

westerly



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Public Notice

FUNERAL NOTICE

The FUNERAL of the
late Mrs. Mabel WILLIAMS
who died on 10/7/94
will be held on THURSDAY 14 JULY, 1994
at 10.00 am
departing from the
COOBER PEDY HOSPITAL
to the COOBER PEDY CEMETERY
where a graveside service
will be held.

Stuck on the glass door, in the front of Lucases, one of only two supermarkets in this one pub town, Coober Pedy. I walk past it, turn around, staring, realising who it belongs to. The sticky tape is peeling, yellow and perishing, from the dust on the glass. The paper glowing gold from the orange sunset flowing through the door. The edges of the paper ragged. The warmth from the sun touches my face, dust particles float on the golden air, touching everything, leaving a film of dust everywhere, all over my body, never to be removed until I wash myself back in Adelaide, but by then the dust has seeped into my pores, settled into every crevice, sunk through the layers of skin and is now part of my blood. I let it sink into me while staring at the glass, at the notice, realising that it's about my Nana, about someone I know, someone who shopped here at this hick-town-halfempty-supermarket at least three times a week for twenty three years of her life.

She used to come in the back way, down the hill from the front door of her dugout. Everybody knew her, so it didn't matter. It was all part of the ritual.

Except on Thursdays. On Thursdays the truck would come in and block her way. Packers would be frantically un-ripping boxes, finding invoices stuck in obscure places, trying to restock the empty shelves before the hoards would come in, demanding more. Wanting to know where the Jarlsberg cheese was, the fresh olives, the freshly vacuum-sealed bacon, the rare, and very expensive fish.

I worked as a packer occasionally, with my mother and aunt, hating every moment. The smells, the ripping of the fingernails on the cardboard. Cold fingers, standing in the fridge, restocking, repacking while impatient customers stood behind me demanding new stock.

"Get me the vanilla custard, no the big one, at the back. Here get out the way, I'll get it myself."

I used to think, "How undignified, how demeaning, how unsophisticated" waiting to be back in Adelaide. But now I realise, dignity comes from the mind, not from the location. And I only hated the work because I wasn't very good at it.

On Thursday Nana would come through the front of Lucases. Through these very doors, and even before then, when these doors weren't glass, but roller doors and this place a tin shed.

I stare at the notice. I stand for a moment, remembering.

The funeral has passed....

The priest reads, about a woman unknown to him, as Father Paul, a long time friend of the family, has left. We say 'friend', only, as we are not a religious family. We are not church goers, and neither was Nana. Who needs to go to Church when you have faith and humour in life at home? Father Paul understood Nana, he understood all of us. He once talked my sister Sandra out of Catholicism, as a favour to Mum. But he's not here by the grave. 'God' has sent him away from Coober Pedy, from his home for so many years. This new priest knows that he has a long haul before he's considered a 'local' and he bears his alienation with dignity. He reads...

"Mabel was born in New South Wales in 1922. She met and married Lindsay Gordon Williams...." That's my grandpa, I think to myself, surprised, my mind wanders. "...when she was twenty-one and bore seven..." Ten actually, the triplets died as babies ... although its never spoken about. " ... When the marriage broke down..." I'd been told my grandfather went to war ... Egypt, Papua New Guinea ... saw his friends killed, came back, was failed to be recognised as a returned soldier because he was Aboriginal ... and took to the bottle in madness and comfort.... She

travelled to Tennant Creek to be with her mother, and worked at the local hospital. There she raised her kids, who grew up with great love, devotion and respect for her. She also met and fell in love with Bruno Giacomelli, who was a welder at the mines in Tennant Creek. Bruno became her devoted helpmate, lover and father to her children.

In 1968 Bruno decided to try his luck on the opal fields. So he established himself and sent for Mabel and the twins.... They were the youngest.... In 1970 she moved to Coober Pedy to become an opal miner's wife.... She came here the year I was born....

Her first job in Coober Pedy was at the local school as a cleaner, and then at the hospital as Cleaner and Cook. This is where she then worked for a number of years and became a 'local'.

She became known as Mum Williams to most of the local children and in later years as Nana Williams. It was not uncommon to see her fossicking through the mullock dumps looking for that little bit of extra money, as many of the opal miners wives did.

She supported the local sporting scene, and attended every sports day that her children and grandchildren participated in. She had a wonderful sense of humour and in the darkest of times could see the lighter side of life. She had a wonderful laugh, full of life and warmth. She was always supportive and caring about her family and friends....'

The service rambles on ... through the tears, the gut wrenching sobs, there is something within me, standing apart, not really believing, looking at the sun, the blue sky, searching for her spirit and I'm thinking, "These words mean nothing. They say nothing about her, her soul, her life. Isn't this what any family would say about their grandmother, their matriarch?"

But these words are all we could think of. Our brains are numb with shock and grief — it's all we could say, all we could share. We are not of the great poets.

Around the grave we are all trying to be on our best behaviour yet, our characteristics and personalities are strongest while we are all trying to be what Nana would've wanted. Our frailties and our faults are solidified in the moment when we were trying to be our best in Nana's memory. Even the sunlight and the tears could do nothing to burn out the fact that no matter how different we all are, or how similar, we are a family who has lost someone we all love — love being a word that does nothing to explain the depth and magnitude of our feelings.

Orchids, roses, native hops, carnations, lilies, banksias, proteas, daisies, she

loved them all. We smother her in flowers.

And now I'm standing in the front of Lucases, the sun streaming on my face with a defiance that is raised after a loss, like the way we Australians are so ridiculously proud of Gallipoli.

She is now laid to rest, everybody that needs to know, knows. I tear off the notice, hoping to capture the gold of the sunset in the paper, hoping to capture the dust settling on me, the moment itself.

Later, my uncle finds the notice between my magazines, stored and hidden from any embarrassment. He had put the notice up, being the dutiful son, trying to keep as busy as possible while working with his own grief. He looks at the notice, at me, but says nothing.

The dying sunlight now streams through the doorway, unhindered, slowly turning red. The sun is in my eyes, but I do not blink, I do not close my eyes, let it burn into me, burn into my very retinas. People pass at the edge of my vision. I turn to do the shopping, knowing there's no need to look for her in the dusty aisles, she's not here. She's in the glow of the sunset and the dust that is on my skin and in my blood.

Ruby Langford Ginibi and Elizabeth Guy

Ruby Langford Ginibi in conversation with Elizabeth Guy

Why do you write, Ruby?

Well, I wrote *My Bundjalung People* because it was a 'going back', to my past and my people and helping them tell their stories.

That's a great challenge to transcribe the oral word into print.

That's right. *Real Deadly* is written orally, that's the way I talk. And *Don't Take Your Love To Town* has a little lingo although a lot was edited (I prefer to put my lingo at the bottom of the page).

When I was reading My Bundjalung People I noticed there are three or four different Aboriginal words for 'white man', why is this?

Well, there are seventy tribes and dialects of the Bundjalung people and it's all interwoven, you know. And those different words for white man represent the different pronunciations. Linguists, who are not Aboriginal, give their interpretation of the sound but it doesn't sound how we'd say it. This is a disadvantage.

This is your language, right?

Yeah, I grew up around my language. My mother spoke to me in lingo before I spoke myself. And I understood what she was saying. The Gidabal tribes of the Bundjalung people had a different dialect. They were the first people who were the stockmen.

And Ruby tell me about that word, 'edu-ma-cate'.

Edu-ma-cate. It's just silly talk, just means I'm an educator.

Ruby, how would describe the type of writing you do?

One reviewer said it's: "Ruby's balance of knowledgeable outrage". And it is. They were taking kids from every state in Australia to be trained in white people's homes for servitude. Cheap labour workforce! This was our kids! But we don't want the white man's guilt. We want positive help to elevate us up and away from this dispossession — which has had disastrous effects on the whole country.

So who are you writing for?

I'm writing all this stuff for you mob. To educate you mob about my people and for my own mob too. Especially those who were stolen away and don't know where they're coming from. To show: "Hey, there's nothing to be ashamed of!" Our people are so down trodden that it's probably going to take another two hundred years to pull ourselves out of this shit that you people have created for us.

Are things changing?

Things are changing but slowly. And you know people say to me: "But things are changing aren't they?" And I say: "What needs to change mostly is white attitudes to Aboriginal people!" You people have to change because we've conformed enough to your laws and your standards.

Do you think that white readers have to ask different sorts of questions of the Aboriginal text to learn a different way of reading?

That's right, you have to be educated to read it differently. You have to have cultural knowledge to read our stuff properly. You've always known your perspective, now this is our perspective.

And what have the responses to your work been like?

I get a lot of good responses and I've only ever had one bad one and that was the Liverani one. The Black response is good. You know, they say of my writing: "That's real deadly". Which means real good. And that's how we talk. That's our voice. And people like to see our Koori English because it acknowledges our heritage, it acknowledges who we are.

What's the next book?

The next book is called *Haunted Past: Nobby's Story and Others* and it is going to knock them on their bums because there's nothing written from a Koori perspective

about Aboriginal incarceration and that's coming out in 1997. And then there's *Only Gamon* and that means 'not real', you know, and it is about the stereotypical jokes made up about us as far back as the 1800s. The Jacky-Jacky and Mary type of stuff that has managed to keep alive the racism. When you're releasing books you've got to wait until they take. And I'm putting together an anthology of poetry called *Koori Voices* and I've also got a collection of all my papers that I've given at conferences and short stories to form my seventh book.

Ruby, could you tell me about the loss you've experienced in the gap between creativity and production?

Look, I reckon about 80% of writing done on Aboriginal people is done by white academics and anthropologists and it is funded. I wonder if the tables were reversed whether they would let us write their stories? Not on your bloody sweet nelly! And this is what we're always up against. Oh we know about loss. I won a human rights award — not that we have any human rights in this country and we really have none. Not while our people don't have access to fresh drinking water and are dying of curable diseases and are the most incarcerated people in the country. We only make up less than 2% of 18 million people — and we can't be the most bad evil bloody people in the whole of Australia. That's a whole lot of goonung (shit).

Tell me about the creative process of your writing?

OK. I did six drafts of *Don't Take Your Love To Town* I was in hospital recovering from major surgery and I had to dip right in my heart, and that's what it's all about. It's the true way. I'm an educator, I teach people what it's like from our perspective. I mean, we don't have a voice in this country. And the rubbish written in newspapers about Aboriginal people! Often those journalists have never even met an Aboriginal person! And how they write keeps alive the racism and the stereotyping of my people. It marginalised us even further. We are a divided nation. And you've got someone like John Howard, a couple of years ago saying that to give Aboriginal people land rights would cause a division. Well I've got news for you there has always been a division! We have never been allowed into white social enclaves.

Ruby tell me something about the production process of your writing.

The first experience of the production process knocked me for a loop. It was my first venture into white man's field of literature. And my editor kept saying to me: "Oh I

think I should have some royalties because I've worked so hard on that book". And I said: "By all means have some royalties but copyright is mine. You can't own my story, that's an Aboriginal woman's story". But she knew what was going down. Those stories are my children's heritage and they don't belong in white people hands. It's her shame. And I'm not the first person to be ripped off. And I probably won't be the last.

And what about the production of Real Deadly?

Well, Tom Thompson asked whether I had any work, and I had some short stories but without a title. And I'm always saying it's 'real deadly', you know. And he said: 'There's your title!'

And My Bundjalung People?

Oh yeah, Queensland University Press — I've got a wonderful senior editor. She's been like an old mother hen. I'll be talking to audiences and saying: 'I'm only a Ruby-come-lately'. And she'd say: 'Don't you dare say that! Your writing is knocking people on their arses!' That shut me up.

