage, my father’s tendencies towards violence are surprisingly mild.

In primary school I was bitten by a Doberman. They still frighten me. This one left teeth indentations in my thigh as I rode my bike past
his house. I came home crying, more with the shock of all that glossy black fury than with pain. So Merv put me in the front seat of the ute with the rifle across his lap. He demanded I navigate back to the scene of the crime. I took him to the street, but pretended I couldn’t remember which suburban yard the dog emerged from. I recall praying under my breath (religion wasn’t allowed in our house). In a lucky stroke of divine intervention, the Doberman was nowhere to be seen.

We had a dog of our own—Alf. He was the stuff of legend (though it has to be said that my mother had a neat trick of routinely transforming the mundane into melodrama). Alf was said to be an Alsatian-Boxer-Collie cross. He had been parted from the family in the Eastern States. Having never been outside Perth, I thought of this as a destination of unknown sophistication, and potential dog-nappers. Alf had fallen out of a trailer while my father, who has always had a unique driving style, turned a corner. Yet hopes remained for his recovery. I watched a lot of Lassie on our black and white TV, and although I already knew the outcome, whenever Mum got to this part of the story a surge of relief washed through me. Through some network of street-wise comrades, Alf was located. By that time Merv and Dorothy had moved back to my mother’s hometown. Merv was a merchant seaman, and Alf was given free passage on a ship bound westwards.

Like all fairytales, the story of Alf pivoted around a test of true love. With his big regal bearing and mostly docile temperament, Alf had insinuated himself into the hearts of hard men. They wanted to keep him as the ship’s dog. An agreement was brokered. When the gangplank was lowered, Merv would call his dog. The merchant seamen would stay on the boat and do likewise. Then it would be up to Alf. I imagine him poised there, torn momentarily between conflicting loyalties, until he bounded joyfully towards his long lost owner.

All this happened before I was born. Alf was, from the very start, my dearest childhood companion. I lay next to him for hours, picking off the fleas that ran rampant through his sandy fur, squashing them,
one by one, between my fingernails. Alf slept at the foot of my bed. Alf let me ride him; I pretended he was a circus lion. Alf kept me safe. There was a rumour that Alf had snapped the neck of a cat belonging to a girl at school. I forgave him, because you can’t argue with nature.

Like the rest of us, Alf learned to be self-reliant. There was no being taken for walks or visiting a vet. If you wanted something, you got it yourself. Merv fed Alf packets of frozen kangaroo meat. He would toss the frozen packet into the backyard. It would land with a resounding thump somewhere near the wood heap. Alf would retrieve the sealed packet and bury it in the garden. Once it defrosted, he would dig it up, tear open the plastic and consume the contents with drooling relish.

Alf wasn’t the only one who served himself. My father brewed honeymead in the back shed. I lay on the cool concrete floor, sucking down the contents through a narrow plastic tube. It made a day at South Perth Primary almost sweet. Despairingly, Mum lectured me.
‘You’ll be like a French child and have cirrhosis of the liver before you’re 10’, she warned. But no one put a lock on the shed.

When we moved to the mythical Eastern States, I was entering my final year of primary school. I hoped to sell newspapers at Circular Quay (or ‘Kway’ as I pronounced it then) in the drizzling rain. I may have read *The Little Matchgirl* one too many times. Alf came too. It was his second crossing of the continent, but his first plane trip. Following disembarkation, Alf lost his bark. I didn’t know whether it was the trauma of the trip or the temperature in the cargo hold. I’d heard that they refrigerated the area to sedate the animals on board.

One joyous day, in Centennial Park, Alf’s bark returned. I guess, though, that he was getting old. When I came home from school, I called him. But there were no shining eyes and thumping tail to meet me. I asked Merv if he had seen Alf. He said he had no idea where he was. This charade went on for days. Every afternoon I combed the streets of Woollahra, incessantly calling his name. Finally Merv couldn’t stand it any longer. He sat me down and gently told me that Alf had been very sick and he had to have him put down. His eyes brimmed with tears. We both loved that animal. I was eleven and it was my first heartbreak. Merv had hoped to somehow save me from that pain. I still often dream of finding Alf again, just around the next corner. When I wake, the stale smell of grief lingers in the cracks and fissures of the day.

Merv, too, wanted to resurrect Alf. About six years later, he found a Boxer-Alsatian cross advertised in the local paper, and named him Abe. ‘Cane killed Abel, but it won’t kill me’, he used to recite, quoting a poem he authored about his days as a canecutter. Sometimes Abe lived with Merv; sometimes he lived with me; in his final years, he lived with my brother, Tom. Abe never measured up to Alf, but that didn’t stop Merv trying to make him. When Merv and Abe went for a walk, Merv would try to instruct Abe in manly behaviour. He would egg him on to fight other male dogs, and to fuck females. It’s hard to adequately describe the embarrassment of standing outside Bill and Toni’s café, while Merv loudly encouraged Abe to mount a passing
Great Dane. Every time Abe fell off, their heights being ill-matched, Merv would castigate him loudly, and Abe, ashamed, would try again.

In those days my whereabouts tended towards the mercurial. Sometimes I was living in a de facto relationship and sometimes, when that ended in tears, or something worse, I would briefly return home. I first left at sixteen. I was lying in bed listening to my mother hitting on my boyfriend, Tim. The familiar sounds of her florid, confrontational flirtation travelled on a Woollahra breeze through my attic window. I resolved to go, waiting until she was attending some writers’ event interstate. As it turned out, I had bitten off more than I could chew. With an enticing familiarity, Tim’s affections proved as unreliable and histrionic as my mother’s.

Abe, too, tended to overestimate his capacities. Goaded on by Merv, he was learning to take on all comers. On a balmy Sydney evening I found him whimpering and blood-soaked on our street. The guard dog who lived on the corner terrace had well and truly got the better of him. He lay there, unable to move. I ran to get my father. Merv came and, with the great gentleness that forms the flipside of his distorted character, lifted Abe and carried him back to the house and up the stairs, cooing reassuringly to him the whole while. Abe was crook. He gradually manoeuvred his damaged body under the billiards table, and lay there stoically nursing his many wounds. I sat under the table with him, breathing his breath and dreaming his dreams.

Dorothy was infuriated. She couldn’t abide not being the centre of attention. Some days she was worse than others. ‘That bloody dog is bleeding all over my seagrass matting’, she bellowed. ‘Get him out of here!’ We ignored her. Eventually Abe recovered, without the help of a vet. But I still baulk when I recall the petty ugliness of her outburst.

Now Abe, too, has gone. And my mother.

I never got another dog. In the end, they up and die on you.

When I pick my eleven-year-old son up from school, I tell him the story about Merv and the cat in our courtyard. I’m not sure if I’m trying to frighten him, or hoping to relieve some of the sense of
cyclical catastrophe through the retelling. When I get to the bit about the hook and the wire, Ewan is horrified. Tearily, he tells me that sometimes he thinks Grandad should be in an asylum.

Occasionally I’ve thought the very same thing. Merv is the kind of man who conjures up adjectives like ‘kind’ and ‘gentle’ and ‘vicious’ and ‘vindictive’ all at the same time.

He’s a hard man to love, but I’m still trying.
The Dutch Widow

Jennifer Compton

We slept through it, we knew nothing—she said—until they knocked on our door. The poor girl died in her car on our front lawn. People started saying that we couldn’t live here anymore but I told them by the time I was ten I had seen enough dead bodies to fill Frankston cemetery. Twice over. I come from Rotterdam. The youngest of thirteen. Our mother couldn’t feed us, such times, she sent us to the park to eat grass. Last year he died, my man. I am alone. I pass her every other day, bent in her bit of garden, folded in half like a dancer in a *port de bras* exercise *en bas*, thoughtfully scrutinizing and weeding her grass.
The garden shines, soaked by night rain.  
Over months we’ve unearthed ivy and dead shrubs,  
bedded new camellias around those planted  
long since by my father.  
The smallest is lost to February heat,  
others bear leaf-scars; but this grove will thrive.

Becoming, after lifelong resistance,  
a gardener, I sift soil for debris,  
clearing stones and broken roots,  
letting air into tamped earth.  
Next, the embellishments—canna lilies,  
impatiens, flax rising above white rocks;  
by the door, jade. We’ll rest or work here,  
breathe the sweet, salt-winnowed air.
Their House

Diane Fahey

In the early years of the town of Barwon Heads, some landholders built boat sheds large enough to live in on their weekend and holiday visits.

Bought for a song in 1972:
rusty walls and ceilings of pressed tin; no stumps;
a cramped main room. There was a sense of old chill.
My father refurbished it to survive him,
see out my mother’s days—with, even then,
the conviction that he should leave first.

Their home became snug yet never lost
that whiff of awkward exoticism:
among the town’s oldest; once a boat-house,
some say—a rumour I neither believe
nor disbelieve, would like to think is true.
These days I harbour dreams of seeing out
my own time on this piece of earth that has grown
weeds and flowers and trees with such abandon.
Sometimes they put you in seas
or rivers without telling you.
The river is dark, let’s say
and trees are low over you.
In the branches are owls
making noises like a machine
breathing.

After you come away from this
you have a scar and a jar
where you swim.
It is chemical, archaeological
and violent.

So you wash it all away.
It’s too early for things to be
broken or twisted
but even when you run, you fall.

All your life, if you could fly
all your life slides from under you
and you do not have to swallow
water or hear it.

You do not have to but you must
as the clouds fall without telling you.
Reservoir: a place where something is kept in store

Ross Donlon

For Kerry

Morning, clear as crystal. Sun motes fill the reservoir, rising like champagne.

I park, cross to where reeds hide the road, undress and stretch to a star shape. Leonardo’s Renaissance man twinkles fingers and toes before the rising sun of High Middle Age.

The skin I enter is blue, black, brown or gold and cool as silk, a wave of air combed by mist as I start to swim, penis a tiny rudder, body propelled by a no name action enough to reach the centre. I cruise a tightrope of water, more-or-less at ease above the cleft of flooded creek, dissolving now and then into the sky’s mirror. And inside fluid, close and alert, what discoveries being an animal again. Once, dragonflies buzzed close enough to see goggles, moustache and flying scarf.
And when nightwind bullied the town, an archipelago of fairy islands shivered in next morning’s breeze—worlds of duck down whisked from border reeds. They disappeared in a touch. I count each stroke and joke it’s my reservoir rosary—

I am better the more I do. Still I take time, occasionally to check my wake and always find, not surprisingly,

my ripples only extend so far—the way I’ve come already invisible, even when I’ve tried to splash.
Saint Kevin and The Blackbird

Judy Johnson

I hope you love birds too. It is economical.
   It saves on the need to go to heaven.

Emily Dickinson

Backlit, the winter blackbirds are dark clothes-pins
on bare branches, hanging small rags
   of the low Irish sun out to dry.

In 618, Saint Kevin of Glendalough
found a blackbird
   had landed on his palm
when his arms were outstretched in prayer.

He remained still
as the bird built its nest
   brooded over
and finally hatched its eggs.

He survived, or so the legend goes
on the offered food and water from its beak.

The same Saint Kevin hated human kind
so demonstrably
   he once threw a woman who desired
to marry him, over a cliff to her death.
So what is the lesson?

    Is it just that one man’s likeness of flesh
    is another man’s poison?

    Or is distance itself the thing?
    And God or bird
    we may only worship something
    so far apart from us
    there’s no chance
    we’ll ever understand it?

At some secret signal, the blackbirds in the tree
take flight in a heart flutter of wings.

Each denuded branch reacts by swaying
like the high wire at a circus
    after the walker has stepped off
    and onto the safety of the platform.

Five minutes later, the smaller twigs still swoon.
The Heywood Spire

Graham Kershaw

Below Howarth Cross, tussocky fields
still wait for builders; ‘Pick your plot now.’
Mice dart away through clover and thistles
dodging oil drums, chip wrappers, surprised
by the impossible song of long-lost looms.
Under Cobbled Bridge, off Belfield Lane
the stones erode along their grain, as lain.
On the underside, immortalised, ‘Kipper Lips’
and ‘Tina too much too young.’

Past cyclists, fisherman and fern-clad locks
two men on a scaffold are bricking-up
the last of nine great eyeless mills.
The sun-stone rolls over Blackstone Edge.
On Smalley Street, each drainage grate
is still in place. Doris hasn’t even moved
the old meat slicer, yet she doesn’t know
me, as she squints over change, saying,
‘You’re better off than you realised, love.’

From the church, scrawled on the garage
my brothers’ names, then the gentle rise
of Heywood Road dipping and winding
narrowly between dark hawthorn trees,
cobbled patches still breaking through,
hints at something we called ‘the country’
as we headed out one Sunday morning
blindfold toward the Heywood spire
with no thought of returning.
The Window onto the Bay (after Kafka)

Christopher Konrad

Whoever could sit in solitude by a window looking out over the sullen bay and yet people it with sea weary sailors, gulls screeching overhead, terns darting swiftly, deftly; solemnly protecting their cliff-side nests and where swallows dot a dreary skyline like coursing black stars in the daytime; the solitary watcher will never be lonely nor will she ever fail to craft a poem that will hook the reader of fine words with a relentless tackle to be reeled in breathless on a pebbly shore nor will she fail to pierce the mirror of that reader's illusions with sharp intonations, striated synaesthesia perhaps on a drunken boat, perhaps the corpse of a cross bowed albatross and the dart of her desire (whatever it is; fame, strength, to walk straight on a crooked dune path) will arch over that sheltered rocky cliff: it may drop sharp into the dark green-kelped depth or it may land softly on a ledge swept by the kestrel so vigilant over its crag nest. I am thinking of Kafka in Prague: of his window onto the street.
In the Voice of a Tree

Michelle Leber

for Georgina King (1845–1932)

Do not marry if you wish to develop your talent
George Bennett

Her warm curve on my spine—
it’s like this each day. She’s reading
with her little sighs, pressing a book
to her hillocks, as if absorbing my ancestors
by way of brooding osmosis.
No one knows what she reads.

Some days she writes letters,
packing faultless flowers between paper
and lets the laughing dove take them
across meadows, over the mountains,
to enter Ferdinand’s chamber as he sits
with Termination Lake specimens
and a glorious relic labeled Jilted Pride.
No one knows what he reads.