Did you have much control in the overall creation of the texts: the graphics, choice of photos and the covers?

I had half a say in the design of the cover of *Don't Take Your Love To Town* but they knocked back Pam Johnson's painting and Danny Eastwood's painting. They accepted this one [the mimi spirits] because the artist was dead and they didn't have to spend any money on copyright. And they couldn't use the real title, 'Ruby, don't take your love to town' because they would have had to pay \$30,000 in copyright for the song. And the photographs are real powerful, they add to it. *Real Deadly* is in its second print, *Don't Take Your Love To Town* is in its tenth and *My Bundjalung People* has nearly sold out of its first print already.

Ruby, I'd like to hear more about the role of women in your culture.

Well there was no such thing as male domination of our women. Men vied for the rights to marry the woman. She was the keeper of the hearth, the mother, the birthing person. She was the hunter-gatherer too, she was the whole source of it. She had her ceremonies which males could not come to (and the males had theirs) so we had this whole democratic society before others came and stuck their noses

into our business and stuffed us up. They divided and quartered and tore us apart.

How difficult is it to write about the Dreamtime?

To write about the Dreamtime is so unbelievably difficult but I've made English my own language and I've used the language in there to say: "Hey, the language is still there, the culture is still there and so are the people. We haven't all been killed off and gone". And the Dreamtime to Aboriginal people is sacred and we don't like to talk about it.

Ruby, you seem to place a lot of emphasis on spirituality as a defining quality of Aboriginal life. It must be hard to convey its importance to a white reader.

Well, you know our people were always spiritual people. We lived in unity with everything. The earth was our mother. And the Aboriginal belief is, we were birds and animals and insects and things before we were humans. And some of our religious beliefs are so similar to your concepts. In our Dreamtime the earth was flat and the great spirit forces moved over it, creating the rivers and streams and birds and fish and insects. It set down the laws for the Aboriginal people, who are the oldest people in the world, to live by.

Does some of the writing about your spirituality arise from pain at feeling a general lack of respect for this 'firstness'?

Yeah, I mean what has this country ever done for us? Deny us our human rights, genocide — murder us. Three hundred Aboriginal nations were murdered in the colonisation of this land. And what is colonisation? It's one society's domination and power over another. And that's what it is in a nutshell. And we're still floundering. Dispossessed people.

Do you have hope?

Yes I do but there has to be a coming together of both cultures, black and white, on a fair and equal level, not like we are today. We are who we are and for too long we've had to conform to your standards, your rules, your laws. About time you people conformed to a few of our laws. Might make it a better world.

And you lived on a mission for some time?

Yes, I was born on a mission and so was my father and mother. In my family tree I

have three traditional grandparents and one of my grandfathers was half-caste. My mother's mother was raped by an Italian banana plantation owner so that's how my mother got her degree of caste. But the missions were like prison camps with white camp commandants running the place. And you had to have permission to come and go. We lived under such a regimen. You weren't allowed to do anything. You got your monthly rations, you got your tea, flour, sugar and a bit of baking powder to make your damper and the rest you had to hunt as bush tucker. The Protection Act was formed in 1883 that was suppose to protect Aboriginal people but they never protected us. They exploited us instead. And it is still the same today.

What was the worst of this exploitation?

They took the half-caste children, mostly to hide the fact that they were being fathered by white men. That's how we got our degree of caste to begin with. There was 8,000 reported cases of stolen children in NSW alone, but researchers are now saying that it was more in the vicinity of 200,000. And they were taking the children in every state in Australia. As I said you cannot do that to a race of people and get away with it! We're still fighting today for human rights.

And your people's history of white invasion?

It was not 'terra nullius'. Invasion took place here at Port Jackson and moved right up the east coast where my Bundjalung place is and they went there for the cedar. The reason why you have Yabsley house on the front of *Real Deadly* is that the Yabsleys were the dispossessors of my people. There were 10 acres that should have been given to my people but never were. We had our own justice. And everyone had a place in tribal society, nobody was excluded. We were the first communists because our culture was based on sharing and caring. My mother's sisters were my tribal mothers and my father's brothers were my tribal fathers. This was our extended family. But then we were uprooted by the dominant society. And we weren't allowed to speak our own language! We were not allowed to be our damn selves! But we're making headway even though we still don't have a voice in that hen house down in Canberra.

Ruby I am really overwhelmed by some of these portraits of you hanging on your walls. This last one by Piero Fusco, it's breathtaking.

That last portrait was real deadly. She got all the sorrow and the anguish and the

emotion. This was done with my hat on and it was me all over, with all my worry and turmoil and emotions that have been in my life. That's me and I accept that. That story of mine is not only mine. It's every Aboriginal woman's story that has ever had children to raise — I'm only one ... the fencing, the carrying water, the looking after kids, the domestic violence, the fighting with men, the whole lot. So it's not only my story, it's their story as well. Everything in that is true and I've got the scars to prove it.

Tell me about your kids.

There's my son the artist who was wrongfully jailed and it's the only sorrow in my life because he has not been able to live free of police verbals and brutality. It's so unfair you know. So unjust. And we've always had to conform to the laws of the white man and it is not the laws of the land of this country. Our laws were the first laws of this land. Anger and the spirits of my people have pushed me to write and to do what I do with that damn pen.

You wouldn't have had to do all that back breaking fencing!

That's right ... if I knew what I could do now, I wouldn't have had to work so damn bloody hard and bust my gut fencing.

Tell me some of your experiences in trying to get into those 'white enclaves'.

I was the first Aboriginal to judge the Young Writer of the Year Award but I never got acknowledged for that. And I was the first Aboriginal person to be invited into the Ministry of Arts with all the big shots in 1993 to judge the writing. And I said to them: "This seems a bit tokenistic to me, why haven't my people been invited before?" And they said: "No, no, no — it's not tokenistic, we're going to right that great wrong! That's why you are here". And I said: "We'll see about that". The next year, 1994, there was no Aboriginal person invited. And I was also asked to be the first Aboriginal person to present the award but Drusilla Modjeska said: "Ruby shouldn't be presenting that award because she's a new writer — there are other Aboriginal writers who've been writing longer than Ruby". So that was denied to me. They have excluded us all our lives. They are the dominant culture and they don't think that we have the capabilities to do what they are doing. That's their perception — and it's wrong!

So, what was it like going back there, to Bundjalung country?

It was very painful to see the way my people lived in poverty. As soon as they knew I was there they came asking for my books — my Koori mob — saying: “Where are your books? They should be here. Why aren’t they here?” And it’s because those book promoters don’t promote Aboriginal work. They don’t want to hear about the people of this land. And we have always been historically, culturally and politically suppressed in our country, it has always been so.

And how has your life changed, now that you are a writer?

It’s taken me to places I’ve never been before. I travel to lecture and talk about culture — exactly what I’m talking to you about. I was over in the Pacific festival in New Zealand last year. I’ve done something like 185 talks and people are coming all the time to ask me to do this and that. There’s a doctorate being written about me and an MA on my writing and other stuff. They don’t know much, the whites, you know.

Do you see a difference between yourself and other Aboriginal writers?

All the Aboriginal people are saying the same thing, except they’ve been saying it longer, for instance Mudrooroo, Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davis, Faith Bandler and Oodgeroo. As I said, it’s the most marginalised art form in the country. But we’re the ones who have to give the education so that the white ones can understand. And I’ve got the gift of being able to write it like I talk. You know, there’s no better way than to say it how it is, from our side of the fence. And we’re still fifteen to twenty years behind everybody in all our basic needs, such as health, housing and education. We didn’t have access to white man’s education until the late 40s and early 50s. We were not allowed into the schools because of racism. I mean racism in this country is endemic! It pervades all institutions, government or privately owned. That’s what we’re always up against, you know. It’s like banging your head against a brick wall!

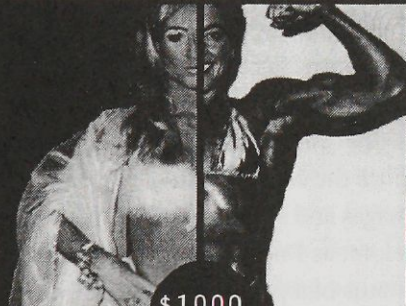
So what marks or characterizes a Ginibi text?

Well, my memory developed because of my oral culture. All my writing is about journeys — back to culture, back to heritage, back to the whole lot, you know. And it’s meant to show that the culture is still there, it’s still intact. The beliefs and the language are still there. You know I have no social life because of what I do but now I want to go home.

Is that what you want to do?

Yeah, I've got to go home to Bundjalung country. Last time I was there I got sick and that's because they want me there. The spirits held me there. And all these little kids came to visit me from the school. All these little ones, blonde haired little ones, frizzy haired littlies, all looking on. Real dark some of them were, too! And they had picked wild flowers for me on the way and there they were doing a little dance and all calling me 'Aunty'. Yeah, all looking on.

So are we, Ruby.

		ISSUE 8 SEXING THE APPLE JUNE 1997 Christos Tsiolkas, Mackenzie Wark, Dorothy Porter, William Yang, Palma Ragno, Javant Biaruja, Ivor Hele, Poli Papapetrou.
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The Art of Translation and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*

In this paper, I will use the word 'translation' as a synonym of 'transculturation', a term used by Latin American scholars like Fernando Ortiz and Angelo Rama to indicate "a playfulness that oscillates endlessly between the adoption of a European model and the valorisation of national difference"¹ in writings and works of art in general. To better understand this wider meaning of 'translation' we can recall a much quoted sentence from Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame*. Talking about migration and migrants, he observes: "I, too, am a translated man. I have borne across. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion — and use, in evidence the success of Fitzgerald-Khayyam — that something can also be gained."² In Rushdie's sense, the term 'translation' implies the act of 'bearing' not only words, but also concepts, ideas, habits, religions, images and symbols, across the borders — either material or metaphorical ones. Therefore, as I noticed elsewhere in Rushdie's works, the word 'translation' is given the status of a political program. While at the level of language it refers to specifically colonial politics, "at the level of images — and still with ideological undertones — translation is the ability to use imagination to elaborate reality [...]"³ Finally, 'translation' stands for 'migration' and 'translating' for the migrant writer's act of creating fiction [...]"³ Consequently, taking the concept of 'translation' in its widest sense, I will try to analyse how some Western artists have recently tried to 'translate' post-colonial and Third World realities for Western audiences, while at the same time some post-colonial authors have introduced

1. A. Rama, *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, Mexico City: Siglo veintiuno editores, 1982, 29. (Translated by T. Brennan in id., *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, London: Macmillan, 1989, 59.)
2. S. Rushdie, *Shame*, New York: Vintage/Adventura, 1984, 24.
3. S. Albertazzi, *Translating India. Travel and Cross-Cultural Transference in Post-Colonial Indian Fiction in English*, Bologna: CLLEUB, 1993.

Western mythologies into their works.