The dandelion seed has taken sentry
in her hair. For the view. For companionship.
Ants devising better ways to reach honey,
by-pass the shady blooms of her sleeve
that puff like batwings onto her page.
No one knows what she reads.
If I could, I’d insist she reconcile
her natural beauty. When her head
turns to the bee, rises on its tower to meet
with clouds, I believe we are more than kindred:
how shall we commune, together admire
our mandate with petalite, tuff beds, fern allies.
I am bending my branches.
No one knows what she reads.
A view of the garden

Andrew Taylor

Beyond the window the railing
of the balcony and then a stretch
of lawn drifting in the rain
to the cherry, lilac and further trees
that block the view we used to have
of the Rhein. Yesterday
a squirrel hung like an orange comma
gnawing at hazelnuts and showering
their nibbled shells onto the grass. Now
an uncustomary plane somewhere over the clouds
drifts with its drone away and the garden
is filled with the trilling and signaling
of blackbirds, more beautiful by far
than the nightingale I heard last year
near Goethe’s house in Weimar.
Shaping the Dark

Robyn Rowland

three readings of Tony Lloyd’s oil on linen painting: On a dark night you can see forever

Day is so cluttered with definition:
angles of buildings, blue pools in backyards,
powerlines, and the fraught confusion of clouds.
The night’s black velvet though—
unwritten upon, still opening ahead—
could be any time, any place.

i.  Night is soft as longing.
The road so lean, like her body,
limbs ivory as the lines on it,
smooth and sinuous as the trunks of trees
shed of bark, dancing in the headlights;
and her eyes brighter than the city glitter below.
When you meet at the top of the dark mount
all the world splayed out below,
she will tell you this is forever;
that all this could be yours.
Your heart accelerates with the drive up,
a small planet bouncing against your ribs;
and the ache for the holding of her,
sable hair blocking out the moon.
In the dark anything seems possible.
Winding the window down, trees are slowly shivering.
A leafy rustling in the illicit dark is whispering:
‘why are you here?’
ii. Night holds history inside its black cape.
You know when your unit reaches the top of this ridge
your truck will turn, unload, and the firing begins.
Sarajevo sits sparkling, a diamond sunk below the ring of hills;
cosmopolitan, blended Ottoman and Austrian and Bosnian,
a jangle of colour and bright spirit, a tight woven history.
You enjoy the lights now; ‘like fairyland’, your mother used to say;
and she’d wonder: ‘what are you doing here?’
People below don’t know what you know.
That they are now targets, ducks in a shooting gallery.
That fifteen hundred children will be killed, ten thousand adults;
three hundred mortars a day will burn their books, crush their history,
buildings and bodies fragmented.
For four years: no heat, no power, no water, no food.
Then they will know blackness:
a lightless city where only your flares will ignite it
so mortars can find victims in the dark.
That long black road may go on forever.
iii. Night is full of fairytales and hope; those lights below stunning. Still; it’s just the drive home, nothing special. Well, ordinary, you suppose; that’s what life is after all. This moment captured in your memory, the road winding up and the rattling city beneath a furry moon. Good to leave it. Lovely, yes, to live up here above the stars below; to feel the kids have trees to breathe in and a deep mist swirling on sunrise. Then the whole world’s pink and hazy. You’d think this road goes on forever but it doesn’t. It stops at your house, with the fire lit, kids in pyjamas, their Dad tired but happy with his day’s painting; waiting for the last piece of that puzzle—you—to slide in out of the dark lighting the front porch home.
Heavy with liquor I drip,
fingertip
my way to your room.

Here where the darkness clings
I dream in a shadow skin
of re-opening
hallways.

Here is where all things fold in
upon themselves.

I envelop you like read
letters from bleeding gums
(earlier—when you spat
syllables
into the street).

My mouth is the slot
post box kiss me;
I’ll drink the unsent
words away.
Be clean for me—
an untroubled page.

Secrets are nothing but tumours
love
lesions that write
whole novels in your heart.

Put the words into my mouth and let me
choose when to spit
or swallow.
She said, The music is enough. He said the branches, the overarching arms, control. Bach, she said, tempered well, clavier and violin. But Wittgenstein or Chomsky’s Black Box, you can’t ignore him—or Said. Sad, she said, I know. Will you walk with me. A meeting, he said. How late it is, so late. There’s Gaza and Tibet, the melting ice-caps. But the roses. Down by the creek the waratahs are blooming. In the paddocks the children are kicking toadstools, bottling tadpoles. Hayek! he cried, stop this feckless frivolity, the world in crisis and you cry for a cat-caught bird, a car-crushed pet. While you, my love play war-games in the wind, calculate the pace of entropy, the endless march of lemmings. This daisy chain my lifeline; it’s yours to break and mine to stitch together. Kiss me, she said.
Family photos

Belinda Rule

The dark half
of my face, in the shade of the tree
could have been anything.
How would you know?

It could have been
all rust and silver trout scales, each
bright as a coin,
sharp as a knife.

It could have been an open wound:
quivering fish-guts,
wet as a mangled mouth.

What would you know,
about the cavern in my body,
the groaning of the wind,
the grinding of the rocks?
How would its song sound
should I pop off the top and speak?
Like the beating of wings?
The scream of a bird?

The sound of a phone, bleating
like a rabbit in a trap,
in a house, when you know
the caller is me,
and I am calling to tell you:
this.
She is looking for his hand, still.
Not because she misses its strength
holding her waist as they walk together
nor yet because she can’t remember
the shape of his hold on her.
She can still feel the slight tremor
that ran through it the first time
his thumb tautened her nipple,
she remembers well how his fingers
curled round their newborn’s head,
how his palm cushioned their future.

No, she is looking for her husband’s hand
because she knows he still needs it,
knows that if she got it back
he could rest in peace
despite the stab wounds
— 43 of them—
despite the acid-burnt-out eye sockets
despite the rage, despite the terror.

She grew up on the stories of what happened
to their Xhosa King Hintsa in 1835,
knows his head, or ears, or genitals
were cut off by British soldiers
and taken as war trophies back to Scotland,
knows his soul blew everywhere
unable to settle, looking for the lost parts of him.
Those stories echoed again
when she heard Mr. Jacobs say
he was shown a hand in a bottle
by police in Port Elizabeth,
when she heard another man testify
he saw the hand of a black activist
in a bottle at a police station
and was told it was a baboon’s hand,
the hand of a communist.

She had not known what they did
with his right hand before then
and she still does not know where it is.
She dreams in the night not of his torture
but of his lost soul searching, searching,
still not at rest, never at rest.

Sometimes, when she sees her son’s hand,
it's perfect copy,
she is forced to her knees
till she catches her breath

and then she goes once again
to those places where they no longer see her,
and begs to be let inside their cages, their basements,
begs to be shown the storerooms and closets,
begs all the officers to look one more time,
begs on her knees to find peace
for a man whose hand nobody holds.

* Based on testimony from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission
At first they thought they were deadwood. Logs stuck
Up out of the lagoon’s mouth; the grey ash of giant cigar
Butts tapped away by the water’s tea-stained lips; or fence
Posts overwhelmed by the lake’s abstract theory of space.
But when their heads periscoped & broke the air’s surface,
Chopping through the mid-morning crest of marine light,
Their anonymity was wrecked; cars u-turned to crane their
Necks. They stalled on a sea of tall sedge; red lures jiggled
With ripe seed as children lost their sure footing & sank.
Spying on a new species was their spiritual uplift, a force
Of nature that drove them off the road’s thin blue wedge;
To act out of habit; observation began before the dam.
No dancing, no trumpeting, they saw the familiar things,
A pair of lifers walking on water; a random flap of wing.
Our Dads laid the lime-stones. We couldn’t lift
or nudge them with our toes
because of what we might catch
under. Like you can’t put your feet
down the bottom, we were
too soft for yabbies, and you
never dive from the bank
because the logs move
where they can’t be seen
overnight. We kept to the surface
struck with water-boatmen,
sun-skitterish pin-pricks of life,
scattering away from the ripples
our fingers made. The year
he laid the path, my father
moved elsewhere, and I
put my head under
for the first time,
past the warm spot.
Swam deep,
it was so dark
and so cold,
there was no
way up.
It was after the long boat was parbuckled over the larboard gangway that the sea revealed its measure to me, slapping the hull all the stunned day and then the night, more insipid and loathsome than any husband. The men spat and stuffed the seams with strips of leather and wrung their greasy hair, but still the tepid water trickled in until we were knee-deep like washerwomen. I could say nothing of my three bairns at Stromness, suddenly torn from my chest, as if the heart of God no less had resided there, nor of the one surrendered by my womb, beneath my billowing skirts, silent as a fish.

When the sun and salt had seared my eyes, I saw my children on an island strewn with ice, frigid before a headstone, their skin the colour of pigeon eggs and their hats batten to their skulls with the grip of something like my love.
Then the sea finally dispensed with us, like a butcher casts his offal, upon a plain of sand vast and blowing with despair. I saw the wolf-dogs biding time and those other strangers’ children, and I could no more stop my keening.

It was then I wrenched off my petticoats and bid them tumble through the air, my body emptied of prayer but delirious—as a whore’s, some will claim—for pardon.
haven

paul summers

christmas island, december 2010

heavy now as ballast lead, a weightless
baby drifts from vision. wide-eyed but

lifeless, melting in the twilight of expanding
depth. she waves in the drag of undertow &

saturated lungs. each gilded globe of fleeing
breath seeks refuge in the cusp of sky & sea.

each fragile bauble of misplaced hope exploded
in the tensions of a rolling swell. & heavy now

as ballast lead, their empty hearts grow cold
& dead. all dreams defunct in waking terror.

they melt into expanding depth. their muted
eyes accuse, though lacking any focus; they fix

like cadavers on points of consensus, their pupils
pulled like moths towards the light upon the hill.
Storm Approaching Where We Would Be If

John Kinsella

Storms written from the eye up north or down south before the tangent wall of front sends its first coils and lashes of breeze and ensuring gusts out over coastal plain, up over hills, through tall blooded forests, onto jigsaws of wheat and bush. Writing as roofs are peeled back and people exposed, as water-tank crumples before big rain can reinforce corrugated walls, animals huddling beneath and behind granite boulders, caves animated by lightning strokes, thunder quietening dogs for miles. In the thick of tempest, you recall silences of birds, the absent parrots, and write them furiously. Your poem is full of warning and prophecy; every aberrant noise is recorded. But as the third great storm of the week approaches that south-west corner—coast, plain, hills, forests, the jigsaws of wheat and bush, we are missing. Damage reports will come in later. We hope there’ll be no casualties. But there will be, on that sliding scale drawn up for disasters: human, animal, plant... buildings. Better to be there and report inside out. Shuck off the anaesthetic of privation.
Employment Problem

Bruce Dawe

Of course, I shouldn’t have been employing them on an early morning shift, anyway (the legs, I mean). So when I fell twice on that concrete footpath just down the road, fracturing my skull and an eye-socket and breaking my nose, I was already feeling a bit off (pneumonia, as it turns out), and where I usually had legs there were, suddenly, just these two strips of shredded paper and so down I went, head-first. Two large pools of blood marked my falls, but I can’t get over my legs, those fairly reliable workmen, just giving up on me, as if I was a crooked employer they had suddenly decided to walk out on, leaving me scrabbling to make sense of it, after all those years of mutually gainful industry!

They’re back again, now, looking dutiful and subservient, hoping for their old jobs back… But (one bruised brow still raised in doubt) I don’t know whether I can trust them anymore. These skinned knuckles, knee-caps, finger-tips, and torn tendon are like reminders of the oil-rags and worn playing-cards those workmen left behind when they just up and walked off the job early that Monday morning… Still, I know I’m a softie, so: ‘Ok, fellers, but this is your last chance, right?’
Night-Brain

Marjorie Main

Whilst waking, whilst falling into sleep, dreams are loosed, white shafted arrows, from the blackberry bramble of my night-brain; fluttering white sheets left overnight on the line between some young gums. The creek at night is tannin-tea dark, the sky upon it is fractured by bush branches, and the pieces between are nothing, pupils expanding and dilating as wind twitches trees, as stars pulse palely; fleeting flickers on the water.

Last night I heard a mopoke’s song alone in an unfamiliar oak, from 12.15 until 1, just like the nights before, while college was quiet, revels elsewhere. From the old brown brick arches, hung a wolf spider, backlit by the moon on its tender thread, hairy legs trembling in the current of my steps.
And later magpies’ heraldic speeches,
as the warm yolk of sleep
is again, at last, all eaten,
and the sun rises as its ghost.

Like eyes bringing the trails of sparklers
in and out of focus,
my worlds merge and diverge,
north, south; city, farm; the people.
Neural pathways entwine and tangle,
snagging thorns and inky blotting berries
choke the creek downstream.

At home Dad thinks of pies,
The Runt of the picking,
Mibs tells me of it all;
old Annie has a crook leg,
the cows and rabbits are at the garden again,
how at the beach they sighted dolphins.
And I remember the huge black
sea slug we found, drifting dying in the shallows,
the long stinging scratches that blackberry thorns
avenged themselves upon us with,
the voyage of the boys one year, in a tinny,
from the weed-warped creek
beside a scrap metal yard down
to the inlet, which had just broken.
Every bloom has two flowers.

Flower one takes delight in renovation. Each petal is an obsession, every gesture a façade growing higher and higher, until the whole thing rings out the empty goblet sound of construction—mansions blowing about in the breeze, the ghost asleep at the wheel.

Every bloom has two flowers.

Flower two resolves to stay when the ghost has passed away. Its dry rejected skin recalls those swift articulations—words without a word or a wink short of an eye. For it’s the game of faking life that cheats the moment from the vase.

Two flowers.
The Before & in the After

Mags Webster

*Dying wasps crawl into shoes, settle and curl*
Lavinia Greenlaw, ‘Snow Line’ (from *A World Where News Travelled Slowly*, Faber and Faber, 1997)

The year before you leave, dying wasps crawl into shoes, settle & curl, the garden puts on armour, becomes a fossil of itself, birds sing through night, the throttle of the magpie marbling the darkness, & I lie face to face with the waning, a circle of bones in a scraped edge of skin.

The year after you leave, the fret begins, summer becomes swelter, winter too wet, while autumn and spring, angled in between act crazily & spin about each solstice. I do not care. You are gone where I cannot reach, but even in the friction of my dreams, I still hear the shape of your voice before your body collapsed, before its swallow dive. Your lunate voice, like the corpse of a wasp, curved in on itself, like one I’ve just found in the heel of my shoe, & I’m shaking the shoe by edge of its tongue, in case it can tell me how to release you, take back those moments, *After & Before*, moments which settle & curl, which won’t stop stinging.
if i wanted

Nigel Ellis

i could sing you
clean and clear and sweet as
meltwater.
wrap you round my alphabet tongue

i could ribbon
the sound of you
down my xylophone spine
all snaked and laddered and
lickety-split.

i could speak you
burst you berried
on my palate
whistle you through my teeth sharp
and high.

i could twist with
my tongue a word rope
for you to dance
across with an umbrella in your hand
and a short short skirt you could turn
somersaults

then jump
i could catch
you in my arms.
there would be cheers. Applause.
there would be wolf
whistles.
They had done so to render the Taj imperfect since it is blasphemous to attempt to repeat the perfection of God’s handiwork.

Diana and Michael Preston

so there must always be
a built-in blemish
hidden
almost unnoticeable

a dimpled tile merest smudge
of ink
the line not quite true
the thread slightly frayed

in life
more easily essayed

word that is broken
deed half-done
paths hard to gauge
the things that change

even if the plan had succeeded
Romeo and Juliet
bickering
into old age
FICTION

View: I propose is determiner, whether consciously and the
record of factors which beliefs, inherited cultural
environment, DNA and chromosome, formal and informal
media. And so these assaults one combined
provoked thinking cause re-evaluation?
Bel picked up the turtle from the middle of the road, where she feared it might be crushed by a car, and carried it to the verge. The turtle’s shell was green as an olive, the plates of its carapace indistinct under a layer of moss. It had turned itself into a stone, its head and legs tucked inside, but its body was lighter than she’d imagined it would be, and more slippery. She couldn’t resist looking at its underside, where the shell was a surprising corn-yellow. This was the way the turtle was going—to the dam beside the road—and Bel set it in short grass on the other side of a wire fence, backing away so that her shadow no longer fell across its body. She rubbed her hands on her jeans, got back into the car and drove down the escarpment to where the town lay invisible, veiled by low clouds. It was almost eleven o’clock, but the lid on the valley hadn’t lifted. Six months she’d been here now, and she loved the worn-down hills rising to the west, the insectivorous bats that flitted over her backyard at night, even the wind that poured cloud into the valley.

In town, the policeman stood waiting for her in front of an orange brick house. When she stopped the car, he strode over to her window. She transferred the stethoscope she kept curled around the gear stick
to the back of her neck, and then got out. His uniform was ironed stiff, and his collar was choker tight around his meaty neck. When she looked into his pink and freckled face she could imagine him acting the role of policeman in a play.

He said, ‘Dog’s been abandoned. Got a broken leg.’

She nodded, and had to stifle a smile at his voice: it sounded so typical of a policeman’s way of talking. She opened the back of the car and slid her fingers around the grooved barrel of the euthanasia bottle. He stood close, as though to make sure she brought out the right equipment. In the white bureau, she found a needle and syringe, and the frayed loop used for restraining aggressive dogs. She was wearing a fleece jacket with deep pockets, and she sunk the bottle, capped needle and syringe in there and zipped the pocket closed. She removed the stethoscope from where it rested cool against her neck, and stuffed it in the back pocket of her jeans.