In this sense, one of the most striking examples of 'translation' which has come from the Western world during the last decade is the musical versions of Amos Tutuola's romance *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, which was attempted by two experimental musicians, English Brian Eno and North-American (but Scottish born) David Byrne, at the beginning of the Eighties. Actually, more than a musical rendering of the Nigerian book, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is a rock suite inspired by the book itself.⁴ That is to say that Eno and Byrne have adapted Black African situations and characters to a North American metropolitan setting, changing them into something completely different and, at the same time, showing their universal value as symbols and metaphors. It is not only a matter of adopting African rhythms and sounds: Eno and Byrne try to demonstrate that certain figures — e.g., ghosts, spirits, phantoms and so on — while acquiring a different status in the different realities they choose to inhabit, in their deepest structure remain the same throughout the globe.⁵ For instance, in the first take of their suite, whose title is 'America is waiting', translating the Nigerian spirits into the voices of a modern Western metropolis, the two musicians interpret urban reality as a ghost dance, exactly as the French philosopher Derrida was doing more or less at the same time.⁶ The world depicted by Tutuola was a world of romance, inhabited by grotesque ghosts leading lives which are exactly like the ordinary lives of living people. In Eno's and Byrne's musical project, that very world becomes a haunting picture of contemporary multicultural society, where you can find Algerian Muslims singing the Quran,⁷ American evangelists preaching their faith, Georgian singers from Sea Island telling folk stories, a Lebanese singer calling her people from the mountains, while politicians and radio listeners argue and scream until finally their voices are

4. According to Brian Eno the record was not directly inspired by Tutuola. He and Byrne only borrowed the title and the idea of different ghosts in different contexts. "These, in a sense, were our ghosts," he says of the record's disembodied voices, "but we didn't plan it that way. It sort of locked together", (B. Eno in S. Isler, 'Going, Going, Ghana! David Byrne and Brian Eno brings Africa to Soho', *Trouser Press*, 61. May 1981, 25).

5. See how, for instance, the word 'unidentified' in the credits list on the cover of the album turns people into nameless ghosts.

6. I'm referring here to a British film of 1982, Kel McMullen's *Ghost Dance*, where Derrida himself appears to explain his reworking of the Freudian idea of ghosts as "internalised figures from the past".

7. In the American edition of the album the Quran was left out and replaced by a track called 'Very Very Hungry'. For these remarks on Eno and Byrne's work I'm grateful to Frank Veldkamp, editor of the Internet pages devoted to David Byrne and Talking Heads, who helped me with his useful suggestions and precious hints.

reduced to a sort of electric mumbling.⁸ Superficially, Eno's and Byrne's experimental work can be seen as yet another Western attempt to transform an indigenous mythology into an Occidental cultural product, thus killing its subversive potential. Yet, what the two musicians are trying to achieve in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is almost the opposite. Using very complex polyrhythmical musical structures, they build a sound-landscape where tribal elements are substituted by technology, while the confusion of voices suggests the idea of a disembodied society, a society of pure voices, of ghosts indeed. Actually, this feeling of disembodiment, this idea of 'phantomisation' is at the core of Western culture at the end of the second millennium. Taking Tutuola's book as a pretext for their musical reflections on this problem, Eno and Byrne not only create a work of art which is against phantomisation and in favour of a desire of embodiment, they also show that literature can recuperate the sense of the body, of living in a particular place, stressing the human need of belonging.

In fiction, a similar experiment has been carried out in Indo-English literature by Rukun Advani in his novel *Beethoven among the Cows*, which was published both in India and in England in 1994. Structured as a true postmodern work, *Beethoven among the Cows* fuses and confuses Eastern and Western myths, symbols, figures and historical characters thus creating an image of India as a country of the mind, a jigsaw composed by fragments of all the things that the two brothers who are the main characters of the book learn throughout their formative years. A very peculiar *Bildungsroman*, Avani's novel appears as a fantastic story full of historically true situations, while being made up by the sum of a series of Indian tales often acted out by characters taken from Western media. For the purpose of this paper, two chapters are particularly interesting: 'Death by Music' and 'S/he or A Postmodern Chapter on Gender and Identity'. In the first, the two brothers find themselves face to face with their favourite American myth: Queen Cleopatra impersonated by Hollywood star Elizabeth Taylor. In the second, the same brothers, once grown up, know the world of Western Universities seen through the lenses of an Indian critic who has acquired a vast popularity in the USA.

In both cases, the purpose of the author is to translate a particular aspect of Western reality for the benefit of Indian audiences, while stressing very ironically how ordinary Indian people are affected and influenced by Western myths. For the

8. See D. Breskin, 'Talking Heads' in *Musician*, 32, 1981 and R. Lloyd, 'You Can't Do It At Home', in *L.A. Weekly*, 9-15 November 1984. Both articles are reprinted in V.V.A.A., *David Byrne*, Milano, Arcana, 1987, 80.

two Indian teenagers of the early Sixties, Liz Taylor stands for 'the exotic and the extraordinary': therefore she can appear in their dreams as Helen of Troy, a mythical figure who is not less foreign or less exotic for an Indian boy. Moreover, she can even step out of a cinema screen like a character in a Woody Allen movie and, still dressed as Cleopatra, wander about the night streets with the two lustful youngsters. Roman history and the hollywood star-system are ironised through the description of a contact with the illusion of cinema. Taylor is depicted as "all scented and Oriented",⁹ a perfect fictive embodiment of a typical Oriental lady, at least as Western men imagine her. Yet, towards the end of her stay her presence in a small North Indian town is related to a mysterious English lady who committed suicide during the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and by whose grave the two boys pass each morning going to school. While the grave and the nearby tree represent the epicentre of their lives, "lying halfway in our history, equidistant between the unspoken warmth of our mother's knitting needles and the dictations in reason we receive at our school" (116), the name of the woman, Eliza Taylor, stresses for them "the strange contours of an emotional convergence between our world and the one from which Liz had arrived" (116). Ironically, later in his life the narrator attributes "that singular perception of Elizabeth Taylor" to "an uncommon Anglicisation which sensitised us to the beauties of the West, until the clamour of local historians sternly warned us against being so ideologically evil as to desire white before brown" (117). At the beginning of the book, taking about his mother's "Shakespearian range of facial expressions which derived from the arts of Europe — a Beethoven frown, a Mona Lisa serenity, a Rubens cherubism after lunch, a Jeeves-Wodehouse arching of her eyebrows, a Nelson's eye when the occasion required and a Medusa glare which turned servants to stone", the narrator concludes that "You could absorb Western culture just looking at her" (14): this can be read both as the statement of an 'uncommonly Anglicised' Indian writer and as an ironical attempt to convey the vast range of expressions of an Indian face to a lazy Occidental reader.

While references to Western culture are to be found throughout the book, in the chapter dealing with deconstructionism, gender and identity, Advani makes fun of Literary Theory and fashionable critics using their esoteric language in an ironic way. Here he 'translates' critical jargon humorously for the benefit of his reader by way of making up sentences and inventing puns which are almost impossible to translate. The protagonist of the chapter is a certain Professor Lavatri Alltheorie, a

9. R. Advani, *Beethoven among the cows*, Deli: Ravi Dayal, 1994, 104.

very recognisable parody of Gayatri Spivak. This is her description: "She was located at the rarefied end of the Women's Movement where Lit.Crit. became Lit.Clit. She possessed a vocabulary to which my brother and his friends aspired. In their world there was a jargon phrase for her sort of fish. Post-modernist theoretician, boia deconstructor, discourse analyst ..." (146) and so on. The author of unbelievable best-sellers like *Collected Marxist Phonecalls* and *Collected Feminist Faxes*, Professor Alltheorie, "once a medium-size Bengali gent", changed his sex — or better, deconstructed his "Self into the Other" — with a decision which "did not merely involve gender: it involved gender, race and class, Freud, Canon and Foucault" (146). Here Advani's clearly recognisable target is the North American obsession with the 'politically correct' — paradoxically, in a "blue collar institution dominated by men with white masks, black thoughts and repressed neo-colonial urges" a brown woman will be offered more opportunities out of political correctness.

The whole chapter is constructed as a series of intertwining puns — on Alltheorie's dubious sex, first of all (when she is around, Jethro Tull don't sing 'Thick as a Brick', but 'Tick as a Prick'); on her marital life ("By rumours she paid alimony to seven husbands and palimony to their seven predecessors") and, last but not least, with more than a hint of David Lodge's academic novels, on her profession ("I wondered why Professor Alltheorie was changing places, how she'd fare in our small world, where she'd lodge ..."). While these attitudes predictably lead to a rude parody of her critical theories — the study of "The Asiatic Commode of Production" or the shifting of the historian's concern from "India's toiling millions" to "its toileting millions" (161) — the idea which is at the core of Advani's playful use of language is that in an end-of-the-century global village you cannot survive if you are not able to "get in with the weather". Therefore, since the fashion of the moment is "academic acrobacy", and "Without verbal pyrotechnics you were liable to a cut in salary at the end of the month" (162), the only possibility left to Lavatri Alltheorie and to people who achieve and strive to keep success in the academic field, is to buy a "dic loaded with academic jargon to uplift [their] career graph". Yet, after realising this, Advani cannot avoid another mischievous pun: Lavatri does not need a new dic, his narrator reflects, "Maybe she needs a private dick" (163). Consequently and quite obviously, at the end of the chapter, she will do a reverse sex-change operation, needing, according to the narrator's last pun, "a dick from a doc" (174).

Nowadays, one of the most widespread forms of translation is the passage from the medium of narrative prose to cinema: translating novels into films has become so popular that sometimes one wonders if the large number of movies taken from

literature does not simply imply a frightening lack of original ideas. As we all know, many postcolonial novels have also become internationally acclaimed films in recent years: apart from the Merchant-Ivory productions of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *The Householder* — in the sixties — and *Heat and Dust* — in the mid-eighties, we can remember, among the most successful ones, Christopher Koch's *The Year of Living Dangerously* and Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (both directed by Peter Weir); Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table* (which was inspired by Janet Frame's life and works) and Colker Schloendorff's *The Handmaid's Tale* (taken from a best-selling novel by Margaret Atwood). Moreover, Michael Ondaatje's Booker prize winning novel *The English Patient*, for instance, is a Hollywood production starring Juliette Binoche, Willem Dafoe and Ralph Fiennes. Anyway, almost all these are — or will be — cases of 'one-way' translations, from book to screen, no way back: that is to say, director and script-writer confronting themselves with the narrative text, cutting or expanding scenes and situations in order to underline particular aspects of the story, thus suggesting to their audiences their own reading keys. The results are original cultural products which have to be valued and judged apart from the books they were taken from. For instance, when Peter Weir translates *The Year of Living Dangerously* for the screen, he is more interested in telling a love story and a political apologue of universal value than in analysing the situation of Australians in Jakarta in the Seventies which is the main concern of Koch's novel. In a similar way, almost twenty years after its opening, throughout the world audiences are still fascinated by *Picnic at Hanging Rock* because of the haunting quality of its scenery and the fantastic ambiguity of the plot: yet, those among them who, like Stephen King, consider Weir's film as one of the best horror films ever made,¹⁰ would be rather disappointed by the comparative flatness and lack of atmosphere in Lindsay's novel.

Dealing with translation — even in the widest sense of the term — perhaps it is more interesting to have a look at those movies in which Western directors try to convey an idea of a postcolonial reality to Western audiences. Here, while something gets inevitably lost in translation, even more inevitably something else acquires the status of a symbol, a metaphor of a whole world. It is not by chance, for example, that the Australian writer Peter Carey and the German director Wim Wenders did not get along quite well on the set of *Until the End of the World*. "It is

10. See S. King, 'Appendix 1' to *Danse Macabre*, New York: Berkley, 1983.

not my film: it's only Wenders", Carey told me at the EACLALS Graz conference, "I even wanted to take my name off the credits". Actually, in the last section of the film Australia appears like a day-after world populated by survivors and exiles. This is Wenders' idea of Australia, "a landscape which seemed to be made for science fiction",¹¹ as the German director himself once commented. Carey's ideas both of his own country and of science-fiction are very different. On the one hand, as we can see in *The Tax Inspector*, *Illywhacker* and even *Oscar and Lucinda*, he prefers to deal with metropolitan settings and urban problems rather than with deserted lands and empty spaces; on the other, as it appears from his latest novel *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, he is much more interested in the satirical possibilities of the utopian convention than in the grimy world of "life after men". Therefore, it is not surprising if the climax and the epilogue which Wenders wanted for his film did not satisfy the Australian writers. After becoming slaves of their own dreams, which they can see over and over with the help of a mechanical device, the protagonists of the film eventually smash their dream-machines in order to survive. To an Australian intellectual this kind of an ending, where Western white people are almost destroyed by the power of their dreams, can seem an easy and naive way of stressing the lack of imagination of the white races, in opposition to the force of Aboriginal dreaming, which can by itself invent whole worlds. Yet, what can appear superficial to a native mind can see absolutely new and fascinating to a foreign one: the Western people, left alone with the power of their dreams, can only become dream-addicted; they lose their rationality and their will. On the contrary, as most readers in Europe know, thanks to another Anglo-Saxon writer, Bruce Chatwin, the Aborigines create their universe and their own identity by a Dreaming, and their "Dreaming tracks lay over the land as 'ways' of communication between the most far-flung tribes".¹² In Wenders' movie, the protagonists are isolated by their dreams, losing touch with each other; after the dreaming experience, they will go back alone to their lives and countries. Lacking a trail — or a 'songline' — to follow, they are not able to find their way across the Australian wilderness.