As they walked up the driveway to the aluminium gate she glanced at him, and saw that he was looking sideways at her. She fixed her gaze on weeds sprouting from the cracked concrete. That minute she remembered: a month ago, she’d been woken by the phone. It hadn’t been late at night, but she’d been dead asleep. She’d been driving in the direction of the escarpment when this same policeman had pulled her over and appeared at the driver’s side window before she’d had the sense to step onto the road.

He asked, ‘New vet?’

She nodded.

‘You’re all over the road. You just woke up, didn’t you?’

She nodded again. He made her get out of the car and stand in the cold, before waving her on. She grimaced at the memory.

The policeman reached over the high gate and lifted the latch, even though Bel was taller. In the backyard, they stood together on an apron of grass. There were blossoms on the apple tree, she saw. The
lawn was short and brown with frost. The pegs were still in a yellow plastic basket beneath the clothesline. There was a green shed with a broken window, a tiny toy stroller out front.

Without sound, the dog rose from a patch of grass near the shed, where some shelter was provided from the drizzle. His coat was black and tan and sleek. He held his ears flattened to his head, as though he feared them, and stood resting his injured front leg on its toe. His eyes seemed to seek hers. She thought of asking if she must kill the dog—he was young; his leg would heal—but knew she could not.

The policeman said, ‘She left the house. Hasn’t paid any rent. Dog’s been abandoned.’

She looked straight ahead at the dog who was watching them. The wind blew the toy stroller forwards, its pink cloth billowing. The policeman gestured to the yard, toy stroller, the broken blinds visible through the window. He shook his head. She wished that she was still at the top of the escarpment, her hands on either side of the turtle’s shell, the smell of spring grass all around her.

He said, ‘It attacked the baby.’

‘Is the baby all right?’

He shrugged.

Bel had seen dog and baby together: baby with sagging nappy and bare arch-less feet, following the dog and saying da. ‘Not the baby’s face,’ Bel said.

‘No idea.’

The dog had given itself a greenstick fracture by jumping from a car window. Trudy, the owner, had suggested a cast applied at home, cheap painkillers and Bel had gone along with it. Bel had kneeled on the living room floor and wound the casting bandage around the dog’s leg; she’d waited for it to dry while Trudy had held the dog still. Back then, Bel had been relieved that this sleek young dog, this baby’s da, could live.

Bel’s hand was on the plaited nylon of the dog-catching loop, made up of a straight section, like the handle of a carriage whip, curling into a circle at the far end. She would do this gently, at least.
All she had to do was throw the circle of nylon over the dog’s neck and pull on the handle, which would tighten the loop around his neck. She’d hand the loop to the policeman, sedate the dog, then proceed with the euthanasia. The mechanics of it were simple. She’d even done something like it before.

‘Where did the owner go?’ Bel asked.

The policeman shrugged.

She held the loop behind her back. On three legs, the dog hobbled away from her. The policeman was standing at the bottom of the back steps, surveying the yard.

She leaned forward. ‘Here Digger,’ she said. ‘Here fella.’ She stretched out her hand for him, hoping he might come closer and sniff her fingers. He wasn’t growling or showing his teeth. He looked terrified. The dog began to slink along the fence, away from her. By the back kitchen door there was a bowl of dry food, another of water. She picked up a handful of food. It was rough in her hand, meat-smelling. The dog ignored her.

The policeman looked up from the screen of his phone. ‘You can’t catch him?’

Bel was provoked to throw herself at the dog’s neck. Again and again, the dog jumped away from her. He was crippled, but sleek and fast. Ten minutes passed that way. Her jeans were wet and streaked with grass stains. Her sides were sweaty.

‘Could you help? We could chase him into a corner.’

The policeman slid his phone into his pocket. The dog was panting, and Bel moved towards him, speaking in a low voice. She gestured to the policeman to move to her right. The dog darted past him. Somehow, she managed to slip the loop over the dog’s head. The dog leaned back on his heels like a captured calf and the loop snapped, setting him free.

‘Useless,’ the policeman said.

Bel felt blood rush to her fingertips. Her eyes pricked with rage. She had to wait until she could see, until she could talk and make sense. But she spoke without thinking: ‘You have to shoot him.’
‘You okay?’ he asked.
She nodded.
‘It’s hard to shoot with these things.’
‘What else?’

The light mist that had been falling turned to rain. The policeman slid the pistol from his holster and examined it. When he depressed a lever to open the chamber, Bel averted her eyes.

‘Come here,’ Bel said to the dog.

The dog stood panting against the back fence. The policeman held the pistol, lifted it, aimed and fired two shots at the dog. One of them missed completely. The other struck the dog in its lame front leg. The dog began to scream. It ran towards the fence, and somehow squeezed between two loose boards. Its hind quarters were stuck for a moment, and then it was out in the lane that separated the house from its neighbor. Bel ran in the opposite direction, through the gate and around the front of the house and up the lane in the direction of the dog. The dog saw her, and in a panic squeezed back into the garden through another hole. There was blood on the fence. A window in the house next door slammed shut, and the blinds were drawn. The dog was yelping. They had to finish this.

Back in the garden, the dog crept into a narrow space behind the shed. The policeman sat down on the back step. He chewed sloughing skin from his lower lip.

‘I told you,’ he said. ‘Impossible to shoot with these things.’

The dog in his lair growled at Bel, and backed further into the space between fence and shed. There, the wooden boards looked sound.

Bel found a sheet of corrugated iron, and blocked off one end of this tunnel. Maybe it would hold. If they could hem him in between fence and shed they might be able to finish him. Her mind was working like this now. Her hands were shaking. As she was blocking off one opening, the dog ran out of the corral into the garden.

The policeman was still sitting on the back step, staring at frost-burned grass.
She said, ‘We’ll chase the dog in behind the shed.’

He nodded, but did not move. For a moment, Bel felt sorry for him. At least she was used to killing. Earlier that week, she’d had to put down five newborn kittens, their eyes not yet open. She’d held their squirming warm bodies in her palm and found a space between their ribs where she could slide the needle and pierce the heart. Later she had cried. Now she saw that she could not keep crying. With each killing a part of her grew more remote, unknown, and yet she had to let this part of her go.

She looked up at the house next door and glimpsed the faces of a dark-haired child and an old woman.

Bel said, ‘Come on.’

The policeman rose from the back steps. Next door, the brown blind was pulled closed by an invisible hand.

Bel stood against the weak points in the fence, so the dog couldn’t squeeze through. Eventually, he seemed to know that they wanted him to enter the space behind the shed. He was tired. His sides were damp with sweat. He went into the corral and faced them.

Bel said, ‘Let’s get it over with.’

‘Go and stand on the other side of the house. The bullets spray everywhere.’

She saw he was ashamed: he hadn’t killed the dog with one clean shot. She passed out of the gate and closed it behind her and stood leaning against the car. For a time there was silence. ‘Come on,’ she said again, aloud. The orange brick house with its sagging venetians and rusted gutters stood between them. She began to walk up the drive, thinking she’d have to stand beside the policeman and make him do it. From a few houses away, she could hear the mutter of a television. Then there were three shots in quick succession, and she breathed with relief.

When she returned to the backyard, the dog was still alive. He was on his belly, his head still up, although he was bleeding from a shallow graze between his eyes.

The policeman said, ‘He won’t die.’
The dog’s eyes were on both of them. The policeman raised his pistol and fired. This time, the dog fell sideways. They waited, as though he might stand up, bare his teeth. When a few minutes had passed and she could see no movement, she slid into the narrow space between shed and fence, where it smelled of wet dog fur. She kneeled beside the dog and touched his ear, not noticing until too late that his fur was sticky with blood. She rubbed her hand on her jeans. The blood looked like a brown smear, like mud. Her stethoscope unfurled itself in her palm. She placed the silver bell of the stethoscope against the dog’s chest and listened. Her ears strained after the beat of a heart. Faintly she heard it, or thought she heard it, and then it was gone. ‘You should’ve run away from here,’ she whispered. She leaned back, resting her shoulders against the shed. The dog lay on his side. In the narrow space, his chest was against her knees. He was floppy with death; his body hadn’t yet begun to stiffen, and a muscle on his stomach twitched. Looking at him she felt disgusted, sick in every bone. She might’ve said, *I can’t catch him* and walked out through the green gate, leaving the dog in his yard with its pink stroller. As it was, she had to stand up and drape her stethoscope over the back of her neck. She had to go out to the car and fetch a black plastic bag for the body.
Walker says we don’t need more houses: not when our city is overcrowded with empties; when papered storefronts dot the outskirts of town. Call us boys, discipline cases with broken brains and secondhand bikes. Keep us after class for speaking our minds. But don’t you dare say we don’t understand. Ask Walker, he’ll tell you straight up: our city is dying, the people are dying, and there’s not a thing we can do about it.

I ask him if he gets it like I do. If we have a shot at changing things as long as we stick together. Walker goes quiet, hair falling down in front of his face. Says they’re moving back to Adelaide in November. They need to be closer to his gran, he says. She’s not too far from the end of her innings.

‘Let’s go,’ says Walker, pushing back his fringe. Kickstand folds and he’s flying down Fourth. I push on the pedals to pick up speed. Sometimes I want to push them through my shoes so they cut into my feet. Sometimes I get a knife and push the point into my arm. Sometimes it leaves a mark but no one ever seems to notice.

Walker skids, turns, and waits. I swerve to get past him. He pushes his front wheel into mine and I bounce him off with a twist of my
handlebars. We ride down to Central, dodging a bus as we reach the corner.

Mum says, ‘You’ll be the death of me, Alex.’ She edges the blade as she opens the vacuum pack, the ham steaks sliding onto the chopping board. Our counter is pocked with misjudged attempts at efficiency, most from Mum, swearing as the knife bounces out of her hand and clutters to the floor.

‘Are you listening? The death of me.’

‘Bit harsh,’ I say, scoffing peanuts straight from the bag. ‘I thought I was your pride and joy.’

‘Your teacher said you called her a bitch.’

‘I called her a witch. When Dad’s coming home?’

‘He’s not,’ she says. ‘Can we please not do this? You’re fifteen years old. Nearly an adult. Start acting like it.’

‘Maybe he’s running late,’ I say. I pull back the curtains and pretend to look down the driveway.

‘He’s not running late,’ says Mum, pulling the steaks apart.

‘Is he mad? At you?’

‘Al—’

‘God. Mrs. Melodrama,’ I say. ‘I was just kidding.’

Mum asks me to peel the spuds. I ask why Emily can’t do it. She says, ‘She’s at piano. You know that, too.’

_In my dream, I live in the country. My girlfriend picks herbs from out back: she grabs fistfuls of chives, chops them up on the board and then straight into the pot._

_In my dream Dad comes over. We watch the football and the Eagles win game after game as he drinks his beer and I drink my coke. I say, ‘I love you Dad,’ whenever Sumich kicks a goal, but he can’t hear me over the roar of the television._

‘Mum?’

‘Mm?’

‘When’s Emily getting home?’
‘You miss your sister?’
‘I’ll have her ice cream if she’s not coming back.’
‘She’ll be back later. Finish the spuds.’

Mum dribbles oil on the steaks and shifts them to the baking tray. When they’re brown like old leather, she’ll pull out the pineapple, drain the slices and put them on top. She’ll dish the yellow mash—half-cheese, half-potato—onto the plates and Emily will come in just as it’s being served.

Emily’s my sister. Dad loves her. Mum loves her, too, more than me. When pressed (and it doesn’t take all that much to press her), Mum admits she has a soft spot for Emily. It’s not that she doesn’t love us, she explains, it’s just that she’d always wanted a daughter.

We used to have family dinners around the table, wood stained caramel and my knees pushed up against the underside. The TV had to be off, and we were absolutely, positively not allowed to go eat it on the couch, which wasn’t really a couch, just a single bed with a cover my Mum made up out of some old beige fabric.

The idea was you got to eat with your family: Mum, Dad, and kids... only Dad left for the second and last time when I was ten. That’s justice; Mum and Emily mess up and now somehow I’m the bad guy.

Emily walks into the dining room.
I bow. ‘Princess.’
‘Good one. Genius stuff,’ she says.
‘Kids,’ says Mum, placing the ham steaks down in the centre of the table.

‘She started it,’ I say, and throw a glob of mash. It lands in her hair.
‘God,’ says Emily. She kicks me, takes her plate, and leaves the room. For a second it’s Mum and me, and I smile but she looks angry or sad, or something, so we sit there eating dinner in silence, and then I go to my room and put on Faith No More really loud.

Walker says he sees adults smoking and drinking, and we’re grown up, so why can’t we? I say I can’t smoke because, well, it tastes like
smoke, and he says his dad was a real chimney, probably smoking up in heaven as we speak, and we laugh, though it’s not that funny.

Out back at mine it’s quiet; we talk there most afternoons. Seek shade in the peppermint tree, play out cricket classics on our sloped back lawn. The weeds by the garden shed is six and out; the back fence is four, and though there’s no bonus for hitting the cat, we both try to do that as often as possible.

We’re practicing footy bumps, bracing for each hit. I get Walker good and he grabs my finger, squeezes it in on itself and it hurts like hell. I reach back for his neck, pulling him in. He lets go of my finger. I let go of his neck. Then we start laughing. We head over to the tree, me sitting centre, Walker with a head full of leaves in the shade of the branches.

‘I can’t believe I’m going back to Adelaide.’
‘It’s not so bad,’ I say.
‘You reckon?’
‘No, not really. But we can ring, right?’ I lift my hand to my ear.
‘Uh, hello, I’m calling long distance for a Mr. Walker. Yes, I’ll hold.’
Walker knocks down my imaginary phone with his arm. ‘Dickhead.’
We sit for a while. I pick a flake of bark from off the tree. ‘Why’d you come to Perth? You said, your Dad, right? A job?’
Walker pauses. He looks away.
‘You okay?’
‘Something happened,’ said Walker.
‘Well obviously.’
‘No,’ says Walker. ‘Not like that... I don’t want to go back.’
‘You don’t have to.’
‘Yeah I do,’ says Walker. Then he’s quiet.
‘I could come see you. You know, on holidays.’
‘Yeah, good one. You don’t get it at all, do you?’
‘I get it, fuckwit. I’m just trying to cheer you up.’
‘Well don’t, alright?’
‘Alright,’ I say and thump his arm twice. ‘We playing cricket or are you going to go cry to your Mum?’
‘You’re fucking dead,’ says Walker.

I grab my Grey Nicholls from under the back stairs, Dynadrive with cherries down the meat, and we head out to the lawn. He bowls a ball, really hard, an in-swinging Yorker that cracks me on the toe.

I swear and lift the bat above me. At first he’s smiling but as he sees me coming, his smile disappears. He starts running. I catch up and hit him hard, once across his shoulder blades, then again across the side of his knee.

He falls to the ground, kind of slow motion, and he’s down. He starts blubbing, real loud, and holds his leg, rocking back and forth. I drop the bat and stare at his kneecap; the purplish stain that’s already surfacing around a white, raised lump.

It looks like it really hurts.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. At least I think I say it but it sounds quiet, far away. Walker starts swearing and crying, and the leg, it’s buckled, kind of bent. I try to help him stretch but it won’t straighten.

‘It’s okay,’ I say. ‘You’re going to be okay.’

Mum drives me back to the psych’s office that Wednesday. We park down a side street and wander up Fitzgerald. We stop when we get to 215, the brick shithouse.

‘You behave, Alex,’ says Mum.

‘As opposed to?’

‘I’ll be back in an hour,’ she says. ‘This is serious.’

‘Bye,’ I say, turning away, opening the screen door and intentionally letting it bang shut.

Mrs. Oliver’s a nice lady. Well she’s a lady anyway. Her office smells of musk and stale cigarettes, and she leaves a teddy bear on my chair for each session, which I promptly toss aside.

It’s ten minutes in before she makes any sense. She asks if Mum’s looking after me and I say yes. She asks me to talk to a chair. I tell her I’m not saying bugger all, ‘cause only loonies talk to chairs.

Mrs. Oliver leans forward. ‘Why are you here, Alex?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘Are you angry?’
I stare at her. ‘I don’t know.’
‘Are you sad?’
‘No.’ I shift in my chair.
‘Why are you sad?’
‘I want to go home.’
‘Not for another forty five minutes,’ she says.
‘You got any video games?’
‘No,’ she says, resting her finger on her jawbone. ‘Why did you hit your friend?’
‘Walker doesn’t mind. He knows he fucked up.’
‘Language, Alex. What did he do?’
I try to speak but see only Walker’s face, his eyes scrunched up and a string of saliva stretching from the top of his mouth as he cries. I look out the window but a dusty white shawl hangs over the glass, blocking my vision.
‘He didn’t have to bowl the ball so hard.’
‘Is that why you hit him?’
‘No.’
In my dream—
‘Have you talked to your father lately?’
‘His number’s changed, I think.’
‘You think?’
‘It’s cold in here. Can we turn the heater on?’
‘Why do you think the number’s changed?’
‘The old one’s disconnected.’
‘You miss your dad?’
‘Sometimes,’ I say, pushing my fingernail deep into my thumb.

If I push the knife in deep it will break the skin and the wound will pulse. My heart will beat and blood will gush onto the floor. Dad will have to come back. He’ll take me on a drive. He’ll close his eyes as
we take the turns and I’ll yell at him, laughing, to just watch where he’s going.

Emily walks into my room. She sees me with the knife, the point at my wrist. I say, ‘Don’t tell Mum, you’ll make her cry,’ and I know I’m safe because when Dad left he gave Emily a letter, but not Mum, so I won’t tell if she won’t.

‘What’s wrong with you?’
‘You. You screwed everything.’
‘Shut up.’
‘I’ll never shut up. I want you to think about it every day.’
‘Dad hates you, you know,’ say Emily. ‘He told me.’
‘What did you say?’
She runs out, fast.

I see Walker the following Saturday at the Fourth Ave. deli. He’s playing Street Fighter II. God knows he needs the practice; I could beat that bitch with Zangieff.

His knee is strapped-up and he’s had a haircut, bowl style. He looks like a total knob.

‘Hey Ringo,’ I say.
‘Shut up, Mum made me. Hey, guess what?’
‘What?’
‘We sold the house,’ says Walker.

Walker moves Ryu into an uppercut but Guile sonic booms his ass something chronic, and he falls back onto the ground.

‘Rubbish.’
‘Shut up. Guile’s hard.’
‘I know,’ I say. ‘Particularly in the first round.’ I push the coin refund but nothing comes. ‘Ah, that sucks. What the hell is wrong with your Mum?’

‘She says we’ll get to be a family again. That if I loved her, I’d want to go.’

‘But you don’t want to go.’
'No,' says Walker. 'But she won’t listen.’
We head outside, him limping, and me walking like a normal person. I lift my bike up from off the front verge.
‘You want a dink back to yours?’
‘Mum’s coming to pick me up,’ says Walker.
‘There anything you can do?’
‘Nup. It’s all go,’ he says. He limps over to the bin and props himself up with one hand. ‘It’s going to be alright. Not really though, hey.’
‘I don’t want you to go.’
‘It’s going to be okay,’ says Walker. ‘I swear, you start crying on me, I’ll kick your arse. Shake.’
We shake hands, palms switch to grip, hold, and release.
‘It’s going to be alright,’ I say. ‘We just—’
‘Mum’s here,’ says Walker.
A red Datsun 180B pulls up. She leans over and pushes open the passenger door.
‘Get in.’
‘I’m coming,’ says Walker. He slides in as best he can, wincing as he jams his leg under the dashboard. He pulls the door closed and rolls the window down halfway.
‘See you Alex.’
They drive off, me staring at the back of my best friend’s head. I shout ‘See you tomorrow!’ but their car’s already climbing the hill.
I ride up Coode up the hill on fourth, footpath dodge into kerb jump, over Beaufort Street with a double honk from a dented-up Corolla, faster, faster, and into a back wheel skid near the edge of Inglewood Oval.
I stay out for an hour until the sun goes down and the midges swirl around the park lights. Walker says you can waste your life watching things, but for me it’s safety; it stops me thinking about all the other stuff.

*In my dream Emily is on a boat in the middle of the ocean. I’m shooting bombs at her. If I hit her then the boat will sink and I’ll get bonus points.*
I’m out late that night. The houses light up like signal boards, on and off, and I wonder which home is the happiest.

I get home around nine, shoes left at the back door, and Mum’s on the couch, a glass of wine half-empty on the glass tabletop. She grabs me tight, hugs me till my back starts to crack.

‘Alex, sit down.’

‘Why?’

‘Just do it,’ she says. I fall back into Dad’s old chair.

She says, ‘Walker, he’s—’ and then starts crying.

‘You okay? What, what’s happened?’ I say and she hugs me, hard. She’s shaking her head, her cheeks all wet.

‘It’ll be alright, Mum. Promise.’

She pats me once on the back, and we let go of each other. Mum takes a sip of her wine and swallows, quickly. ‘There’s been an accident, Alex.’

‘Like a car accident?’

‘No, it’s…give me a sec.’

She looks as if she’s about to speak but she doesn’t. She starts crying again, her body rocked by grief, and I want to shake her ’til she starts making sense.

‘Mum.’

‘He’s gone, baby,’ whispers Mum.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The estate agent found him. His mum’s in pretty bad shape…I’m so sorry.’

When she says it, I barely hear her. I feel something like butterflies in my stomach, only they’re bigger.

‘Love? Are you okay?’

_In my dream Dad’s holding me. He’s taken time off work. He ruffles my hair and says I’m not going back until you’re okay. And I love you mate, it’s going to be alright._

Mum holds me tight and my vision’s blurred, and there’s this noise, like a yelp, again and again. I breathe, breathe, and then it’s quiet.

‘Can I see him?’
Mum pulls back. ‘Sorry?’
‘Walker. I want to see him.’
‘He’s dead, love.’
I get up out of the chair. ‘I know he’s dead, Mum. I’m not retarded.’
That shuts her up.
‘Sorry, Mum.’
‘It’s alright.’
‘No really, I—’
‘I’m going to find your Dad,’ says Mum. ‘I think he’ll come home if you need him.’
‘If I need him? Like as a father, you mean?’
‘It might help. For a day or two.’
‘An hour or so should do it.’
‘Alex, I—’
‘He’s not coming back, Mum. Don’t you get that?’
She calls but I’m already on my way out back, pulling so hard on the sliding door that it bucks when it reaches the edge of the track. I lift my bike up off the dirt and hop on barefoot, pushing my feet hard into the pedals, out the side driveway and down the hill.

I think about Mum crying, Emily’s fingers, scaling the piano keys and Walker’s face; laughter lines around his mouth, locks of his hair in piles around the barber’s chair. I want my bike to buckle; to feel the road up against me; I want to lie there like a speed bump, wheels cracking bones and my body past broken.

We used to run this town. We used to ride the streets. Now I’m chalking circles, the rims flat on the road, thinking, _Ride, Alex. Keep riding until the pedals break through the skin._
‘Howzabout a walk on the wild side?’ Simon wound an arm around my waist, at the laundry trough where I was wet to the elbows in Lux flakes and nylon slips. ‘You and me and Frida,’ he said with a purr, to which I resolutely shook my head. Back then, the sixties, I couldn’t look past the artists I’d learned about at high school. ‘Diego? Pablo?’ he put on an accent and walked his fingers beneath my skirt, knowing I was ticklish and defenceless.

A month before our wedding anniversary, I was given the task of choosing an artwork which, as time went on, meant long lists and short lists and then a final list, from which Simon plucked a name from the bowl, me sometimes shrieking, not the Whiteley, what was I thinking! at which time we’d discard that scrap of paper and choose another.

We celebrated our first anniversaries with the French Impressionists—predictable, but I adored them. We’d head off in the beetle to Harts Hobbies & Art, having set aside a portion of our pay (Simon was an apprentice cabinet maker, I a student nurse). We made a pact to leave with nothing if the poster print we’d ordered did not meet quality control. Though neither of us could claim to
have seen an original—there wasn’t a museum within cooee of our small town—Simon inspected the edges of the print for registration (he’d spent a year at a printing press and knew about these things), while I had my art books from the library to confirm that the colours were true.

Simon’s uncle owned a good camera and slide projector, and once we’d taken photos of the print and had the slides developed, we projected the best onto a stretched canvas, fiddle-faddling until the image matched the size of the original. My part was done, except for the patience required to curb my excitement until the forgery was complete. Forgeries, we called them, two innocents too innocent for thoughts of fraudulent intent.

I was banned from viewing the work in progress other than the first sitting, which consumed an entire evening. Simon traced the details in pencil with such concentration that his teeth appeared to clench an imaginary pipe, or paintbrush—he looked just like the real thing. He was so steady handed, such a perfectionist that I’d have been proud to hang any one of those works in its unfinished state.

At weekends and each morning and when he could at lunchtimes, he’d be at his easel in our glassed-in porch, the poster taped to the wall for reference.

Each unveiling marked a year of our marriage, or vice-versa as it came to feel, and while some couples might splurge on champagne and dinner out, I set our best tablecloth and we stayed in, the painting covered in the corner until we’d had dessert.

I can still summon the thrill at looking upon the rendered scene, a tidal wave of pride for Simon’s skill, any difference to the original beyond my scope. My husband would disrobe the painting as alluringly as he would undress me later in the night.

Where else, with the money we won in the hospital raffle, but Paris—in low season—to stand before icons we never dreamed we’d see, pretending we were rich, our days planned around visits to the
Louvre, the National Gallery, never mind the queues and shuffling and stamping away the cold. On the first day I must have looked like a child fuelled on red cordial, racing from gallery to gallery, colliding with onlookers, feverish to spot each famous painting I knew so I could dash back to the start and look through them again. There I found Simon, standing before Van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait* in such an other world, he didn’t notice me beside him. ‘Yours is just as good,’ I squeezed his hand, at which he gave me such an anguished look, I felt foolish and naive.

On our final week, seeking sun and warmth, we wound through the countryside of southern France, tootling along lanes in a rented campervan. Simon slowed and pointed, he pulled the van over beside a dry stone wall.

‘What is it?’ I searched the wall.

He motioned beyond to a field of stubble unremarkable but for a stack of old wood primed for a bonfire. ‘Picture frame,’ he said. ‘Looks like a beauty.’ It took until dark, feigning a stroll each time a car passed, to heave it free from the rest of those worm-infested timbers.

Ornately carved, we assumed it old, but one sniff of the musty, rickety thing and I’d have torched it myself if not for Simon’s persuasion. ‘A bit of TLC. You wait.’ We dragged it inside the van where he carefully extracted the old tacks that secured it, placing each in his pocket. Such sweet, simple pleasures then, our faces flushed with brazenness, whooping and tooting the horn as we motored away with our spoils.

Whatever vintage the frame, I only knew that once Simon restored the wood and pieced it back together, it became a masterpiece itself, fit to show off the best of the best.
It wasn’t even close to our anniversary when he announced he was painting something special to fit the frame. ‘Seurat?’ I quizzed. ‘O’Keeffe?’ For weeks I bellowed out old and newfound names with nothing but a not saying.

The finished painting stood covered in the corner, Simon jittery and unable to settle during the meal; he was that same anxious boy I’d sat next to in class when we were ten. It was with a wrench that I looked upon the work and laughed in disbelief, unable to hide my dismay. Don’t get me wrong, the painting was as skilful as any of the forgeries, only this was his creation, his own strange style, and signed with his name. All fog and gloom, the streetlight casting a frigid glow. Where was the colour and light he knew I loved? Maybe I’d have grown used to it if not for the familiar figure, head down, huddled beneath a nurse’s cape, scurrying flat-footed along the path. Gaunt, colourless: was that how he saw me?

His voice was flat. ‘That good, huh?’

I shrugged. I couldn’t speak. I don’t know you anymore, is what I thought. Me, my work, my life turned drab. Night Duty, he’d titled it. I felt short-changed—that beautiful frame. I wrestled my own boorishness: the effort he put in and I couldn’t be happy for him. The room felt as sharp as a packet of pins, both of us sensing some deep irrevocable change.

Weeks before our anniversary, Simon came in from the porch. ‘I don’t think I can do this anymore.’ I thought he meant another forgery. At the hospital, I would take a patient’s hand, sit quietly at their bedside, knowing they were dying. I watched my husband’s hand reach out for mine.

The parting was amicable enough. We each took three forgeries, the only question left was who would claim the final piece. By rights I should have relinquished it—I hated the painting, it was Simon’s creation, I’d never have hung it, then all the hours he’d spent restoring the frame. But each time I walked past the thing propped against the
boxes, I felt a gritty defiance at letting it go scot-free. I resented that nothing I could do would set things right again; that that painting had somehow unspun the magic.

‘We could put two slips in a bowl,’ said Simon, which we did, and he drew the blank.

I’d turned thirty-five when Alec and I stood on a headland within view of the city to exchange our vows. While Alec wasn’t one for wanting children, in every other way he was a good match for me, thoughtful and kind—I never wanted for a thing. Simon, I’d heard, had also moved down to the city, and I once saw his name in connection with an art exhibition. I gathered he’d given away his trade.

Our patio dining seated twelve and in the warmer months we fell into an easy pattern of entertaining Alec’s colleagues and clients. After a meal, one of the wives requested *a little tour*, so we left the husbands, lazy from wine, to smoke and survey the harbour. One fellow tagged along, admiring our collection of art and Alec’s antiques. He slowed at the forgeries, his eyes shifting to the signatures. He looked at me askance. With Simon, I’d never felt compelled to explain, but in this house, everything we owned authentic, it came down to principle.

*Just a bit of fun,* I heard myself say, thinking, as we moved on, how a few flippant words can sap merit and worth and turn your youth, that hadn’t cared or even known the difference between genuine and imitation, into something trivial. Truth, before these transitory acquaintances, held its own deceit.

We shared thirty-three years, Alec and I, when I found myself widowed and alone, rattling around in what felt, without him, as lifeless as a mausoleum. The decision to downsize was easy enough, and I put a deposit on a luxury ground-floor apartment with good security, lawns and water views. But the prospect of winnowing belongings to fit the smaller place was something I couldn’t manage
alone. I had no children to call on, no family left, only cousins in the
country who I’d lost touch with long ago.

A clean sweep, my Alec would have called for.

I settled on an auction house that we’d dealt with before. Values
and commissions were drawn up, a draft of the catalogue sent for my
approval, the only addition a tribute to Alec. The sale was set for June.

I sat at the far end of a row where I could remain more or less
anonymous, see forward and across the room, or turn to look behind.
As ten o’clock drew near I felt an uneasy mix of nostalgia and nervous
anticipation. When the doors opened I was taken aback by the throng
that streamed in, young and old, bidding cards, catalogues, faces I
knew that nodded or paused to say Hello.

I didn’t immediately recognise Simon as Simon. My first impres-
sion was of an old muso—puffy-faced, a drinker’s nose; an awful
pallor. His hair was pulled back to a ponytail that could have been
styled that way before it thinned and turned grey. Oblivious to my
presence, he slopped past my row in frayed jeans and trodden-down
sandals, his paunch filling out his shirt. I opened my catalogue to
steady my nerves. What had I seen in him? Why was he here? Come
to spy on my life with Alec, covet our success? These were our things.
My day.