Yet the most striking example of the difficulty of 'translating' a postcolonial reality to a Western audience can be found in a French movie *Nocturne Indien*, which was taken in 1991 from an Italian novel, *Notturmo Indiano*, by Antonio Tabucchi. Here a man comes from Europe to India to look for a friend, traces of whom have

11. See W. Wenders, *Stanotte vorrei parlare con l'angelo. Scritti 1968-1988*, Milano: Ubulibri, 1989, 202.

12. B. Chatwin, *The Songlines*, London: Picador, 1988, 15.

been lost somewhere between Madras and Goa. Faced with an utterly alien reality, the protagonist wanders from town to town, from train to bus, from hospital to monastery, until he eventually discovers that he has always been looking for himself. The Western stereotype of India as a place of the mind, a place where you can go to 'find yourself' in the book is conveyed to the reader through a series of hints which lead, in the end, to a very postmodern metafictional turn which can leave the reader quite unsatisfied, as is often the case in this kind of open-ended fiction. On the contrary, the film, more than stressing the metaphysical aspects of the story, lets the images speak for themselves. Consequently, the audience sees India through the bewildered eyes of the main character, a European everyman who is not a tourist and has not come to India to learn or to make philosophical discoveries. Always remaining detached from what he sees, he reaches the end of his journey with the awareness that it is impossible to know a place from a heap of scattered images: "pas de morceaux choisis", he is warned in the last scene of the movie by a French photographer to whom he is trying to tell his story.

Apparently, his attitude could be summed up in the words of a Canadian writer who lived in India for twenty years, Sara Jeannette Duncan, and who said to an interviewer just a century ago: "[In India] one sees one's self projected like a shadow against the strenuous mass of the real people, a shadow with a pair of eyes".¹³

It is not by chance that Mr Nightingale (or M. Rossignol), the protagonist of Alain Courneau's film, after a long dialogue — in a scene which is not in the book — with the namesake of Peter Schlemil, the literary character who sold his shadow, starts to feel more and more disembodied. One night, at a bus stop in the jungle, a blind fortune teller will even refuse to read his hand justifying herself with the fact that he is not a living person. Actually, from a metafictional point of view, if Nightingale and Rossignol are the same person, one of the two is a ghost, not a real man. Yet, what strikes the spectator of the film — and is not to be found in the book — is the idea that in India Nightingale has to realise — and come to terms with — his own very Western feeling of disembodiment, the peculiar sense that someone else (here, Rossignol) is living his life.

Once more, a Western artist trying to translate an alien reality gets lost in the bush of ghosts.

13. G.B. Burgin, 'Interview with Sara Jeannette Duncan', *The Idler*, August 1895, 115.

Domestic Politics

my wife is the opposition leader

if i sit on the left
she'll sit on the right

if i lie down on my back
she'll lie down on her belly

if she cooks
i have to do the dishes

if she cleans
i have to tip the rubbish

when she speaks
i keep my mouth shut

when i speak
she keeps hers

as there's no Mr Speaker
we sometimes speak together

we hold domestic elections
once a month

when she has her period
i exit

then i come back
with a vengeance

verging on violence
while she plays the wilderness again

no-one beats the other
we are equal

together we rule this tiny kingdom of ours
like a democracy

Yi Sha
translated from Chinese by Ouyang Yu

Train Journey across the Yellow River

the train was crossing the yellow river
while i was pissing in the toilet
deep down i knew i should not be doing this
i should be sitting before the window
or standing by the train door
with my left arm akimbo
and my right hand sheltering my brow
looking into the distance like a great man
at least like a poet
thinking of something on the river
or some old accounts of history
when everybody was looking into the distance
i was in the toilet
it took a long time
and the time belonged to me
i had been waiting for a day and a night
it was only the time for a piss
but the yellow river had already flowed far away

A Hero Revived

Uncle Lei Feng has come back
 the twenty-two-year-old youngster
 is standing among us
 looking shy and ill at ease
 he is wearing a leather jacket which
 is the one and only evidence that Uncle Lei Feng
 treated himself well in his early years he never made public
 the banknotes bulging in his pockets
 royalties from *Lei Feng's Diary*
 which are now reissued by the tens of thousands
 what a strange creation this is
 in that age when poverty was glorious
 he was a lovable poor devil
 but now having suddenly changed his own identity
 he's turning himself into a small man of wealth
 Jia Jai said: Uncle Lei Feng
 please dance a dance
 and so he marches in parade steps
 Li Li said: Uncle Lei Feng
 are you a virgin?
 and so he is crowded into a dark corner

* Translator's note: Lei Feng is China's most revered revolutionary hero who died in a work-related accident in the sixties.

The Artificial Limbs Factory

Chen Xiangdong a friend of mine from childhood
is now working in an artificial limbs factory
unexpectedly i got a call from him
asking me to go and see him
in front of the factory i saw his
smiling face like before
but enlarged many times
there seemed something different in the way he walked
i reached out with my hand
to hold up his trouser leg
and he smiled: it was real
together we walked forward
then we remembered that we should shake hands
he squeezed my hand
which was as intact as ever
everything was as intact as ever
we laughed with great delight

* Translator's note: the person's given name, 'Xiangdong', means 'Towards the East'.

A Tale from Sand Plain Country

Where the coast meets the sea
Four hundred kilometres north
Wheatfields go right up to the dunes
Which shift with winds so strong
They bend trees. Postcards are sold.
Once the Devil played cards
In a small stone pub
And his opponents
Noting his luck change
As the stakes got high
Check to see if he'd been
Marking cards under the table.
As plain as day they'd seen
His cloven feet and had as one
Watched as he'd passed
Directly through the wall,
Scotching the dry fields
As if a flame had been caught by the wind
And dragged away from the coast
Towards the dark centre
Of the continent.
They marked the charred Patch
Where he'd passed through the stone.
At the Cathedral in Aachen
The same Devil left his finger
Behind in the mouth of a lion,
Though this was some time before.
Stroking the bronze wolf for luck
You might wonder if time
And place were relevant to him.
The story in this case
Goes something along
The lines of the following:
That in order to finish the Cathedral
When times were hard

The people of Aachen promised
The first soul to enter the building
Upon completion to the Devil.
When time for payment came
They hesitated. Of course,
No one would enter
This Byzantine wonder—
Seat of Charlemagne—out of fear
Theirs would be the Soul
The Devil took as his due.
So a wolf was forced through the doors.
Furious, the Devil shook the building
And storming out, slammed the doors,
His finger catching
In the lion's-mouth handle
As it ripped shut. This story
Is of particular relevance
As the family who owns the farm
That touches the coast
Are of German extraction,
On the maternal side. Otherwise
It's fifth generation Irish.
The old man says they only
Got the land because it was sold
For a song—only good for a few sheep.
It wasn't until much later
That farming on sand-plain country
Was pioneered. And while English settlers
Had all the rich land south
He'd point out that
Much of it had turned salt.
On the sea-side of the dunes
You wouldn't know
that things could grow
Only a few hundred metres away.
It was as barren as a beach could be
And there were no reefs or sandbars
To protect the shore
From a constant barrage
Of black waves. Savage rips
Meant that visitors
Were warned not to bathe.

Dot to Dot

Mary stood in front of the magazine rack in the hospital gift shop. Vogue, Elle, Cosmo (Sexspeak: what he says, what she hears), Family Circle, Car, 100 Puzzle & Activity Book.

Mary stretched out for the activity book and flicked through the pages. Her mother had bought her a dot to dot puzzle book every time she had been sick in bed as a child. Mary remembered looking at the dots and numbers and trying to guess what picture was hidden in the haphazard clusters. She never got it right. Often the pattern of connected dots was unrecognisable as a picture until the last few dots had been joined.

Once Mary had decided to disregard the numbers in a puzzle. She had put her pencil on dot number one and then did not go to dot number two. She joined dot to dot at will trying to make a pattern as she went. The only rule she made was not to lift the pencil off the page. Mary drew a page of interlocking triangles. She coloured the triangles to create a pattern with colour but later she took a black felt tipped pen and joined the dots in numerical order. The horse's head came up clear over the background of yellow, rust and electric blue triangles.

Mary remembered that she could not track down dot number one in some puzzles. Then she had found the number closest to one and had worked her way backwards to dot number one. She had to start at the beginning. She had to start at number one.

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Every Sunday afternoon Mike's family played poker. First they ate a roast beef dinner and then they played five card stud. As soon as Mike's father had finished his pudding, he took the green felt cloth out of the sideboard drawer. He sat holding

the felt until the table was cleared. Mike's father was interested only in the game. He did not care if the players were male or female, but no man ever went through to the lounge room after lunch.

Mary sat next to Mike's father because she was new and because she was going to marry Mike. She watched the men. They passed a packet of cigarettes from one to the other.

—Have a Lucky.

Mike took a cigarette and tapped on his thumbnail and then put the cigarette in his mouth and lit it. Mike's father smoked a pipe. He pressed the tobacco down with his thumb. Mike drew a black ace. He dealt the cards.

—One down, Mike said. He dealt the next round.

—A five. A nine. A Greek. A Joseph. A ten. The Greek boy to bet.

—Pot.

—I'll buy a card.

—I'm in.

—Stay.

—Stay, Mike father said. Mary was holding the cards. Mike's father pointed at the cards with the stem of his pipe. Mary tried to remember the right words to go with the actions. Mike dealt a third round.

—A possible flush. A possible straight flush, Mike said. A Greek boy to the nine, a possible straight. A Joseph to the Greek, two Greeks showing. A seven to the Jack. A Jack to the Lady, King/Jack bets.

—Pot.

—I fold.

—I stay.

—We're in, Mike's father said.

—I'm in. I prefer bulls.

—Have a Lucky.

Mike's father breathed through his pipe. The nicotine juice gurgled in the stem. Mike dealt the fourth round. Mary couldn't stay. She gave the cards to Mike's father.

—Respect your father, your mother and a one card buyer.

Mary went outside and crossed the road to the small park outside the house. She sat on a swing and pushed herself backwards and forwards slowly. She buried her

face into the sleeve of her jumper. She could smell the scent of her skin under the smoke smell. The smell of her skin reminded her of the ozone-sweet air charged by an approaching electric storm when the thunder rumbles and the lightning flickers behind the clouds on the horizon. The first flash forks across the sky and three seconds later the thunder cracks.

Mary remembered a night driving out on the farm with her father. The sky looked as if it was wired with a live network of lightning. Mary's father stopped the car and she and her father walked out into a field. They felt that they would see the whole sky if they looked up from the middle of the flat field. The thunder sounded first along the line where the field met the sky and then ripped overhead. Mary raised her arms above her head. She wanted to jerk her arms up and down and shout. If someone had asked her how she would have drawn that sky in the morning light, she would have shown them a picture of a half sphere of tangled electrical wires, burnt out, with dangling ends that sputtered at their frayed edges.

But nothing ever remained. The morning sky was empty and high, and washed to the palest blue like the vaulted ceiling of the school chapel.

In the school chapel Mary had knelt on a small rectangular kneeler and had felt the tapestry stitches impressing crosses into the skin over her kneecaps. She had looked down and had seen the white fleur-de-lis centre pattern between her slightly parted knees.

—*The Lord be with you.*

—*And with thy spirit.*

—*Lift up your hearts.*

—*We lift them up to Thee, O Lord.*

Mary knew all the responses by heart. She knew when to cross herself, when she should stand and when to kneel. The smoke from the burning incense rose up in a straight greywhite line and then broke into rising spirals like the smoke from a cigarette left burning in an ashtray.

—*It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty ...*

The cement floor was hard and cold under the kneeler. An effigy of Jesus, cast in bluegrey cement, was nailed to the cross that hung above the altar. The wreath He wore was slightly tilted to one side. Mary could never tell anyone that she thought that Jesus looked as she imagined Bacchus would look.

Mary went back inside.

—That was a good hand, Mike said. He was scooping the pool.

—You win some, you lose some, Mike's father said.

—Work tomorrow. Busy day. Gold's going to go through the roof, Mike said.

—How do you know? Mary asked.

—I feel it in my water, Mike said.

Mary stood in the stock exchange gallery and watched the men on the floor.

—What are Consgold? Cons! Cons! Cons! Mike shouted.

—Yes Cons.

—I'll buy at thirty.

—How many?

—I'll take one thousand, Mike said.

—You got.

—I'll take another thousand.

—Give you five hundred.

—Buy at thirty, Cons! Mike said. *Go you gold.*

—Sell at thirty-one.

Mike's arm jerked up and down in the air.

—Mine, he said. Buy at thirty-one. *Run gold, run.* Buy at thirty-two. *Take that, you bears.*

—Gold's up another five.

—Buy at thirty-five, Cons!

—Buy at forty!

—You got one hundred, Mike said.

—Buy at forty-five!

—Buy at fifty!

—You got, Mike said. *Fuck me gently, I could buy the mine.*

Mike bought a racehorse which he named Highcrest.

Mary had never been to a racecourse until she met Mike. She watched and listened. She saw people look up and stand and she went with the surge to the rail of the track. She heard a distant thudding. She shouted as the horses passed. She heard their heavy breathing and their hoofs tearing the turf. The people around her raised

their arms above their heads.

—Didn't you have anything on the race? Mike said.

—No, Mary said.

—If you haven't got a ticket, you're not in the game, Mike said. Mary learned how to place a bet.

—Five each way, she said.

Highcrest first went out in the Juveniles 1000m Sprint. He finished twenty-seven lengths behind the winner. Two months later he ran the 1000m Sprint at Eastside. He came second by a short head. His trainer, Teddy White, entered Highcrest in the Graduation 1000m Sprint at Rivers.

—He'll come first if he doesn't break a leg, Teddy said. Teddy saw nothing of the race. His hands were shaking and the binoculars bumped against his eyes.

—Come on Cresty, come on Cresty, he said until the race was over. Highcrest won by seven lengths in a time of fifty-seven seconds. Next, Highcrest ran in the C Division 1000m Sprint at Acton. He was lying fifth with a hundred metres to go. The favourite was in the lead but stopping. Highcrest beat him by half a length. Teddy entered Highcrest in the B Division 1000m Colts/Geldings at Royal Park.

—Think I'll take the old man to this race, Mike said. Mike's father had had a stroke. His voice gurgled in his throat. He walked with a stick. In the enclosure Mike's father pointed at Highcrest with his stick. The horse's coat shone with rust coloured lights around the curve of his rump. Mike's registered colours were electric blue, yellow diagonal stripes and cap. Mike's father fumbled in his pocket. Mary took the wallet out for him. She started counting the notes.

—Ten? Twenty? Thirty? she said. Mike's father gurgled.

—Sixty? Eighty? A hundred? Mike's father nodded. Highcrest was seven to one. He beat the odds-on favourite in the last hundred metres. Teddy and Mike came back from the winner's enclosure.

—Your father is trying to say something, Mary said.

—You win some, you lose some, hey dad? Mike said. Mike's father nodded and tapped his stick.

—I'm going to enter Cresty in the Thorne Sprint, Teddy said.

Early on the Friday morning before the Thorne Sprint the groom rode out on Highcrest in a string of forty-two horses. The sky was light but the sun had not

risen. Thunder rumbled in the distance and lightning flickered behind the clouds on the horizon. Highcrest and his groom were sixteenth in the string. The unexpected last bolt of lightning flashed down. Highcrest and his groom were dead before the blow sounded.

Mike came home drunk. Mary was in bed and she lay awake in the dark. She heard Mike struggling to undress. He was talking to himself. Mary knew he wanted her to speak but she kept quiet. Mike got into the bed. Mary felt him kick at the bedclothes to loosen the sheet so that he could push his leg out of the side of the bed and put his foot on the floor. Mike had told her that this stopped his world from spinning.

Twenty seconds later Mike was snoring. Mary could not sleep and she could not talk.

She remembered a tree on her father's farm that had been struck by lightning. The trunk had split in two and resin had bubbled through the black burn mark. Mike turned over. The smell of his breath was like a heavy soft-furred animal lying over Mary's face. Mary turned over and pushed her nose into the crook of her arm. There she smelt ozone-sweet air. She flung the blanket back and got up.

Mike poured himself a tumbler of wine.

—Gold fell out of bed today, he said.

—And pulled the bedclothes with itself, Mary said.

—Where did you learn that one? Mike said.

A friend lent Mary and Mike her holiday house. —You need a break, she said.

Mary and Mike went down to the beach with their children. They sat on a towel under an umbrella and the children swam in the surf. Mary took a cold bottle out of the esky and poured a drink.

—I can't get rid of this heartburn, Mike said. He rubbed his chest. Then he knelt on all fours and sweat dripped off the end of his nose.

A friend asked Mary later why she had not shouted for help. Mary had poured her drink out into the sand. She folded the towels, closed the umbrella and fetched the children out of the surf. She gave the esky and the umbrella to one child and the bag of towels to the other child. Then she wedged her shoulder into Mike's armpit and helped him to walk. She smiled at the woman who looked up from her book

as they passed. She saw a boy watching a topless girl as she stood up and stretched. Mary and Mike stopped to rest. A child stood close by and licked a pink stripe of melting icecream that ran down the cone and on her hand. Mary felt the sweat from Mike's body soaking into the blue fabric of her bathers. She felt the drops running down her stomach and collecting around the leg of her bathers until they dripped down the inside of her leg.

Mary came home from the hospital. She slept and only woke when the telephone rang. *You must come at once.* Mary showered and saw her yellow face in the mirror when she cleaned her teeth. Lisa, wake up. You must be a good girl and look after Tim until I get home. Mary opened the front door. The sky was light but the sun had not yet risen. Mary wanted to go back into the house and to be warm and asleep. She drove past lines of cars parked against the kerb. The light at the hospital shone out onto the black rubber mat. The doors slid open and Mary felt the warm air. People walked briskly. High noon at the hospital. Mary remembered. Fifth floor. Cardiac intensive unit. Why are your legs bandaged? Why are your legs wrapped up? You look like a mummy. *It is nothing to worry about. He must have an angiogram. His condition is not stable.* They cut into Mike's femoral artery and inserted a catheter. *Watch the screen.* The red dye forked across the black screen. *There it is. The black spot. He is a lucky man.* You win some. The lights were so hot. *We will bypass that dot like this.* Mary saw the red loop. Lord have mercy. The lights were so bright. *We will take him back now.*

—You must understand that you will not live if you go on smoking, Mary said. You must choose food from a fat-free diet list. You will have to walk every day. Your lifestyle must change. When I phoned your brother he said that you had it coming. Great. He'll be the next one. You must change. Do you hear me? Mike opened his eyes.

—For God's sake say something, Mary said. As Mike opened his mouth and drew in the breath to speak, Mary knew what he was going to say. She watched his lips and tongue shape the sounds of the words.

—Cowboys don't cry, Mike said

At Fifteen

You women all die at fifteen—Diderot

We called her the Albino Girl, but I don't know whether she really was, because true albinos are meant to have pink eyes, and you never really saw her eyes. She was always either looking away or wearing sunglasses. She came to our school halfway through that year, and that year everyone was wearing those big bulging sunglasses Jackie Onassis wore, the ones that made you look crustacean, or even insect-like.

Compound eyes. We were talking about them in biology. We had to pin insects and describe and classify them. We needed the normal specimens for this, so anything deformed or even runty got off lightly. We learned Family, Genus, Species. We learned that two creatures were of the same species if their different sexes could not only mate but produce fertile offspring from that mating. We learned to make either/or judgements, taxonomies for classifying plants. We collected nectar from eucalyptus flowers, fragile as pale eyelashes. We pared garbage from under our fingernails and watched it blossom monstrously in petri dishes of agar gel. When the boys heard you could eat agar gel of course they wanted to. We gave them some with fingernail grunge in it, for a joke. But it had no effect.

The boys took to her straight away. For about three weeks they all tried to go out with her. This was partly because she was a new girl, and any new girl had to be better than the old girls. But it was also because of her blonde hair. This was full, long and coarse—not especially alluring, but it was pure white, the furthest you could go. And naturally so. Not that they ever minded *fake* blonde, but somehow the naturalness of it made her more of a prize.

You couldn't really tell if she was pretty without seeing her eyes; all you really noticed was this band of red, peeling skin across her nose and upper cheeks—the only streak of colour about her. She was slim and delicate and moved about quietly, like I always imagined the Lady with the Lamp did. Only she was the lamp, a

strange kind of lamp, a light that did not radiate but seemed somehow to implode or suck in.

Her name was Rae-Lee, but all the kids called her Raeleen; they just couldn't get it right. She was always on her own. That was because of the boys-thing. None of the girls liked her because the boys all did, and when the boys lost interest after those three weeks or so, it was too late to make friends among the girls.

Not that she ever *went with* any of the boys. She was totally aloof. But it was the fact of the boys' desire for her, however shortlived, that made the girls dislike her.

We didn't dislike her; we just weren't interested. We were too busy with coaching for "Class Struggle", a rather simple television quiz show where you could win big prizes for your school and an engraved ballpoint pen for yourself. You needed teams of three. We spent all our lunchtimes up in the Social Studies room with a makeshift buzzer-set that the science teacher had rigged up for us, and put our general knowledge through its paces. We were not the girls who *went with* anybody. We spent our spare time in the library writing improbable novels we never finished. We were not popular either, but at least we had our means of retreat. A retreat we could ill afford, since we were girls from working families and would need to find jobs, just as much as the girls who *went with* Pablo Lazaros behind the disused music room or up on the oval after school—just as much as the girls who let Darrell James put his hand down their top, who got engagement rings, however temporary, by Year 11, and then left school.

"Why does Darrell James put his hand down their tops?" Muriel puzzled. We shrugged, indifferent. We were wolfing down salad rolls and picking the sesame seeds from our uniforms, waiting for Mr Terry to arrive.

Mr Terry was the dream teacher, all the girls giggled and blushed around him. But we knew they hadn't a hope. We were the luckier ones, the brainy squares who got to spend all our lunchtimes with him, in training. Of course we giggled and blushed too, but never in front of him.