I couldn’t concentrate when the bidding began and the auctioneer’s
voice sped away to a sprint. I fell behind, unable to jot the amounts
as each item sold. I looked to Simon seated the other side, two rows
in front, his arms resting on his belly, staring at the floor—that glazed
look went all the way back to our school days. It punched me through
to the moment when he’d uncovered the final painting, our undoing,
his silent rebellion against something that only now I recognised for
what it was: an ordinary life. Perhaps the cry for change had been set
in motion that first day in Paris, Simon transfixed before Van Gogh,
seeing a quality I couldn’t, that the real thing commanded a life of
its own. Perhaps, motoring away from the dry stone wall, both of us
charged with the thrill of pilfering, he’d looked through the ornate
picture frame to sheets of Formica and chipboard, a colourless town,
to the prospect of years with me, a small town nurse with small town wants, each anniversary, each forgery a Munch’s *Scream* for the life he’d never have.

Well, look at him now; look where it got him.

‘Lot fifty-one’, the auctioneer called. I’d lost the page. I wanted Simon gone. He had no place here.

Oh, but he did. He did.

Simon shifted in his seat as the three forgeries were carried in and set on stands. I watched him shake his head—dismay for our life? affront that his anniversary offerings were up for grabs? Hardly the spirit in which they were given. I hung them for forty years, I wanted to cry; I don’t have the space now. But I cringed with that sickening feeling of being caught out; it brought to mind the time Alec recognised a pair of ivory bangles he’d given me, worn by a girl I’d passed them on to.

The auctioneer declared the forgeries Museum Quality Original Reproductions. They created a stir through the crowd and he called for hush. I’d named a reserve of three thousand dollars each (see, I wouldn’t have let them walk). A bidding card went up and it was on. The Monet sold in less than a minute to a man at the front, for over six thousand. The Modigliani went for five, to a bright young thing whose arm shot up the instant she saw someone else bid. Van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait*—I should have kept it—became a volley between a rotund man near Simon and two fellows at the back, one of whom fell away when the bidding reached eight thousand. The duel turned into a battle of wills, the crowd delighting in it, me trying to look calm, the auctioneer performing his magic, the pauses lengthening, the hammer hovering, once...twice...*all done at eleven thousand, six hundred dollars*. People clapped while the buyer near Simon swivelled in his seat—a beaming porcelain clown into whose open mouth you might pop a ball.

I watched the back of Simon’s head for some sign of expression. Surely he’d be flattered, gratified. God, the thought struck me: perhaps he expected a portion of the sale.
I sat rigid in my chair, prickling at what was next.

‘Lot fifty four,’ the auctioneer called. The work was held up by two assistants and placed on an easel. ‘An original oil on canvas, Night Duty, by Simon Tarpin.’ The auctioneer lifted his glasses and looked my way. ‘Painted late 1960s, is that right, Mrs Westerway?’ Faces turned. I nodded dumbly. I couldn’t meet Simon’s stare.

‘Exquisitely finished,’ the auctioneer waited for the crowd to settle, ‘with a rare, fully restored mahogany frame, a fine example of early nineteenth century French craftsmanship. An investment in its own right. Who’ll begin the bidding at ten thousand?’ He repeated the amount. There wasn’t a sound, not a movement through the room. He dropped the amount by a thousand. Someone coughed. Papers shuffled. Another thousand. Why hadn’t I nominated a reserve?

‘Come on, folks,’ the auctioneer held out his hands. ‘Hand-carved mahogany. Early nineteenth century.’ He waited. ‘Who’ll give me seven thousand?’ Someone gave a nervous titter. I held my breath. ‘Six,’ he said, in the tone of a parent losing patience with a child. ‘The frame alone is worth twice that price!’

His expression switched to one of flirty tease that I admit to being partial to in our dealings. He gestured to the previous buyer. ‘Toss Florence Nightingale and hang your Van Gogh in it.’

It was as if the room itself was cackling. The buyer cried back, ‘Five hundred.’

The auctioneer scanned the room for another bid. He saw me shake my head. ‘A comedian in every crowd,’ he said to the man and moved to the next lot.

Simon had seen what he’d come for. I watched the effort it took for him to rise from his seat—no one near offered to help. I thought to follow as he shuffled down the aisle. What could I have said? The look he gave me was the wounded flicker from an ill-treated dog.

Not long after, I happened upon the death notice, not believing it was Simon until I checked the birth date. Devoted husband, father of four,
adored by his grandchildren. He died at home, I read, his long battle with cancer over.

I found the number in the book and phoned to offer my condolences. ‘Of course,’ his wife said kindly when I explained who I was. ‘Simon spoke of you.’

I wondered what he’d said. ‘Did he continue with his art?’

‘With framing,’ she said as if to correct me. ‘Simon did beautiful work.’ She told me he had run the business until the last few weeks. ‘Determined to get every last order finished. That was Simon.’

A picture framer. I felt the adoration in her pride. In Simon’s courage. ‘Did he paint?’ I asked again.

‘Oh, he knew about art. And he recognised talent when he saw it. He was always encouraging the young ones coming through.’

I wouldn’t have pushed but I wanted to understand. ‘But he never returned to his own painting? His own work?’

I waited for her to speak. Finally, ‘He never did, no.’

She sounded odd. The realisation jolted me as it must have her. His own wife, and she hadn’t known he’d painted. He must have given it away before they’d even met. I caught myself in time. But how tempting to say, what a shame, let her admission of lack be my shirking of blame, assign that fragile part of Simon I’d crushed so long ago to her neglect. Instead I said my sorries and she thanked me.

I carried Simon’s painting to the living room. Sunlight streamed in. The mahogany frame lustred. Night Duty. It transported me to another time, a half-forgotten world, our old town’s winter gloom, nights where I’d hurry, tight with cold, to and from the bus stop. My quaint nurse’s cap, the lining of my cape given by a single, masterful brushstroke of vermillion. The girl I was then thuddled in my throat.
A fear of eels

Breton Dukes

After dinner they go out to see the eel. It lives beneath Ray’s driveway in a drainpipe that joins his ditch to the neighbour’s ditch. Over the road are mangroves and then the harbour. The ditch water goes up and down with the tide. Raylobsin the last sausage. It floats for a moment then rolls and sinks to the bottom.

‘How big?’ says his dad.

Ray makes a size with his hands. ‘Like your arm.’

His dad’s nod is in slow motion, as if he doesn’t believe.

They look back at the water. Little fish—tadpoles or baby eels—bunt the sausage, causing it to shift about.

‘Nevaeh,’ Ray says.

Over dinner he’s been telling his dad about the funny names of some of the patients at the hospital.

‘That’s not a bad one.’

‘Heaven backwards.’

His dad raises his eyebrows.

‘There,’ Ray says, pointing.

The eel comes halfway out of the pipe and stops, wagging its head side to side.
'Strewth,' says his dad.

Shooting forward it gulps the sausage. It’s low tide and the ditch is narrow. To get back to the pipe it has to make a tight turn. Its sagging fin breaks the surface, then its tail. The sound is like children slapping bathwater. The rippling water browns.

‘Show’s over,’ Ray says, but neither of them moves.

‘What about Low-Garden?’ asks his dad. ‘Denise Low-Garden. Do you remember?’

After the divorce, Ray’s dad shifted across town. He joined a singles club and a few girlfriends followed. Ray was eight at the time and the whole thing stirred him up a little. He only met Denise a couple of times. Long hair and lots of wrinkles, that’s what he remembers. She’d seemed way older than his mum. Later on he’d found a letter she’d written. It called his dad selfish and said he’d hurt her.

The foil corner of a pack of chips is caught in the grass on the bank of the ditch. Ray squats near the edge and collects it.

‘Well?’ his dad says, holding out his hands.

Ray shrugs. He pockets the rubbish.

‘We went to the Chatham’s one Easter,’ his dad says, wistfully.

‘Crayfish, mutton-bird, blue cod.’

‘I never went to the Chatham’s.’

‘I know that, but what about Denise?’

It’s warm and clear. There’s the smell of mangrove mud and road tar. ‘The first star,’ says Ray, still squatting.

His dad looks as if he’s going to say something, but then tilts back with his hands on his hips. ‘Ah,’ he says in agreement, and then, seeing Ray watching, he smiles and exaggerates his posture. ‘The old teapot,’ he says.

They turn and go back to where wooden steps lead to a small deck and the front door. There are frog sounds and already a morepork is hooting. Ray’s dad puts his hand on Ray’s shoulder. ‘It’s good here,’ he says. ‘I’m glad I came.’

Ray fills the jug. The dishes are rinsed and stacked in the sink. Between the sink and the oven the small bench is wiped clean. In a
glass on the bench there are some leftover sprigs of parsley. It grows out the back in a pot by the washing line. He’s got sage and basil there too. On the toilet cistern there’s a handful of rosemary jutting from a pint glass. He’d been excited to see his dad, and in showing him around the flat, he’d said in an unusually confident voice, ‘It’s not much, but it is home.’

The jug starts to boil. His dad’s standing in the living room. There’s a two-seater couch and a table not much bigger than a school desk. The kitchen and living room are all pretty much one. His dad shakes himself and makes pop eyes as if surprised by something. He stretches. ‘That flight,’ he says for the second time since arriving, ‘really took it out of me.’ Dunedin to Auckland was in a normal plane, but from Auckland it was a dodgy wee propeller-powered job.

‘There’s a Low-Garden at the hospital,’ says Ray.

‘A what?’

‘Dr Low-Garden,’ says Ray. He feels good. The visit’s going well.

‘Daniel?’ asks his dad, letting his arms drop. ‘Tall, pale, a squash fanatic.’

‘You still talk in lists,’ says Ray, holding up a tea bag.

‘That’s the teacher in me,’ says his dad, as if Ray’s observation was a serious one. He nods at the teabag.

‘He’s not that tall,’ says Ray, ‘maybe our height. I don’t know his first name.’

His dad raises a hand as if measuring Denise’s son.

Ray looks doubtful.

‘There can’t be that many Low-Gardens,’ he says, and then, ‘Denise liked to worry about him. You two should talk—you’re both from Dunedin.’

‘He’s a doctor.’

‘So?’

Ray pours water into two mugs. ‘I’m an orderly.’

‘Yeah?’

Ray doesn’t say anything, just carries the cup to his father who says, ‘Jesus, Ray. This is New Zealand.’
It’s the sort of thing that’s started them off before.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ says Ray. ‘New Zealand?’ He stands with his narrow shoulders hunched and the mugs in fists held up at his chest. The words come out with force—more the way you’d expect someone to talk at the end of an argument. But it works. They both tip back and look at the mugs and at each other as if reminding themselves of their roles as host and guest, as if remembering that this is night one of a five night visit.

His dad reaches for the mug.

‘It’ll be hot,’ says Ray, then in just the way his dad would say it, and as if the flat were fitted with all sorts of perches, ‘Now, where shall we sit?’

They talk about Dunedin’s lack of summer, about Ray’s workmates, about the crowds at Auckland airport, about the All Black captain and the fuss over his new haircut, about all the species of subtropical plant Ray’s dad saw coming down from the airport, about the neighbours in Dunedin and how they’re always asking after Ray, about the neighbour’s dog, Hank, who had bad breath and diarrhoea, who got x-rayed and who, it turned out, had a whole, rotting chicken lodged in his gullet.

‘What did they do?’ asks Ray.

‘Massaged it up.’

‘Who did?’

Ray’s dad smiles and makes a smoothing motion with his hands as if following the thick body of a snake. ‘The vet,’ he says.

‘Hell,’ says Ray.

Ray’s dad looks into the bottom of his cup and laughs. After a moment he puts the cup down and says, ‘Right?’

‘Yep,’ says Ray, standing and helping his dad turn the couch into a bed.

The next day they get stuck into the weekend. Ray’s dad’s always loved the outdoors and since shifting north, Ray’s been right in
there too, so after breakfast they take his dad’s binoculars on a long harbour walk where he points out the birds: spoonbill, gannet, reef heron.

Sunday, it buckets down and after a run his dad goes out the back in his togs with a bar of soap. Halfway through the rain stops and Ray has to get the hose. In trying to give his dad a fright he gives it full pressure, but his dad takes two steps forward and welcomes the water with raised arms. There’s a little extra meat around his belly and the beard is an obvious difference, but other than that, despite thirty years, there isn’t much between them.

Monday. With only enough leave to take Wednesday off, Ray’s at work. His dad doesn’t mind. He’s going to have another run, then do some more bird watching.

None of the orderlies like their jobs. Not liking the job is part of the job description. Sore feet, shit pay, eight hours of slavery. But just quietly, Ray doesn’t mind: regular breaks, a uniform allowance, time and a half on weekends and over nights. It’s not what he had in mind when he was younger, but it’s a lot better than living on the dole in Dunedin with your old man.

So he’s almost smiling (it’s mid-morning and he’s pushing a female patient in a wheelchair down the sixth floor corridor) when he sees Dr Low-Garden striding towards them. Ray slows, checking the man’s height, trying to see if there’s any of Denise in his face, trying to make eye contact, to say ‘Hello,’ or ‘Gidday,’ to see if there’s a way into asking about his identity. His dad will like it if he does—he’ll like hearing whatever information he can gather, and he’ll like that Ray asked. But it’s as if there’s a system of weights between them, because as they get closer the man speeds up, so that now, in coming upon them, he’s one gear short of a run. He’s got a neat haircut with a long fringe that catches the air. Broad like a midfield back, he wears a neat, dark shirt and dark trousers. Stethoscope round his neck, cellphone clipped to his belt, he passes them with such confident urgency, that
the woman in the chair asks in a loud voice, ‘What’s he got to be so pleased about?’

‘You didn’t say anything?’

‘No, but if it’s him he’s no taller than us.’

Out in front of the yacht club, they’re up to their waists in the harbour. It was his dad’s idea. ‘To beat the heat,’ he’d said, when Ray got home from work. It’s Ray’s first Northland swim. He’s seen plenty of people out there before, but something about going in alone, with no one in town really knowing him, has always made him wary. He’s enjoying it though. When he takes a step the harbour’s muddy floor squeezes up level with his ankles. His dad wants them to swim out to the green pylon that marks the nearside of the harbour’s channel, but Ray’s not so sure.

‘And you didn’t say a thing?’

‘He just went past. Probably he was off to save a life or something.’

His dad doesn’t say anything, just moves further out, waving his arms back and forward. ‘Hi,’ he says in a loud voice, as if addressing the two men aboard the dinghy moored near the pylon, ‘My name’s Ray. My old man knew your mum.’

Ray scratches the back of his head and then puts his hand through his short hair.

‘You’ve nothing to be ashamed of, Ray,’ says his dad, looking back. ‘You’re bright. I’m always telling people that.’

The mud around Ray’s feet has settled. His legs bow in the water’s briny refraction. His dad has turned towards the dinghy. He’s got his hands on his hips. Ray raises one foot and then the other. Mud rises. He thinks of the eel, of its slapping tail, the spikes of its saggy fin, the way its eyes sit off its face. He wants to get out, but in that thought there’s shame and what follows is anger. He lunges forward and starts swimming.

At high school, Ray wore a West German army jacket all year round. He dyed his hair a darker colour, tried to get some facial hair going, and
pretended to be into the punk bands. He liked the idea of dungeons and dragons, but didn’t like the nerds who played. In his twenties he smoked—weed and tobacco—and drank. Anyway, sports were never his thing, and in swimming for the pylon, his dad goes past him easily.

When he gets there his dad’s holding the bottom rung of the ladder that serves the light at the top of the pylon. He’s chatting with the fishermen, asking about the depth and the sort of fish they’re after. Ray tries not to breathe too noisily. He swam the last section hard—wanting to get to the pylon, wanting to appear competent. There’s a current and the water is colder. The ladder is encrusted with barnacles. The boat and the men aboard her are reflected colourfully on the water’s surface. One of the men is baiting a large hook with half a fish. Ray faces the shore. His car looks like a dinky. The yacht club is a face of black windows. There are whip-thin aerials attached to the roof that needs repainting. He lets his free hand dangle. He feels weak. He should ask for help, but now his dad’s discussing the pros and cons of the new Dunedin stadium. I’ll go hard to begin with, Ray thinks. I’ll get through the current and the deep water and then float the last bit. Round the shore he sees two people on bikes. The sun is high. Behind him one of the fishermen laughs. No one’s gonna drown on a day like this. Something slippery crosses his leg. Without saying anything he sets off.