He had a studious-looking dark-haired wife who dropped him at school in the mornings and picked him up in the afternoons, and he was a Labor man. He said that all teachers who didn't vote Labor were fools, they were thwarting their own class interest. He taught us history and geography and always squeezed in sensible moral lessons about hard work and self-belief. He wanted our team to win 'Class Struggle' not for the sake of the prizes but for School Pride and Self-Belief. Our school had a bad name, our parents all drove Valiants and Toranas, if they drove at

all, and hoped we would manage to get jobs in Coles. We were keen to win, but knew we'd be up against all those private school kids who probably had extra tutoring. We had something to prove.

So we didn't feel guilty about leaving the Albino Girl to her own devices. We had serious work to do.

The Albino Girl had troubles with most of her work, even with cooking and sewing. She tried switching to Animal Husbandry and Market Gardening, but developed an allergy to some product they used on the school farm. We should have felt sorry for her but she was so, well, *characterless* that even compassion could hardly find a point of entry. She was like a blank in Scrabble, a template, an outline with no detail. She'd auditioned for 'Class Struggle' training but there were only three spots to fill and she didn't get in.

We had our team pretty well figured out. None of us knew much about sport or sporting history, so Muriel was boning up on that. I was supposed to be the spelling and literature whiz. In fact the words they usually asked on 'Class Struggle' weren't that hard to spell but you had to be fast at it—visualise the letters and pull them out of thin air. Nadine, our science and maths boffin, was so confident of my spelling that she always pressed the buzzer in advance, as soon as she heard the word, 'Spell'—a quirk I was sure would cost us the game on the big day, since you lost ten points for every wrong answer, and she couldn't guarantee I'd know the word. But you couldn't argue with Nadine.

Nadine was the tallest girl in the school, a fact that made her freakish among the general school population, but which in her own group conferred upon her a kind of natural authority. I was part of that group, but so was Muriel. There were others who hung around its edges, but I guess we formed the core. We'd frown out of the stage of twosomes with 'best friends', we'd all known the pain of losing *her*, whoever she was, to some boyfriend.

I lost Maggot that way. Maggot was my best friend in first year—her real name was Margot, but some older boy came up with the nickname and it stuck. At first she hated it, but before long she was writing it on her bag, her pencil case, her pictures of Fonz and John Travolta. HANDS OFF MAGGOT RULES O.K. Soon her name began appearing on school toilet walls and in telephone boxes down town, alongside words like SLUT and MOLE. Maggot didn't ever really dismiss me from my role as 'best friend', or I her; she just moved off, always had something else on at lunchtime or after school.

Occasionally I saw her waiting in the bus queue, her uniform unzipped a bit

lower at the neck than it used to be, a Winfield Blue between her nailbitten fingers. I let go of her silently, the way a lizard leaves its tail—is it painful, or a narrow escape? I never even knew who the boy was.

But now I was part of a group, even if it was a despised group: the squares. Safety in numbers. There were the rocks, the skins and the surfs (though we lived inland, far from any surf), and outside all these configurations, the squares. We squares even walked home together, since the bus didn't go our way. The Long March, we called it, thinking ourselves witty.

Some days Nadine had to work in the newsagent's after school, so Muriel and I walked along together. Then the *tough girls*, walking behind us, would home in. They didn't ever do this with Nadine around, because they were scared of her height and her deep voice, her boyish manner. But without her we were fair game.

"Hey hairy legs, love your skirt, bit short for a surfer skirt innit?", and they'd tug at the back of our dresses as we walked, or lift our skirts and poke us in the bum with wooden rulers. We tried to ignore them and not quicken our pace as it just antagonised them. We'd seen *cat fights* after school, seen the perfect scorched circles on the backs and bellies of girls who foolishly stood up to them and copped the tough girls' cigarette treatment.

The tough girls usually turned off near the railway line and then, when we were sure to be out of their range, we'd run all the way home, laughing stupidly so that our mothers shook their heads and said, "Simmer down and act like a young lady."

I'd sniff, dump my school bag in my room and run in to take a shower, as if all that other skin, that school-self, could be washed off with the sweat and suburban dust. At home I was not a square, I was not anything in particular. I'd grab something to eat and go downstairs to listen to cassettes taped off the radio or, more rarely, a real record I'd saved for. Most days I had plenty of homework but, contrary to all myths about squares, I never did it, or did it only the next morning before class, half-guessing the answers. My parents never seemed to notice this.

I put on the headphones I'd won in a Polly Waffle contest when I was a kid, and listened to *Wuthering Heights*, that thin high wail that seemed to come from somewhere inside my own body.

The needle jumped, the record stuttered, and the shelves began to sway. My mother came running down but by the time she reached me the tremors were practically over, only the windowpanes still quivered a little. I took off the headphones. Mum was panicky, remembering the Meckering earthquake when I was a toddler, our house falling to bits. But this time everything settled back to

normal after a few minutes. Even the turntable went on turning. A disaster ominous in its very simplicity.

Suddenly the phone rang. It was Nadine, and she was crying. Nadine never cried. I thought their place must have had pretty bad damage, but I couldn't get any sense out of her. Couldn't calm her down.

"You don't understand," she said. "They've grounded me, I'm not even supposed to talk to anyone on the phone. They're going to send me to another school. It's unbearable."

"What? Who, your parents?"

"I can't talk now," and she hung up.

That was the last I ever heard from Nadine, the night of the Cadoux quake, and no-one found out what had happened, though at school the rumours flew thick and fast. That she'd stolen from her employer. That she'd smoked pot, beaten someone up, had a weird secret lover, had an abortion. In class people stared at Muriel and me, as if we knew and weren't telling.

"Idle gossip," Mr Terry said when we arrived, forlorn, for 'Class Struggle' practice. "It's a shame she's gone, but it's nobody else's business. Let's get to work. Rae-Lee has agreed to fill in. We only have two weeks to go, so we should be very grateful to have her."

This was the first time I got a good look at Rae-Lee, but I still never really saw her eyes; she let her hair hang forward all the time. Her quiz-answers, when they came, were better than we expected, but few and far between, as if her heart wasn't really in it. She just wasn't Nadine.

She hung around us in the schoolyard now; only at the edges, like something not quite fully formed, but there nonetheless, in her Jackie-O shades. We weren't sure how to feel about this—it was almost as if she'd bought her way into our group, riding on our loss of Nadine. But as soon as you thought that, you felt guilty. She was harmless, really. Quiet, inoffensive, always disposed to be helpful. Only you couldn't tell if that was a pose, whether she was that transparent or in fact very, very opaque. You sensed she was always watching you, guessing your needs, growing useful. She took her lead from us and began to dress more as we dressed, to use the odd little inflections of speech we were unaware, until now, we had used.

On the big day my parents drive us out to the studio. They have never been that interested in what goes on at school but this is television! It's a makeshift studio with no seats for the audience, so my parents and the others have to stand down the

back and be quiet. We three girls sit behind a maze of wires that's not seen by the camera, our knees cramped under fake desks. On the floor behind these facades are broken foam coffee cups, sawdust, rubble and bits of cable. We didn't expect this, we thought we were in for glamour. Our only moment of glory. But from where we sit it doesn't look at all like what you see on the monitor.

"TV's like that, very artificial," Mr Terry says. "Don't worry, it'll look great to the kids at home watching you."

I wonder just who will bother getting up on a Saturday morning to see three square girls—or two square girls and their pale, would-be shadow—doing what square girls do best. We are pitted against an Anglican boys' team and some Catholic girls. Three teams of three, in three rounds. The camera-men seat Rae-Lee in the middle, which gives her a sudden ironic dominance she doesn't usually have.

The first round goes well, though Dad keeps making gestures from the back and getting told off by the studio people. Rae-Lee answers no questions, and we feel as if we're one person down, but nonetheless by the second round we're neck-and-neck with the Catholic girls, all ahead of the boys.

What is the capital of Afghanistan?

Spell "inconsequential".

Name the two men who walked on the moon in July 1969.

Who wrote the novel *Heart of Darkness*?

Each team has a set of questions to answer, and then they stop the cameras, and we all have a drink of water and tell jokes. The last round will be the hardest—it's an open section addressed to all three teams and you have to get in first. Pressing the buzzer too early means you might not hear the end of the question, so caution is needed.

We squeeze back behind the chipboard facades and the cameras roll again. The Catholic girls are good at this part; quick reflexes. But Muriel and I between us manage lots of the answers. The boys have rather dropped out of the picture; they watch us going at it.

FIFTEEN SECONDS

Who along with Batman was co-founder of the city of Melbourne?

Rae-Lee presses the buzzer and says, "Robin!"

The quiz-master splutters and the small audience begins to giggle. Soon even the other contestants are laughing, and the cameras have to be stopped. Muriel and I are not laughing. We can't look at Rae-Lee; our faces are burning. Finally the quiz-master regains composure and asks for quiet, and we film the closing segment. Our

team has lost by the ten points Rae-Lee buzzed away.

The adults pressed forward to console us, but Rae-Lee, inscrutable, was already heading for the door.

"She did it on purpose," Muriel said.

"No," said Mr Terry, "I'm sure she didn't. She just panicked, people say silly things under pressure. She badly wanted us to win."

Muriel shook her head.

The three of us rode home in the back of my parents' car. A thick silence. When we reached Rae-Lee's house Muriel said at last, "Cow! You don't know anything."

"Muriel, don't," I whispered.

But Rae-Lee just said softly, getting out of the car, "I know why your friend Nadine left school, and that's more than you know."

Stephen Gilfedder

A Misinterpretation of the Davy Crockett Technique around the time of Caryl Chessman's execution in the Electric Chair

*For the late Stan and Esme Livingstone, suspected of murdering Margaret Clement
for her property 'Tullaree' in Gippsland, Victoria*

Esme and Stan could not be real life
murderers, more like some creation
of a 50s noveliste with a nom-de-plume.
I can remember the bright and jerky
Super Eight of me swinging
on the apple tree with a toothpaste grin
and the decorative couple leaning
on the gate smiling with my dad
in the shadow of Uncle Alf's long pan.
Stan's brilliantined brushback
shone beside Esme's slash of lipstick
as lush as a barmaid's, her face
a changing patchwork of light and leaves.
Around the old upright at night
the ice clinked in their Johnnie Walker
as my parents sipped cream sherries
before the production cut through the years
and their sober reappearances
from London exile at coronial inquiries
whenever Aboriginal bones were found
as the Shire Council drained the swamp.
On my eighth birthday I walked with Stan
on an inspection of the irrigation channels
carrying Miss Clement's stick to carve
through the bullgrass and wallop
any tiger snakes that crossed our path.

Sporting a Jermyn Street panama,
with Esme's perfume swirling around me,
he checked the new electric fence
I dared myself to touch and felt
the low voltage rumble through my veins
all the while watching the whites of their eyes.

Kevin Murray

School Closures

Across the dairy plain, stretched taut
between two ranges, the farmers' utes
wind down the horse and buggy lanes
to park beside the shelter-shed.
I've travelled from the nineteen fifties
to be here. They can't quite place me
but seem pleased I've come.

With loaded silences and coded smiles
they find each other in creased class photos,
run blunt fingers down old school rolls
—all the names still present.
City-wise, I wait for awkward speeches.
They mark this loss with sandwiches and tea
and mourn in ways I cannot see.

Under an arch of parents, teachers and the laws
my small shadow passed along walled ranks
of folk like these, inducted into certainty
as solid as the hills. But time erodes all that.
At dusk I drive away, proud to see that herds
still plod in file towards the milking sheds—
warm suede flanks in bails and sweet hay in the lofts.

Offshore and Drifting

You always said you loved the sea.
That afternoon before the storm
making a run for the mainland from Rottneest,
with waves heaving mid-ocean
and the steel thud of the hull
hitting the bottom of troughs
then rising up again
and you with your red mouth wide open
laughing in your drenched clothes.

A soft morning in summer
anchored beyond the reef in a safe spot
till a six-foot wave was born
out of some twist of swell,
breaking just to our left,
as we swore that waves never broke out this far,
but you said that there were
no safe places, no certainty.

I still remember you,
it was not that long ago.
I am alone two miles offshore
in a boat drifting slowly
across a glass slick sea,
heaving the words overboard,
watching the letters fall like anchors
to the uncertainty of an ocean floor.

Brave Myth-takes: Re-Writing Romance in Tim Winton's *The Riders* and Amanda Lohrey's *Camille's Bread*

Camille's *Bread* is described on its dustjacket as 'a well-baked cake', 'seductively readable', 'a rare thing in Australian literature — a novel that offers both intellectual and emotional satisfaction', a 'search for a meaning to life and something good to eat'. *The Riders* is marketed as 'fierce', 'gut-wrenching', 'a hell of a novel'. 'Domestic narrative' and 'the adventure novel', the kitchen and the great outdoors — the two novels are slotted neatly into familiar generic patterns, the one as a recipe, the other as an epic adventure.

Both novels sustain this sense of familiarity by drawing on romance conventions. In *The Riders* Tim Winton re-writes conventional male quest romance, whose archetype is the *Odyssey*, and in *Camille's Bread* Amanda Lohrey re-writes feminine romance, of which a foundational text is *Jane Eyre*. In rewriting romance conventions the two novelists explore gender constructions, particularly those of masculinity. Our concern is with whether their explorations offer something new: something more than what Ann McClintock has in another context called 'bogus universals',¹ the complacent application of labels like 'the postcolonial narrative' or 'patriarchal values'. Rewriting a convention depends on a normative understanding of what it is. Yet as Elizabeth Grosz argues,

... experience cannot be taken as an unproblematic given, a position through which one can judge knowledges, for experience is of course implicated in and produced by various knowledges and social practices. Nevertheless ... without some acknowledgement of the formative role of experience in the establishment of knowledges, feminism has no grounds from which to dispute patriarchal norms.... Experience is not outside social, political, historical, and cultural forces and in this sense cannot provide an outside vantage-point from which to judge them.²

1. Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather*. New York: Routledge, 1995, 14.

In discussing *Camille's Bread* and *The Riders*, we will question whether their rewritings can take us further than the contented burp with which many readers claim to have finished *Camille's Bread*, positing 'experience' as something more than 'an unproblematic given'. While both novels might make claims for rewriting literary conventions, we are unsure of whether they really do dislocate their characters — and their readers — from familiar ground.

What people do with houses...

Northrop Frye says of romance that it

is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream, and for that reason it has socially a curiously paradoxical role. In every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance.³

The *Odyssey* begins "with Odysseus and Penelope furthest from one another", and ends with the hero arriving in the nick of time to claim his bride: "our central feeling about it is a ... prudent sense, rooted in all our acceptance of nature, society, and law, of the proper master of the house coming to reclaim his own".⁴ Beleaguered by the apocalypse construed as 'feminism', Winton invokes classical literary male figures to authorise contemporary male anguish, played out through the epic search of his protagonist, Scully, to reclaim his wife and identity.

In *The Riders*, Scully's quest for his wife across the Mediterranean parallels Ulysses' quest for Penelope. The first place in which Scully seeks his Penelope is Greece. His weapon in this quest is his Amex card, which evokes the figure of Mercury, Ulysses' mentor.⁵ In Part II, which is set on Hydra, Scully confronts the expatriate community like a paranoid Ulysses confronting Penelope's suitors. Part III is set in Italy, where, sailing from Greece to Brindisi, Scully finds Irma, a bruised and lonely woman whom he sees as trying to get to him through his daughter, Billie. In Paris in part IV, when Irma catches up with them at the American Express office, Scully accuses her of being "some kind of hustler, a travelling whore" (303), but it

2. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994, 94.

3. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957, 1973, 186.

4. Frye, 318-9.

5. Tim Winton, *The Riders*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1994, 1995, 110. All further references will be to this edition and paginated in the text.

is also Scully who fucks her in order to rob her of money to get to Amsterdam. Irma's characterisation is strongly fetishistic, presenting her as a stereotypical Circe: "she was soft to touch, too soft, like something overripe" (312). Only momentarily, in a few passages here and there when the narrative focusses on Billie, Scully's daughter, is there a partial glimpse of a perspective other than Scully's that challenges this process of objectification: "she felt bad about [Irma]. ... her heart was big. One day Scully would see that. Irma wasn't a statue" (322).

In contrast to the grand mythological associations which Winton claims for Scully's homeseeking, in *Camille's Bread* Amanda Lohrey, like Helen Garner, posits a far more modest notion of domesticity. *Camille's Bread* is set largely in the house, and indeed the kitchen, of Marita Black. Stephen Eyeon abandons his duty of house-sitter in his sister's antique-filled, burglar-alarmed repository of 'high culture', seeking instead to make a home in Marita's terrace house in the inner-Sydney suburb of Leichhardt. Stephen is the child of an Australian family. While he is allowed to blame his past violence — and his consequent stint in gaol — on his father's touchiness, devotion to business and domestic anger, Stephen sees the past as a myth of origins. Refusing to speak of his background, he is intent on constructing a 'new' identity for himself, born of shiatsu massage, zen and holistic therapy. Just as his sister meticulously frames her homelife by using the markers of European civilization, Stephen frames his life in terms of his new-age adventures. Inflexible to the point of self-parody, Stephen adheres zealously to his holistic practices, viewing those around him as unconverted unbelievers. Stephen is a 'do-er'; quite pointedly, he will not read. He crafts his new self in the sinews and digestive tracts of his re-formed, thick-necked, muscular body.

Marita, however, loves to read. Against the positivist Stephen, Marita is a dark-haired shadow, gently resisting his attempts to turn her home into a den of Zen. Perhaps in sympathy for the bullied Marita, Lohrey ironically turns the unwitting Stephen — he who abhors both history and reading — into a literary paradigm in Marita's favourite novel, *Jane Eyre*. This foundational women's romance is central to Marita's life, and she is in the habit of re-reading it. In order to achieve the goal of love and domestic peace, Stephen will reenact Jane's quest for identity, leaving Marita's home for a time. Just as Bronte's Jane must leave Thornfield for Whitcross, gaining a self by her uncle's inheritance, so Stephen ('exiled' in an expensive sibling-funded excursion to a dojo in Japan!) wants to make himself worthy to be accepted. And Marita is now in the position of Rochester, having the home and the child to another partner.

Alice doesn't live there any more

While both *The Riders* and *Camille's Bread* may purport to be 'quest' novels which challenge the conventions they inherit, the very notion of 'the quest' is conservatively linear. More specifically, the two novels invoke Teresa de Lauretis' suggestion about 'traditional narrative', which

carries both the male child and the female child toward one and the same destination: Oedipus and the Oedipal stage. That movement ... is the movement of narrative discourse, which specifies and even produces the masculine position of that of mythical subject, and the feminine position as mythical obstacle or, simply, the space in which that movement occurs.⁶

Scully's wife Jennifer is an endlessly deferred subject who shifts on the perimeter of his imagination, while in *Camille's Bread*, Marita provides the quiet home in which Stephen performs his complex rituals of self-transformation. In setting up a theoretical strategy for resisting this organization of gender, de Lauretis argues that "narrative ... works for Oedipus. The heroine therefore has to move on, like Freud's little girl, and take her place where Oedipus will find her awaiting him. What if, once he reached his destination, he found that Alice didn't live there anymore?" (153).

This suggestion has interesting possibilities for reading both *Camille's Bread* and *The Riders*. In the two novels, male quests *depend* on the 'thereness' of a female subject. Jennifer is 'present' only in her absence: because she appears in Scully's imagination, he can refer to her image at various opportune moments in his quest. What if Jennifer *did* appear at some point during Scully's quest, disrupting his image of her? This 'Alice' would be found not to live 'there' in his imagination, but somewhere else. Marita, the quiet reading subject in *Camille's Bread*, is herself like a book that Stephen learns to read — he learns her moods and her reactions, and factors them into his personal growth. But what if Marita went off with her ex-lover Adrian, became pregnant while Stephen was in Japan, or renounced him for no reason? Her letters assure him of her continuity, her thereness. What if she no longer lived 'there'?

6. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, 143.

Mirrors

De Lauretis argues that narrative offers women the dangerous pleasure (dangerous to the notion of 'patriarchy') of a double identification, of reading either as hero or heroine, as either the subject or the object, in a way that would be inconsistent with the positioning of male readers. "Could we say that identification in women spectators alternates between the two terms put in play by the [cinematic] apparatus: the look of the camera and the image on the screen, the subject and the object of the gaze?" (142). This "double identification", this "surplus of pleasure" (143), has the capacity to reveal the possibility of unfixing subjectivity in the very act of its fixing, because 'femininity' and 'masculinity' are never fully attained or fully relinquished: 'in the course of some women's lives there is a repeated alternation between periods in which femininity or masculinity gain the upper hand' (142).

The trope of oscillation offers us a useful way to compare re-writings of romance in both novels. Although Winton attempts to unhinge male quest romance by removing the object of desire and suggesting that it is a projection of patriarchy, his rigorous third-person narrative stance never really allows male readers to do anything other than read as 'males'; nor, we imagine, allows women readers to identify very much at all, other than in a traditional sense as the objects of the romance discourse. *The Riders* is strongly focussed on Scully, who performs a crisis of narcissism. He is both the subject of the framing romance discourse and the scopical subject who constructs 'woman' as the object of his desire. In an appropriate parallel to the theme of desire, Scully is first described by his image in a mirror: he "found a shard of mirror to shave by. He wiped the glass clean and set it on the granite wall. There he was again, Frederick Michael Scully" (9). The specular images of desire — home, women — are projections of the masculine self. All that Scully sees are his own desires, transparently framed by a conventional masculinity. The scopical gaze extends to the main object of desire — the woman — whose "dark hair would weave a snare/That I may one day rue" (1). Yet as Scully looks at his face, the memories of his past are diffracted behind the mirrored image. Recalling his many careers and roles — salesman, truckdriver, uni student, father — he concludes, "All these lives, and still the same face. All these goes at things, all these chances, and it's still me. Old Scully" (10). If *The Riders* discloses the specularity of desire and the instability of identity, it also *already* works to assert its own closure: "it's still me". Although *The Riders* disrupts the endorsement of masculinity achieved in the quest, it thus finally works to affirm the idea of a fixed masculine identity, embedded in

the narrative voice and the image of the hero's face.

This narcissistic fixing of identity is implicit in the very fabric of the cottage which Scully tries to build in the image of a child's drawing. The house is in fact a crumbling ruin in a state of flux, filled with the garbage of a dead man's other life: "The place had no damp-coursing at all, and the interior walls were chartreuse with mildew, especially the side where the soil had crept high against the house. The place was a wreck" (11). Scully is frightened that he will see his own image in that of the dead man: "Every time he saw that forlorn heap of clothes and refuse out behind the barn he'd begun to see it as his own" (15). Although Scully labours in order to reverse the second law of thermodynamics — that everything turns to shit — when he finds a rotting newspaper report about a man preserved for centuries in peat bog in Cheshire, he "shifted his foot and the paper came apart like compost" (6). Language, narrative and (specular) visibility create a masculine symbolic order out of "compost". In the face of the literal and metaphorical evidence of disintegration, Scully struggles imaginatively to people his new home: "It was simple. She was his wife. There was a baby on the way. They were in it together, end of story" (12).