He remembers a teacher telling him once to pull with his fingers together. He kicks hard. Your legs are your engine. In taking a breath he wears a small wave. He stops and coughs and tips his head back. The sky is the same blue. His body shapes down and out to sea in the way of a snake’s fang. He starts again, throwing his heavy arms just over the surface of the water, breathing with his face forward towards the shore. Okay, he tells himself, okay. He goes onto his back and kicks, but water gets in and he coughs and rolls over. For a moment he feels better and makes a few good strokes. Then the cold, draggy weight returns. He develops a grabbing doggy-style and makes enough splash for two people. He worries that the pinching in his lower leg will turn into a full blown cramp. He thinks of sharks. But then it’s okay. He’s through the cold water and beyond the sly
current. The temperature and the softer, saltier texture of the water is a comfort. He’s more buoyant and he slows the motion of his arms. He can see the bottom—see the little black breathing holes there. He chugs on. The towels and one of his shoes has fallen from the bonnet of the car. He stops and reaches with his toes for the muddy floor. It’s not there. He sinks and kicks out, wanting to see how far he has to go, wanting to feel something hard. Mud wobbles around his flippering toes. Surfacing, he breathes too soon and gets a lungful. A long rectangular block replaces the hollow pliable parts of him that deal in air. His arms scrabble and clench. Then his dad arrives.

Tuesday. Ray’s in the staffroom stirring his Milo when Dr Low-Garden walks in. Ray goes red. The doctor (along with the weather and now the harbour swim) has become the visit’s default setting. ‘Just call me Dr L.G.,’ his dad said, having got him ashore. CPR wasn’t required, but when Ray doubled over, spewing and coughing and burping away, his dad held him by the elbow and made gentle circles between his shoulders.

The doctor walks to the water-cooler and crouches with a plastic cup.

‘You’re Denise’s son,’ blurts Ray.

The man looks, but Ray doesn’t give him time to speak. ‘My dad knows you.’

Smiling, the man stands and sips from his cup.

Ray takes the silence as a denial. ‘You’re from Dunedin.’

‘Who’s your dad?’ asks the man as Ray gulps at his drink, taking in the tan and the chunky sports watch. Windsurfing, Ray thinks, and then, he’ll be noticing my uniform: cheap blue trousers, turquoise polo shirt. Embarrassed, he thrusts out his identity card. ‘Alan. Alan Stevens. I’m Ray Stevens,’ and now mumbling, hating his dad for starting this, ‘He went out with your mum for a while.’

‘Alan Stevens?’

‘A school teacher. It doesn’t–’
‘I remember,’ says the man. ‘He was a runner. Yeah...’ he makes a flannelling motion over his cheeks and chin, ‘he had a beard.’

‘And still does,’ Ray says, grinning.

‘I liked him,’ the man says. ‘How is he?’

It’s the relief Ray feels in watching Daniel fondly remember, combined in some vague way with his watery scare, and the fact that in the last few months he’s been at himself to join a club, or try internet dating—anything to meet some people—that results in him telling Daniel he should come over that night, that he should question his old man in person.

‘He’d be almost forty,’ says his dad, when Ray tells him.

‘He doesn’t look that old.’

‘He was a couple of years older than you. He still would be.’

Ray doesn’t smile. Still in his uniform he’s sweaty. What he wants is to get into his shorts, go out the back and give his herbs some water. Instead he’s nervously looking at a shopping list and wishing he’d never seen the bloody staffroom.

‘Some beer?’ says his dad, watching him. ‘Beer, wine and snacks: chips, vege sticks, hummus.’

Ray’s peeling a carrot when there are footsteps on the deck and then a knock. He looks at the clock. If it’s Daniel he’s early. Still holding the carrot, he opens the door. Daniel. Dressed just as he was at the hospital. He’s got a bottle of wine. Ray’s words get caught and he nods dumbly as if he rather than Daniel is the guest, as if rather than coming for dinner he’s arrived to ask Daniel’s daughter to the formal. In trying to shift the attention from the blazing colour his face is taking he stares over Daniel’s shoulder, at where the mangroves are under hot sun.

Daniel looks back and then turns, still smiling. He raises his eyebrows. ‘Hi,’ he says.
In thinking he’ll tell Daniel his dad’s out for a run, Ray forgets any sort of greeting. ‘Dad’s out for a run.’

‘Oh, am I early?’

Ray looks at his wrist and raises it a little. He doesn’t wear a watch, but the movement suggests a handshake and Daniel obliges, also offering the wine. In having to move both hands Ray gets more uncoordinated. He manages the wine, but somehow the carrot gets free, bouncing between Daniel’s legs and stopping out on the deck. Daniel doesn’t react; he just shakes Ray’s fingers and follows when Ray finally asks him in.

Ray heads for the kitchen.

‘Nice little place,’ Daniel says, coming in behind him.

‘Ah, yeah,’ says Ray gustily, squatting and peering as if there’s something in the oven.

‘You been here long?’

‘Few months,’ says Ray.

‘Like it?’

Leaving the wine on the floor, Ray stands and throws out his hands, and as if that gesture covers everything—all possible questions, all possible answers—he laughs.

Daniel smiles and nods, then keeps nodding as if waiting for the explanation.

But Ray says no more. His mind’s empty and he’s starting to sweat. ‘A beer?’ he manages, noticing the bottle.

Daniel nods. ‘Yeah, great, whatever you’ve got.’

Ray points at the little couch. It looks ridiculous. Dusty, crippled, like the rugs he’s padded it with are all that hold it together. ‘We’ve only got Speights,’ he says, angrily.

Daniel backs up, smiling and shaking his head. ‘Perfect,’ he says, then in sitting down, as if he’s had a long day, as if the couch meets all his expectations, he sighs and says, ‘Ah.’

More footsteps at the front and Ray’s dad comes in wearing a big grin. He’s turned his T-shirt into a bandana and is holding the carrot. ‘It’s bloody great out there, Ray!’ he says, not noticing Daniel, who gets up from the couch and clears his throat.
When Ray’s dad swivels sweat sprinkles the floor and Ray knows exactly what he’ll say and do. ‘Daniel!’ and then, brandishing the carrot, ‘What’s up Doc?’

They go through the beer and snacks quickly and start on the wine. Ray keeps getting up and doing stuff in the kitchen and he goes to the bathroom twice to wash his hands, but with the beer and the conversation he’s feeling better. Daniel and Ray’s dad talk about running, about the old days in Dunedin, about Denise (two cats, three stents, runs the toy-library), and about the important things that have happened since they last saw each other. During their first wine, Ray’s dad explains the ‘Nevaeh,’ conversation, which leads to him telling Daniel about the chicken in the neighbour’s dog.

Ray doesn’t say much, just nods and laughs a lot. But when his dad does the snake massaging motion, he joins in. ‘Fowl!’ says Daniel, and they crack up, and then, when they’ve settled and not said anything for a moment, Daniel looks over and says, ‘So, Ray, what have you been up to over the past few years?’

Ray starts off answering as positively as he can, trying to make all his different jobs sound as meaningful as possible, but pretty soon, in listening to himself, and in seeing the way Daniel’s nodding—like he’s encouraging a bloody retard—Ray gets smaller and smaller in the chair and starts addressing his answers to his feet, and when Daniel enquires about the conditions of his current employment he gets up without answering, just says he needs to piss, but instead goes into his room and stares at the floor.

Through the wall he hears them talking and now laughing—probably about his poxy little house. He holds his breath to hear better. They’re chanting. One, then the other. It takes a moment before he gets it. Their old game: La ENSALADA! Counting to ten in ten different languages. You’d go as fast as you could while still using the accurate accent for each number: eins, rua, san, quattro. His dad taught him after the divorce. They’d do it in ad breaks, in loud voices on long drives, in
whispers at bed time. Thursdays, Ray stayed at his dad’s and each time he’d arrive with three, maybe four new strings. He’d study encyclopaedias and look up foreign language dictionaries. He’d aim for rhythm and alliteration and rhyme. He thought it was their thing.

They start laughing again and Ray goes to the foot of his piss face, fuck-head of a single bed, raises it and slams it back onto the wooden floor. It makes a decent crash. The windows vibrate. In the lounge they go quiet. Ray sits down.

One of them comes into the back of the house. Ray stands and readies himself. How many fucking sons have you got! But there’s no knock and no stern words. The door’s been badly hung and there’s a gap on the hinge side that he can see through. Ray looks. His dad’s facing the door doing the teapot, his jaw set, lips moving like he’s sucking something, but as Ray watches his face goes slack, his head droops and his arms fall. And it could be the booze, the lack of light, or the narrow perspective, but whatever it is, the rage goes out of Ray, because his dad looks old and grey and somehow impermanent, like he’s dangling from a kid’s mobile, like a good breeze would set him spinning.

They’re in the kitchen sharing a fresh bottle. It’s dark outside. Daniel’s plugged his phone into the stereo. Ray’s trying to recall a string he put together once in the school library. His dad called it the best ever. A masterpiece. Swahili, Dutch, some Eskimo, but it was thirty years ago and remembering is like trying to count the eyes on a blowfly.

Daniel hiccoughs. He’s said he has a chicken story of his own, but mostly he’s been talking about living in Brisbane, about his stint there as a house officer in the hospital’s psychiatric ward.

Ray’s dad’s shifting about with the music, drinking, watching. A song ends, Daniel stops talking to hiccough twice and Ray’s dad speaks into the hole in the sound. ‘Should we tell him, Ray?’

‘About what?’

‘Hey hang on,’ laughs Daniel, ‘I am getting to my story.’
Ray's dad swims his arms. ‘About how I saved your life. Again.’

Daniel looks at them both, hiccupps, burps quietly, and then, like he wants to distract them, he adds volume and enthusiasm and keeps on talking. ‘There was this lady on the ward and she wanted a baby... no, no, that’s not it. She thought she was pregnant. She thought she was pregnant and that she was going to give birth. According to her that’s why she was in hospital. But she wasn’t pregnant,’ he says, slapping the bench between each word. ‘She was not pregnant!’

The wine in the glasses goes calm. In the dim light it’s more black than red. Ray’s given up on the numbers. He looks at his dad who’s swaying side to side. He waited for the anger, but it didn’t come.

Daniel’s had the most to drink and now he’s talking with his eyes closed, ‘She had her own due date and every time I saw her she reminded me and told me how her big day was nigh.’

Overall it’s the best Ray’s felt for ages. ‘How do you like eels?’ he asks.

‘No,’ says Daniel, shaking his head. He takes a drink and hiccupps halfway through. ‘Snakes, eels, spiders,’ he says, wiping his chin, ‘Anything without legs, anything with too many legs.’

Ray’s dad’s stopped dancing. ‘He didn’t need resuscitating—he has in the past though.’

Ray puts one hand high in the air and the other over his nose. He does a caricature of a drowning man.

‘Anyway, then the day arrives. Oh lord, the big day,’ sings Daniel. ‘Not literally resuscitated, but—’

‘Eh?’ says Daniel, and then as if tiring of the interruptions he stands a little straighter and adopts a more formal tone: ‘At ten that morning, I get called by one of the nurses. ‘Dr Low-Garden,’ she says, ‘could you come down and look at patient X? She’s complaining of cramps.’ At 10:15 I present myself at patient X’s bedside. She’s propped up with pillows. She is febrile. She has a raised pulse and temperature. Her blood pressure is up. When asked to describe her symptoms, she says, ‘It’s coming!’

‘What is?’ I ask.
‘My baby.’
‘Patient X,’ I say, ‘you are not pregnant.’
‘Fo oo Fo oo Fo oo,’ she says.
Then she hollers and her face fills with blood and she suffers what I can only describe as a contraction. There’s a movement beneath the sheet. Then a smell. She smiles. ‘He’s here,’ she says.
I raise the sheet. She’s naked from the waist down. In blood, between her legs, there’s a frozen chicken.’

Ray’s in the bathroom stuffing balled up socks into a black rubbish bag.

In the living room they’re onto some vodka Ray’s had lying around for years. The volume’s up. Daniel’s making them listen to a band he’s seen recently in Sydney. He’s drunk and doing most of the talking: his yacht, a woman who left him, his attributes as a physician.

Mostly Ray’s settled into his role as the strong, silent type. When he has talked he’s played up the working class thing: ‘What that bloody hospital needs is less chiefs and more Indians.’

He stashes the last socks and with sellotape shapes the bag into a narrow cylinder. Held at arm’s length it sort of resembles an eel. The window above the toilet is on a latch. He opens it, climbs from the toilet seat to the ledge, and then carefully climbs outside, where he goes past his herbs, down the side of the house and to the ditch. There he gets onto his knees and slips the fake eel into the drainpipe. It floats. He waits a moment. When he reaches back it’s still there. He’s not exactly sure who he’s trying to get, but it feels good and he smiles broadly as he sneaks back the way he came.

Out by the ditch the air wraps around them like a warm, wet sheet.

‘We need cigars,’ says Daniel.

Ray’s poked the middle out of a piece of bread and is wearing it like a bracelet. He’s drunk. It feels like his back teeth are floating. He told Daniel about the eel before they came out.
His dad burps.
‘I’ve got a clinic in the morning,’ says Daniel.
‘I’ve got to fly to bloody Dunedin,’ says Ray’s dad.
‘The eel,’ Ray announces, waving the bread like it’s a flag and then dropping it in front of the drain pipe. It sinks into the water that is deep and murky with the high tide.
‘Eel,’ says Daniel in a doubtful Aussie accent, but he’s stepped back and now he puts his hand on Ray’s shoulder like he’s being led somewhere.
‘Behold the famous eel,’ says Ray’s dad, burping again, which is when Ray goes forward on his knees, grabs his hands into the ditch—getting a good grip on the bag that is suddenly slipperier and heavier—and then rears back, bellowing and turning to the men who, hopping about as if fireworks are exploding at their feet, yell in terror and in awe, because barehanded, Ray’s snared a real, live eel.

Wednesday. Ray and his dad are washing their hands at adjacent sinks in the airport’s small bathroom. Ray’s dad looks at him in the mirror. ‘You think it’s a good day for flying?’ he asks, for the second time that day.
‘Say hi to the neighbours for me.’
His dad nods.
‘What’s on your face?’
Ray hasn’t shaved since the weekend and there’s a good shadow already.
‘Don’t know,’ he says.
‘Looks like the beginnings of a decent beard,’ says his dad.
The soap stings in the small cuts on Ray’s hands. He grins and turns to face his dad who’s also smiling.
Having been in the shed all day, it feels good to be out. He walks along the fence line, the wired spine that fuses farmland with forest. In places, the fence is strained and buckled from the traffic of emus and roos and, every so often, there are big gaping holes. A bit further along, the wires suddenly stop: a few metres of nothing between two star pickets. He crosses through and follows the thin kangaroo track into the scrub.

He likes the way the white-grey sand is illuminated as if it is a silver thread lit just for him, and he imagines what he looks like from above: a small man, a good man, an adventurous man, weaving through scrubby bushes far bigger than himself in search of something, although he is not sure what. He pushes back clawing salt bush and mallees as if they are spectators grabbing at him, hungry for him. But it is Sarah’s face from this morning, slippery with tears and snot, twisting and wretched, that haunts him as he charges on.

Reaching the main stream, he sees the tannin-black water: thick, like molasses, slipping over rocks and dirt, coating boulders, grasses and
trees. It makes him remember a play Sarah took him to years before: the actor, with engine oil smeared down his chest, dripping onto his faded jeans, recited Shakespeare. He sat in the audience, Sarah’s warm hand in his, drowning in the language and the long, dark rivers running out of the man.

Steadying himself, he reaches out to the bushes growing in the centre of the stream, hangs on tightly, edges his way across. Sharp reeds scratch at him and, though they pierce his skin, he clings to their long blades until he can leap easily onto the other bank. On and on he surges.

He walks slowly through a small clearing, kicking at dust, seeing where a bobtail has been. There’s loads of kangaroo shit and some charred bits of wood where someone has had a campfire. Picking up the roo path over the other side, he heads for the scrub again. The sun is losing its sting. He knows Sarah will be home by now. He hasn’t left a note.

Forging through the bush, he remembers the first time his dad took him up the river—just packed up their horses, called the cattle dogs and left. They followed the water for miles then headed high into the hill country, making camp near a cave Moondyne Joe used over a hundred years ago. They chewed on crunchy, black meat and sipped billy tea tasting of grass and smoke, and he listened to his dad talk of bushrangers and sheep thieves until sleep found him.

In the morning they ate damper and drank more tea, loaded up the horses and headed further north, checking fence lines and traps. Roos, wild pigs, rabbits, bush turkeys: they took what they got.

His mum never came on these trips. And he wonders, now, if his dad had told her they were going.

He remembers when they did return, bone tired and heavy with wild animals, it was dark. They’d not seen her for a week. He knew she
could hear the dogs barking, the sound of the horses, him calling out to her, but still she stayed indoors. The first time, he walked in behind his dad, and expected his mum to be happy to see them, excited even.

But she sat there, unmoved by the kitchen fire. He thought then that she might be mad, her eyes shining with hurt, but she remained still. When his dad walked over, touched her shoulder and bent to kiss her cheek, she stiffened.

‘Well,’ she said, staring into the fire, ‘I guess you’re back then.’

And she stood, and walked slowly to the bedroom down the back.

The day is shutting down. It’s getting cooler. He walks along the fence line and comes to the blue gum plantation. In the afternoon breeze, the leaves—full and fat—shuffle: a grey inland sea. With no money in dairy or sheep anymore, lots of farmers had turned to blue gums. His dad would have called them fake farmers. He laughs, a snort really: his mum would call them smart.

He thinks again of Sarah and wonders what she is doing. What they will say to each other. Perhaps she is making dinner, bottle of red already open.

He found her on the bathroom floor that morning. He thought she was out in the garden. Instead she was slumped against the toilet, hugging her knees, green bathrobe unraveling, eyes all puffed up.

‘What?’ he asked. ‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

He knew he was speaking too loud.

He spoke softer: ‘Tell me, Sarah. What is it?’

She didn’t look up.

‘It’s nothing,’ she said. ‘It’s always nothing.’ And she threw a thin white pregnancy test across the bathroom. It hit the far wall hard, and slid clattering to the tiles.
He walked outside then, past the pumpkins and potatoes, to the shed, got out his plane and drove the blade over a chunk of rust red jarrah, back and forth, back and forth, until he heard the car start and head down the drive. He ran his fingertips along the smooth, flat surface of wood. He worked away on the table he was making, watching the clock all afternoon and left before she came home from work.

He circles these spindly blue gums now, thinking about how fast they grow: tall and ragged, reaching up and up and over each other. All arms and legs, his dad would say. Leaving the plantation and slowing down, he realises he is nearly home; only one last stretch of bush then the driveway. The sky is deepening and he catches a glimpse through trees of the sunset. It makes him stop: blood seems to leak into the sky, a deep red hurt stretching above him. Against the silhouette of swaying trees it could even be a flickering fire, he thinks, and he imagines the crackle and lick of heat, sucking up everything in its way.

He pulls his jacket closer and suddenly realises he is hungry and thirsty. The sharp bark of crows empties into the dusk. He walks on.

When they lost the first baby, he had wiped the snot and tears from Sarah’s cheek in the doctor’s room. Stunned, she uttered no words, just a moan or a sigh every now and then as the doctor rambled on. She looked, he thought, like a tiny bird that had flown into a closed window. They drove home in silence. She had a shower as soon as they got in. Through the pelting water and exhaust fan, he could hear her wails and they wrenched his insides into thin, hard wires. When she turned off the taps he knew she was trying to muffle her cries with a bath towel; he could still hear the whimpering. He sat at the kitchen table until he heard her walk to their bedroom and shut the door. They had lost two more babies since then, and it was always the same.

At the end of the driveway, he stops. The verandah light is on and he strains to see Sarah through the kitchen window.
Just as he is about to continue, a flash of silver by his boot startles him. Bending down, he sees a small bird, only 10cm long, with a yellow green tail and a silver-grey ring around the eye. Its beak is slightly open like a last breath is still wedged inside, its claws are hard and curled over. He thinks of his father’s hands when he died. For hours, he and his mum sat with the shrunken body—coiled up under a blue blanket on the bed—until the undertakers came. He touched his dad every so often, feeling him grow colder and colder. But his dad’s hands are what he remembers most: big, brown working hands that looked pinched and sore and sad.

He kneels and picks up the bird. The eyes are dried up or pecked out; he can’t tell. Its body is withered and damp. He imagines his hand, scratched and dirty from saw dust, is a nest for this tiny bird. He walks towards the house. He strains again to see Sarah moving inside. But there is nothing. He feels he is walking faster now. As he walks closer, he thinks this bird could almost be warm. He wants to show Sarah. He pushes open the wire gate and when he reaches the snaking grape vine, he stops suddenly, thinking the bird has moved. He walks quickly, past the shed, feeling bigger, like he is grown into himself somehow, and bounds up the verandah steps.

He calls for her. He can hear the TV. Rushing inside, he calls out again.

The air feels warm and he searches, turning the lights on in the kitchen, then the lounge, bedroom and bathroom: the whole house blazing.

Hurrying back to the kitchen, he notices her boots are gone from the box by the door. On the sink a bag of chops is thawing and a bottle of Merlot is open. He feels his chest stretch, then go loose. He smiles.

He walks outside, back into the cool night. Sits on the edge of the verandah, broken bird in his hands, and waits.
Even if it had rickety stairs from the back door and neighbours close on every side, at least the new house was much closer to the beach. If I stood on tiptoe at the kitchen sink I could see, on the horizon, the blue line of the sea. But still. It was a long way from where we had lived, from the place Dad and I went back to every second weekend.

The first thing I would think of when I woke every second Saturday was that it was only one more sleep till it was a second Sunday, the day Dad and I drove in his car to the oval where we met the girl who looked after Silo now. She would lead him slowly up the steep road to us, dismount her own pony, hold out Silo’s reins to me and look at me without smiling. At any other time, this would have bothered me, but when I was with Silo I just looked at it as if I was looking at a picture in a book. Then I closed my eyes, pressed my face into his warm neck and breathed him in.

One second Saturday morning, at breakfast, the sky through the kitchen window looked like a big blue bowl, and Mum looked at Dad over her cup and said, ‘Such a lovely day. Too lovely to be stuck inside.’ I looked at him, too. Even my brother looked at him. But he just sipped his coffee.
In the afternoon, clouds came in. That night Mum opened the front door and I saw it was raining. Big drops fell shining in the circle of street light. Dad was sitting on the sofa. He was very still, and watching a man in a suit and tie talking on TV. I looked from Dad to the man and back. Dad was so still that I wasn’t sure he was breathing. I looked from him to the talking man again, trying to understand what Dad was listening so hard to, what the man was trying to tell us. Mum was still holding the door open and she said, ‘Well, we’re going. Are you coming with us?’

I looked up at Mum. She was staring at Dad. So I looked across at him again. But Dad couldn’t hear her. He just stared at the man. Dad’s eyes were wide open and quite green, not their usual colour. He didn’t say anything, and he didn’t move. He didn’t even blink. Mum had spoken loudly. I looked back up at her.

The three of us—Mum, my brother and me—were standing close together. I looked at her hands: she had one on the door knob and the other on my brother’s shoulder. I looked at my brother’s face staring up at her. Suddenly I felt frightened. I didn’t want to go out. I looked at Dad who wasn’t Dad but a statue of Dad and I stared hard at the side of his face to make him move, to make him turn his head and look at me, lift his hand and gesture me over:

Pleasedaddypleaseletmestaywithyoupleasedaddypleaseletme—

‘All right,’ Mum said. I looked back to her: she nodded, her mouth set in a line. She opened the door wider. I felt her turning towards it and I felt my brother turning towards it, too. I didn’t need to turn towards it. I already knew it was cold and wet and dark outside and that Mum couldn’t drive and in the moment when the thinking stopped and my head felt hot and fuzzy and I couldn’t control it, I looked away from all of them and into the space between the lounge room and the kitchen, and wished I were over there, around that corner, out of sight. Or under the table, or in my bed or the toilet, or in my mother’s wardrobe with the hems of all her dresses around me. I wished my legs would move—curl me up on the floor or lift me up into the air so I could fly out the room, or just walk me straight into
my father’s arms—but they wouldn’t do anything. If this was what I thought it was, it was all back to front. It should be him at the door with us, his car keys in his hand. It should be her in the middle of the room, shouting, ‘Go! Get out! Get out all of you!’ the way she often did.

A little while before, I had been in my new room of this new house, on my bed, reading *My Friend Flicka*, and Mum had called, ‘Get ready, we’re going out!’ And my brother and I had raced to put on our good shoes and coats, excited because we didn’t go out much at night. And we were there, ready, at the open door, and Dad was staring at the man on TV, and Mum had said, ‘Are you coming with us?’ And then somehow, in an instant, everything changed: we were way over here and he was way over there and my head was hot and I could feel myself start crying and I couldn’t move my feet but I could move my hands so I lifted them up to cover my face, and I bowed my head like I did when I prayed.

Mum never cried. She always said, ‘For God’s sake, stop your noise’ or ‘Get out of my sight if you’re going to do that.’ But once it had started it wouldn’t switch off, so I covered my face with my hands and bowed my head and then there was just the sound of me and the voice of the man in his suit and tie, and Dad was going to let her take us away. He hadn’t even looked at me. He had forgotten. He had forgotten the plan I had made in my head, forgotten what he was supposed to do, that he was the one we would live with, that she was the one who needed to go, that we would all be happy then, that I could learn to cook the dinner and wash the dishes, that there would be no more shouting.

Then I felt Mum’s arm around me and her soft belly press up against my cheek, and her voice sounded different when she said, ‘It’s all right,’ and the door clicked shut behind me, all the dark, cold rain still outside.

When I woke the next morning it was sunny again. I sat beside Dad in the front of his car, and looked at the houses and trees and animals
we passed and my stomach just kept flipping because at last it was a second Sunday and the girl with the shiny hair who looked after Silo would meet us, with Silo on a lead rope, and I wouldn’t care that she didn’t smile at me. I would stroke his face and talk to him and swing myself up high into the saddle.

When we arrived at the meeting place, Dad pulled the car off the road. There was the loud crunch of wheels on gravel and I had the door half-open before we stopped. Beside us was a line of huge trees where my brother and I had built cubbies from fallen limbs and strips of bark in the summers when we lived up here, and behind the trees was the oval where Mum had sat on her fold-up chair and watched Dad play cricket. There was no cricket now. There were just two boys far away on the other side, kicking a footy to one another. Dad and I stood under the trees, as we always did, to wait. For a long time I watched the road that narrowed as it fell away down the rise. The voices of the two boys reached us across the flat green space behind us and reminded me of lunch times at school, the way boys shout like that. I picked up some gum nuts and turned them over and over in my hand. I stared at the toes of my polished riding boots, tried not to think about the time that was passing, then I picked up small stones and tossed them a little way just to hear them clatter.

Beside me, Dad leaned against a tree and smoked, lighting one from the other, just as he always did, grinding out each butt beneath his shoe. He stared straight ahead and was quiet. After a long time, I glanced at the watch on his wrist: twenty to eleven. I peered down the street and bit my lip. They’ll turn up. She’ll say she’s sorry. Or Dad will say something to me. He wouldn’t have driven me all the way for nothing. The sun slanted in under the trees. I closed my eyes and tilted my face to it. For a while, the inside of my eyelids turned to gold.

When Dad threw down a butt without lighting another, I looked at him. He put his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth.
on his heels. His shoes crunched over the stones. He looked like he was thinking, still looking straight ahead, across the road and into the bush. I followed his gaze. There were wild flowers over there. He said, ‘Well, it’s after eleven. I think we should go.’

I said, ‘Why haven’t they come?’

He turned my way but he didn’t look at me, and shrugged. I followed him back to the car. All the way home I stared out the passenger window, my stomach full of things I couldn’t ask.

I waited. No-one said anything about it all that week and all the next, and soon it was a second Saturday again and I knew everything must be all right and that tomorrow we’d go up to the oval in the hills again and this time the girl would bring Silo. After our Saturday lunch, Dad looked at me. He had to visit a farm for work; did I want to come? I jumped up and down. Just him and me again. Him and me on a farm. A farm with animals. Not Mum being angry or my brother snuggling up to Dad in the car and Dad carrying him around on his shoulders.

We were still in our street when it happened. I gasped and jerked forward, maybe I shouted. Dad swung the steering wheel to the right, swerved across the road and back again before he regained control. It was just a flash of a brown dog, running. I swivelled around to look behind us. No yelp, no bump beneath the wheels. No dog lying in the road. No dog at all.

Dad said, ‘You shouldn’t have done that.’

I said, ‘But there was a dog—.’

‘It doesn’t matter. It’s dangerous. Understand? We could have crashed. It’s just a dog. Don’t ever do that again.’

I looked at the air in front of my face and blinked. He had swung the wheel. We had missed the dog. I had thought he would be pleased, like me. I looked down at my hands. ‘Sorry, Daddy.’

We drove a long way. The farm was at the end of a sandy track. Dad pulled up outside a house surrounded by trees. An old dog was asleep in the sun but stood when a man came out of the house. Dad and the man talked, and Dad patted the dog on its head, pat pat, and
said, ‘Hello, boy.’ Dust lifted off the dog’s coat and into the bright air. Dad and the man went into a shed so I found a long stick and poked at the ground, then squatted to watch ants. The dog stood outside the shed door, looking in, its back to me.

We were on our way home when Dad said, ‘I’m going to tell you something and you mustn’t cry. Is that clear?’

I looked at him. He was staring straight ahead at the road. ‘Your horse is dead.’

We were hurtling forward, just him and me. I was sitting in the passenger seat. A moment ago there was a world outside the window. We had been at a farm with a dog. The day was sunny. And a moment before that we had stood under trees. There were wild flowers across the road. He had stared at them. It had been twenty to eleven. We were going back tomorrow. There had been another dog. The dog had lived.

Dad said, ‘There’s no use crying over spilt milk. Do you understand? It won’t change anything.’

At home, he got out of the car so I did, too. I walked through the door after him. He threw his keys on the table and took off his shoes, just as he always did. Mum said, ‘Do you want coffee?’ He said, ‘Lovely.’

I squeezed my fingers together then walked down the passage to my room and stopped in the middle of it and looked around. It was bigger than I remembered. Then I walked out of my room and towards the front door because they were in the kitchen, talking, I could hear them, and they’d see me if I went to the back door, even though it was closer, and besides there was that rickety staircase outside the back door that shakes when you step on it and goes down steeply in one direction and then turns to the right halfway down and goes all the way to the ground just as steeply in that direction, so I walked to the front door and opened the wire door and ran across the front porch and cut through the car port, running between the car and the house and it was so cold in there and smelled strange, just as it always did. Then I ran alongside the house to the back yard and I crouched as I ran
so they wouldn’t see me if they looked through the window on that side. In between the house and the fence there was never any direct sun, and I crouched and ran as fast as I could towards the big fat slab of yellow in the back yard ahead, and I squeezed my fingers together as I went, squeezesqueeze squeezesqueeze. And then I broke through into the bright yellow burn of it, and I was there in the sunlight and I stood in the yard and no-one knew I was and I lifted up my face and it beat and beat and beat on me.

Later, the bath was half full and steaming. There was a clean towel on the rack. I knew Mum had put it there when she ran us the bath. I wasn’t allowed to close the door when I was in my room or in the bath, that was the rule, so I stood on the mat in the space between the bath and wall and turned my back to the door and undressed quickly because it was cold by then.

Somehow my skin came off with my clothes and I had to concentrate hard on my arms and legs, careful how I stepped in. My limbs belonged to some other girl. I was just minding them. So I kept very still and the water turned into a mirror around me. The overhead light floated across it. The ceiling was the floor, the floor the ceiling. I watched the round yellow light beside me and it watched me back.

After dinner I sat in the lounge room with my book open in my lap. I turned the pages, looked at all the shapes words made. When I got up to go to bed, I held the book in one hand while Mum and Dad kissed my cheek and the kissing felt the way it always did, and when I got into bed I ran my fingers over the cover of the book, over its picture of a mare and her foal. The mare’s head was turned to look out of the book at me. I tucked it under my pillow where it would be warm and safe. I lay very straight on my back under the blankets and stretched my legs out carefully and thought about Silo, how they had always been nearest to him when we were riding, had been the part he had felt most then and that felt him most, too. I thought about the muscles in each of my calves and how calf is also a word for an animal, and I remembered how they felt when they were against Silo’s soft flanks, and how he would do what I asked when I kicked him there.
I listened for a long time for shouting in the kitchen or the lounge room but that night there wasn’t any. I could hear Mum washing up and Dad drying, things clattering into cupboards and drawers as always, and I wondered what they were saying to one another, if he picked up a plate and wiped it, and said, ‘So I told her not to cry over spilt milk.’ Maybe Mum stopped washing another plate and looked at him: ‘Why did you tell her that?’ And Dad said, ‘She’s a cry-baby, you say so yourself. She needs to learn.’ And Mum wouldn’t say anything, she would just lift out the clean plate and start washing the pots and pans because he was right, she knew it. And then I turned onto my side and slid my fingers under my pillow to feel the edge of My Friend Flicka, and I closed my eyes and remembered how Dad’s hand looked on the old dog’s head, pat pat, and how pretty it was when the dust flew up from dog’s coat into the sunlight, and I couldn’t help it, that was when the thinking stopped and I pulled the blankets up over my head and I cried and cried like a cry-baby until the next thing I gasped, it was morning.
Clint Bracknell’s ancestral Noongar country is along the southeast coast of Western Australia. His cultural Elders use the term Wirilomin to refer to their clan. He lectures at The School of Indigenous Studies, UWA and is completing a PhD researching Noongar musical and linguistic heritage. He is a committee member of the Wirilomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, is an award-winning musician and has worked in education since 2002, winning the Department of Education WA Barry Hayward Outstanding Aboriginal Educator Award in 2010.

Jennifer Compton lives in Melbourne. She is a poet and playwright who also writes prose. Her book of poetry, Barefoot (Picaro Press) was shortlisted for the John Bray Award at the Adelaide Festival this year, and This City (Otago University Press in 2011) won the Kathleen Grattan Award in New Zealand.

Bruce Dawe was born 1930 and is one of Australia’s best-known poets. Many of his books of poems have been set for study at secondary and tertiary level. His Condolences of the Season and Sometimes Gladness have been through numerous editions.

Brett R. Dionysius was founding Director of the Queensland Poetry Festival. He won the 2009 Max Harris Poetry Award. A chapbook, The Negativity Bin was published by PressPress in 2010. His latest chapbook, The Curious Noise of History was released by Picaro Press in 2011. He was recently a joint winner in the 2011 Whitmore Press Manuscript Prize and a new book, Bowra, will be released in 2012. He lives in Ipswich, Queensland where he teaches English and writes sonnets.
Ross Donlon lives in Castlemaine, Victoria. His latest book is *The Blue Dressing Gown and other poems*, the title poem of which won the Wenlock Poetry Festival Prize (U.K.), judged by Carol Ann Duffy.


Nigel Ellis is a Brisbane based writer. His work has appeared in various online and print publications in Australia and elsewhere. He is a regular contributor to the long-running Speedpoets spoken word events and zine, where he has been a featured poet. He has also been featured at the Avid Reader Poetry Month series of readings. His first collection, *Haematograms*, will be published by NeoPoiesis Press in late 2012.

Diane Fahey’s *The Wing Collection: New & Selected Poems* was published by Puncher & Wattmann in 2011, and was short-listed for the John Bray Poetry Prize in the Adelaide Festival of Arts Awards, 2012.

Kia Groom is a graduate of Edith Cowan University’s creative writing program, currently undertaking an MFA in poetry at the University of New Orleans. She enjoys horror movies, fairy lights and abandoned suburban structures. You can find out more about her/her work at www.kiagroom.com

Judy Johnson has published three poetry collections, a verse novel and a novel. Her verse novel *Jack* won the 2007 Victorian Premier’s Award for Poetry. In 2011 she spent a month at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Ireland as part of Varuna’s alumni exchange program.

Jill Jones’ most recent book is *Senses Working Out*, a Vagabond Press Rare Object chapbook, published in 2012. A new full-length book, *Ash Is Here, So Are Stars*, will be published by Walleah Press later in 2012. She is currently collaborating with photographer Annette Willis and composer/sound designer Solange Kershaw on a new multi-media project. Her poems have been translated into Chinese, Dutch, French, Italian, Czech and Spanish. She is a member of the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide.
Alison Kershaw is a painter and printmaker based at the Butter Factory Studios in Denmark, Western Australia. She wrote her doctoral thesis on the seventeenth-century mystical poet Thomas Traherne and, as a writer of prayers and former academic librarian, she brings a passion for the written word to her first illustrative work. She works as an administrator with Denmark Arts Council.

Graham Kershaw is the author of two novels published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press: *The Home Crowd* and *Dovetail Road*. His poetry has appeared in several Australian journals, and his verse sequence ‘Emails from Manila’ recently won second prize in the Val Vallis Award, in Queensland. He lives in Denmark, Western Australia, where he practices as an architect and publisher.

John Kinsella’s many volumes of poetry include *The Silo: A Pastoral Symphony*, *The Hunt*, *The New Arcadia*, *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography*, *Peripheral Light* and *Armour*. He is also the author of volumes of short stories, novels, plays, and criticism. He is a Professional Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia and an Extraordinary Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge University. He most recently edited a selection of Randolph Stow’s poetry for Fremantle Press.

Christopher Konrad has lived in the hills around Perth pretty much his whole life. He has completed his PhD in creative writing and has had poems published with two other WA poets in a recent anthology, *Sandfire* (Sunline, 2012) and in many journals, print and online. He was awarded the Tom Collins Prize and the Creatrix Prize (WA) in 2009.

Blaze Kwaymullina belongs to the Palyku and Nyamal peoples of the Pilbara region in northwest Western Australia. He is a Heritage Consultant for Terra Rosa Cultural Resource Management and an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Law School, University of Western Australia. A published children’s author and avid reader of stories from fantasy, science fiction to Aboriginal literature, life histories and creation stories, he is also a practising visual artist. His research has been in the area of Aboriginal knowledge systems, creative writing and Aboriginal literature, Aboriginal Law and Aboriginal concepts of justice.
Contributors

Benjamin Law is a Brisbane-based writer. His essays have been anthologised in *The Best Australian Essays* twice, and he is a frequent contributor to *frankie*, *Good Weekend*, *The Monthly* and *Qweekend*. His debut book *The Family Law* (2010) was shortlisted for Book of the Year at the Australian Book Industry Awards (ABIAs) and has been translated into French. His second book *Gaysia: Adventures in the Queer East* has just been released. benjamin-law.com

Michelle Leber is a Melbourne poet whose work has appeared in newspapers, journals and anthologies, including *The Age*, *Sydney Sun Herald*, *Meanjin*, *Southerly* and *The Best Australian Poems 2009* and 2010 (Black Inc). She was commended in the Rosemary Dobson Prize and highly commended in the Val Vallis Poetry Award. Her collection, *The Weeping Grass*, was published in 2010 (APC).

Rozanna Lilley is a social anthropologist, whose work is published widely in academic journals, books, including *Staging Hong Kong: Gender and Performance in Transition* (Curzon Press, 1998), and parenting magazines. She also edited *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* for five years (2004-2008). Her youngest child was diagnosed with Autistic Disorder in 2004, which has profoundly affected both her intellectual work and her desire to write for wider audiences. Lilley is currently doing a second PhD on maternal experiences of parenting kids who are ‘on the spectrum’ and working on a quirky travel/autism memoir. The daughter of authors Dorothy Hewett and Merv Lilley, she grew up in Perth and Sydney in a distinctly bohemian household.

Mark Lyall grew up an Albany, Western Australia. He studied poetry and music at UWA in the mid 1990s, before moving to Sydney and finally Melbourne, where he works at the Australian Catholic University as a lecturer in media theory. Mark is active within the Victorian concert and brass band scenes as a player, composer and conductor. He has been writing poetry since high school, and several of his works have been set to music by other composers (most notably by Roxanne Della-Bosca, who is a long-standing collaborator).
Shane McCauley was born in England in 1954, but has lived most of his life in WA. Six books of his poetry have been published, the last of which was *The Drunken Elk* (Sunline Press, 2010). A chapbook, *Ghost Catcher*, is soon to be published by Studio Press. He was awarded the Max Harris Poetry Prize in 2008.

Marie McNeil is a Fine Artist. She also teaches art at St Marys College. Her ‘paintings’ are intricate, textured and multi-layered, made up of paint, pencil, thread, cloth and found objects. More collage than painting, they often have concurrent narratives defined or complemented by verse and typography. McNeil’s works challenge life’s deeper issues: identity, truth and meaning, and the integrity of the human soul.

Marjorie Main is a first year arts student at the University of Western Australia, majoring in English. Marjorie is a rural student from Torbay, in the Great Southern Region, Western Australia.

Caitlin Maling is a WA poet who has previously published around Australia in places such as *Going Down Swinging*, *The Australian*, *The Sun Herald*, *Blue Dog* and *Westerly* among others. She is currently based out of Houston where she is completing an MFA in poetry for which she was awarded the DCA (WA) Young People and the Arts International Scholarship.

Frank Moorhouse’s *Cold Light* (2011), the companion novel in his Edith Trilogy, was published to high acclaim. The novel continues the life of his character, Edith Campbell Berry, and is set in Canberra and Vienna and has as its back ground the Cold War, the development of nuclear weapons, and the final arguments over of the planning of Canberra. *Cold Light* won the new Queensland Literary Award and was short-listed for the Miles Franklin Award. The first two of the trilogy, the award winning historical novels, *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace*, have as their background the rise of modern diplomacy and the failure of the League of Nations to prevent World War.
Robyn Mundy is the author of the novel *The Nature of Ice* published by Allen & Unwin in 2009. She has published short stories in the journals *Island* and *The Iowa Review*. She recently took up a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at Edith Cowan University’s South West Campus, where she is writing a second novel.

Lucy Neave’s novel, *Who We Were*, is forthcoming from Text Publishing in 2013. Her fiction has appeared in Australian and American literary journals, and in *The Best Australian Stories* 2009. She teaches creative writing at the Australian National University.

Marcella Polain has published three poetry collections, the latest *Therapy like Fish: new and selected poems*, and a novel, *The Edge of the World*. In 2010-2011, she was a recipient of an Australia Council grant for a new work of fiction. ‘A Calf is an Animal’ is reworked from that developing manuscript.

Ron Pretty’s seventh book, *Postcards from the Centre*, was published in 2010. He is currently spending six months at the Whiting Studio in Rome, courtesy of the Australia Council.

Alice Pung is a Melbourne writer and lawyer. The author of *Her Father’s Daughter* and *Unpolished Gem*, and the editor of *Growing up Asian in Australia*, Pung’s *Unpolished Gem* won the 2007 Australian Newcomer of the Year award in the Australian Book Industry Awards and was shortlisted for several other awards. It has been translated into other languages and is also published in the U.K. and U.S. Pung has had stories and articles published in *Good Weekend, Meanjin, The Monthly, Age, The Best Australian Stories* and *The Lifted Brow*. In 2010, she was a judge for the Walkley Awards for Journalism, and in 2012 *Her Father’s Daughter* won the non-fiction section of the 2011 WA Premier’s Book Awards.

Rachel Robertson teaches Professional Writing at Curtin University. Her research interests include life writing, mothering and disability studies. Her memoir, *Reaching One Thousand: a story of love, motherhood and autism*, was published by Black Inc. in 2012.

Belinda Rule lives in Melbourne, where she studies creative writing at one university, and makes websites for another. Her work has appeared in *Antipodes, Eureka Street, Islet, Visible Ink* and *Meanjin.*

Kim Scott has worked extensively in Indigenous arts and education, and is an award-winning author. He is a Noongar man whose ancestral country is along the southeast coast of Western Australian. His most recent novel *That Deadman Dance* (2011) was awarded The Miles Franklin Award and the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, along with a myriad of other literary prizes. Scott is currently working on the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, and has recently been named the inaugural West Australian of the Year.

Tiffany Shellam lectures in History at Deakin University in Melbourne, but her research and writing interests are intrinsically about the southwest of WA. She is very interested in encounters between Aboriginal people and outsiders in the early nineteenth century, particularly in the context of Australian exploration, urban settlements and mission stations. Her book *Shaking Hands on the Fringe* was published by UWA Publishing in 2009.

Eabhan Ní Shuileabháin, daughter of an Irish-American father and an Irish mother, grew up in Dublin, Ireland, but now lives in Gwynedd, North Wales. Her poetry has appeared in many journals throughout Europe and America.

Nicole Sinclair has had both fiction and non-fiction work published in *indigo* journal and *The West Australian* newspaper. Her work appears along the newly re-opened Busselton Jetty and has been performed at The Blueroom, Northbridge. She recently won the Down South Writers Short Story Competition and ‘The Nest’ won the 2011 Katharine Susannah Pritchard Award for Fiction. She is currently writing her first novel set in Australia and Papua New Guinea as part of a PhD in Creative Writing.
Laurence Steed’s writing has appeared in *The Age, Meanjin, Sleepers Almanac, The Big Issue* and elsewhere. He is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at UWA, the 2012 Emerging Writer in Residence for the Fellowship of Australian Writers (WA), and has recently returned from attending the Graduate Fiction Workshop at the University of Iowa. He lives in Perth, Western Australia.

Paul Summers is a Northumbrian poet who now lives in Central Queensland. His poems have appeared widely in print for over two decades and he has performed his work all over the world. A founding co-editor of the ‘leftfield’ magazines *billy liar* and *liar republic*, he has also written for TV, film, radio, theatre and collaborated many times with other artists. His collections include *union, new & selected poems, three men on the metro, big bella’s dirty cafe, cunawabi and the last bus*.

Maria Takolander’s poetry has been widely published. She is the author of a book of poems, *Ghostly Subjects* (Salt Publishing 2009), which was shortlisted for a Queensland Premier’s Literary Award in 2010, and her poems have appeared annually in *The Best Australian Poems* (Black Inc) and/or *The Best Australian Poetry* (UQP) since 2005. She is also a prize-winning fiction writer and was recently awarded an Australia Council grant to complete a collection of short stories, *The Double*, which will be published by Text Publishing in 2013. She is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies and Creative Writing at Deakin University in Geelong, Victoria.

Andrew Taylor’s most recent books are *Collected Poems* (2004) and *The Unhaunting* (2009) both published by Salt Publishing, UK. He is an Honorary Professor at Edith Cowan University.

Mags Webster is a British-born writer, formerly based in WA and now living in Hong Kong. Her poems have been published in various Australian journals, and her first poetry collection, *The Weather of Tongues* (Sunline Press) won the 2011 Anne Elder Award.
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