Because *The Riders* speaks exclusively to men, however, Scully and his wife are not "in it together". Nigel Krauth acknowledges the existence of 'woman' in and around this story only as scopic projection when he simply stops talking to female readers, assuming that they have no point of identification with the romance:

Women will hate this novel ... Okay. I'm talking to males now. ... We have to look in the mirror with Scully, I'm afraid. ... We have to acknowledge that our mates (the female ones, you idiots) will never be found where we think they are no matter how hard we search for them there. They've gone. They've moved on.⁷

It seems, then, that the strongly 'masculine' point of view in Winton's novel really only allows it to perform a *crisis* of masculinity, and not to see ways out of that crisis. This may well be why so many readers have found it disturbing. While alienating women readers by refusing them any point of identification except as objects of romance discourse, it still seduces male readers as subjects in the same old discourse, though now this discourse is in crisis.

7. Krauth, Nigel, 'Riding to Hell on Tim's Back', *Australian Book Review*, no. 164, September, 1994, 16.

Refractions

One of the obvious differences between Winton's book and Lohrey's lies in Lohrey's unwillingness to fix a point of view. In *Camille's Bread*, the blocks of interior monologue — 'Him', 'Her', 'Connection' — break down the single, specular point of view and allow readers a spectrum of identifications. The first section, 'Him', allows for competing ironies: the point of view could be either a woman's or a man's. The section 'Her' allows the female protagonist to be seen from a point of view which is indeed markedly different. Thus the novel signals to its readers (female or male) the idea of 'oscillation' between subject and object, masculine and feminine. To draw further on de Lauretis's work, it is not a flat mirror, like Winton's novel, in which men look and see only themselves, but "a prism diffracting the image into the double positionality of female Oedipal desire as sustaining the oscillation between 'femininity' and 'masculinity'" (152). It is precisely such an unfixing of gendered subjectivity on which Stephen is to embark in a way that Scully never does, because Scully is fixed in the traditional role of the hero of male quest romance, albeit in a state of crisis and malfunction.

Lohrey appears to offer Stephen a way out of masculine subjectivity by allowing him to oscillate, to occupy a subject position which is normally the precinct of female characters. At the crisis of their relationship, Marita reads from *Jane Eyre* the episode when Jane, to preserve her integrity (refusing to become an objectified image of Rochester's desire), becomes a resisting reader of the way Rochester narrates their relationship. She leaves his home, and in so doing resists her Oedipal desire to displace him. At Whitcross she is reduced to the status of non-subject, denied work, money, identity and social agency. In these terms, perhaps Lohrey's flexible point of view allows Stephen to be Jane. Marita now has what Rochester has, a home and a child. But as a woman she is able to block Stephen out on her own terms. Stephen is now invited to be Jane, to go in exile to his Whitcross, which means refusing traditional Oedipal subjectivity and narrative closure. This is inflected in the novel by a double unfixing of both gendered subjectivity and culture: Stephen's Whitcross is the *dojo* in Kyoto where he learns oriental and feminine conventions of submission, and is beaten by his spiritual master to dissolve his western and masculine personality, with its stubbornly Oedipal desires.

One might, with a somewhat ironic detachment, however, question Stephen's displacement of the female protagonist, Jane. No matter that the protagonist's role in *Jane Eyre* is written for a woman — big enough is good enough for Stephen. With

all the alacrity of his new found new-age 'humility', he steps into Jane's shoes and marches forward, assuming, as a man might, that he is forging a new path. Where Lohrey herself stands is unclear, and we are left wondering whether or not she shares our sense of irony. This uncertainty unfixes and liberates readers of the novel because it disallows a secure reading position.

Lohrey does in places self-consciously undercut Stephen's new age attempt to rebuild, by bricolage, a self without origins from the fragments of various cultural traditions. For instance, when he sits at the Demeter bakery, listening to a retelling of the story of the mythological Persephone, he falls asleep. Despite his rejection of patriarchal machismo, it seems that he is not interested in stories about women. In Sydney, however, "the new Asian city of the Pacific rim",⁸ Stephen lives in a post-modern space of converging styles and traditions. His sister Helen's home, "an opulent Edwardian terrace" in the Toxteth Estate in Glebe, is a monument to the past, to the idea of a 'centre': "it's the elegant salon of her childhood dreams, so far away from the scrawny bungalow out west that she ran away from" (27). On holiday in Europe, where her marriage is breaking down, Helen dreams of the home that Stephen minds for her, sleepless at the thought that burglars have broken in to disturb this show of domestic and cultural perfection (27). Even while Helen sits in place this fantasy of origins, then, she also constantly envisages its disruption: her imagination transgresses the very borders she has so carefully constructed. Just as Helen in this way negotiates between different selves, so too does Stephen. He is forced to by his mother, who sends him newspaper clippings warning of the dangers of a macrobiotic diet: "This, then, is how my mother and I conduct our relationship: we exchange warnings" (32). As Stephen's mother points out, his redefinition of himself constitutes a denial of his origins, and she casts him in the role of Orestes in the *Oresteia* of Euripides, warning that "The killing of a mother, however you go about it, is no small thing" (37).

If Stephen's homeless, motherless quest is for a new 'self', it might be an explicitly masculine preoccupation, since Marita's quest is for a better relationship with her daughter, and for time to attend to her home. A single mother, Marita has given up office work for twelve months to spend time with her daughter: "On some level or other I am always thinking about Camille. Did my mother think this often about me?" (40). For Marita, the *form* of motherhood is crucial — "Sometimes I can

8. Amanda Lohrey, *Camille's Bread*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1995, 23. All further references will be to this edition, and paginated in the text.

get a fix on what it is that I desire only by being in the company of my mother" (41).

Marita is a writer who — in an ironic gesture toward Helen Garner — gets her material by taping the conversations of her friends and relations and re-writing them. Unlike her mother, who writes travel narratives, Marita is not a 'romantic' in the sense that she does not aspire to be original: "All I am able to do is re-write" (49). This idea of re-writing, of weaving the self out of other selves, is in strong contrast to Stephen's firm conviction about the originality of his own project of self-development. Marita draws on a collective identity of women, as already seen in the idea that the female self is built out of a continuity between mothers and daughters: "First you type up the transcript, a process both tedious and soothing. Then, if you feel moved ... you tamper with it, you destroy it, so that it belongs to no one person but is a kind of bonded, collective effort, like the conception of a child" (49). The notion of a continuity of feminine identities — encapsulated in Marita's relationship to *Jane Eyre*, the ending of which she rewrote from an early age, and which she still loves to read today — suggests that while Marita 'knows' herself through narrative connection with the past, Stephen is a male bent on killing off his origins in constructing his present and future.

In a very complex passage, Marita describes how she has learned the importance of stories. She recalls a childhood dream of her mother being chased around the kitchen by a large man with a cleaver. Her mother tells her in the dream not to worry, that it is only a dream, only a story. The following morning her mother serves her a roasted head of a dog, which she recognises as a symbol of the head of the man (49). This passage connects with the importance of dreams in *Jane Eyre*, which are Jane's way of knowing and narrating herself. It also anticipates the presence in Marita's life of Stephen, with his cooking knives, a symbol of controlled violence, so that his passion for cooking is an inverted echo of Marita's childhood nightmare. The two are united by an unconscious fear of male violence, which is in effect the horror the novel seeks to repress just as *Jane Eyre* represses the madwoman in the attic. The idea that stories are continuous with dreams, and that they link selves together — mothers and daughters, women and lovers — through complex returns of re-storying, perhaps constitutes a feminist theory of narrative as the collective telling of identity. This is an alternative to the patriarchal inheritance of eat-or-be-eaten: "The third option is to do neither; the third [female] option is to speak" (50).

The question of origins — raised by narrating stories or by repressing them — defines Marita's difference from Stephen. Marita tells Stephen early in the

relationship about her mother, "but he had no desire to know any of this, in fact the opposite" (80). In an egotistic projection, he wants only the female body, not the stories associated with it: "he wanted to know only her warm body, not her past" (80). Yet Stephen's sleep in Marita's bed is haunted by nightmares about his own past, nightmares of which he will not speak. In this sense, "Once again, ambushed by the past" (81), he is like *Jane Eyre's* Mr Rochester, resisting stories and their connections to secrets in the past which may impede relationships in the future.

Marita's relationship with Camille in her Leichhardt home is like Rochester's life at Thornfield, which leaves Jane homeless. Like Jane, Stephen is therefore questing for domestic happiness. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, where men are in control of domestic happiness, *Camille's Bread* suggests female control. In *Jane Eyre*, the furniture, home and child are Rochester's — but it is Marita who owns the cedar bed, the house and the courtyard which Stephen comes to see as 'home'. When Marita and Camille write words on each other's backs — another image of feminine storytelling as a link — he is excluded, bound up in the inarticulate structure of his own incommunicable dreams of the night before: "At moments like this it's as if she already has what he's working towards" (83).

Guided by his spiritual teacher, Stephen tries consciously to forget his past, in particular his violent father: "Forget about fathers ... they get in the way....; [stop] [R]eferring to the self through past experience" (122). Stephen may well reincarnate Jane — but for Marita, he can still be Mr Rochester, since his rigorous quest for a new self through diet and meditation is oppressive, demanding that she and her child change their lives: "Every few years, or whenever moved, she takes up the old plot of romance and ponders it anew. Especially Mr Rochester. Mr Rochester is the problem. There is always a problem with this demon lover, this man who will and won't be tamed, who will or won't be domesticated, or only at a terrible cost" (149). In readers' imaginations, Stephen can see-saw between Rochester and Jane. As his relationship with Marita enters its most uncertain phase, Stephen asks her to read to him from *Jane Eyre*. It is the very moment of Jane's departure from Thornfield, when she realises that she must resist its safe haven if she is to retain her quest for identity: "There was a heaven — a temporary heaven — in this room for me, if I chose" (173). Again, he is Jane, a role which is validated by Eva, his yoga teacher, who warns, "you cannot afford to let anything stand in the way of your personal evolution" (175). Alone, Stephen faces *Jane Eyre's* choice at Whitcross — to stay, or to leave the safety of domestic life for his quest. Looking at a group of derelict men, he realises that to become a full-time masseur could mean financial

hardship: "staring down at the ragged band of men crouched around the fire, an abandoned thought sparks in his head. He should make the break now. Give up his job, take the mat and leap into the abyss empty-handed. Asking — not demanding — that Nature support him" (223). Like Jane, Stephen goes on a self-imposed exile.

Stephen's decision to take the position of Jane is an ironic one. He who has willed himself away from the past, from narrativity, now narrates himself *into* a story — and not only 'a' story, but a woman's story. This sense of displacement is intensified by the displacement of roles in the re-narration of *Jane Eyre*. Yet in the very act of taking away Stephen's control, Lohrey also affirms it, because like Tootsie in the kitchen, the male protagonist here claims the epic female role for himself, and claims it with all of the assurance that Jane lacks. The novel ends with letters passed between himself and Marita — a promise of the continuation of the narrative beyond the covers of *Camille's Bread*, and of the eventual reassertion of Stephen's rule in the kitchen. This female-authored novel ultimately complies with Barbara Creed's assertion that women's quest involves "someone else's fantasy".⁹ We need to balance any sense of transgression against this fundamental refusal to foreground feminine interiority. Convention may be re-written in *Camille's Bread*, but it does not seem to be re-framed. Nevertheless, *Camille's Bread* does end ambivalently. Its very last lines play a light-hearted game with subjectivities: a game which glimpses a way out of gender boundaries even if it does not appear to transgress them. Camille and her friend Flora enact a "self-conscious" parody of a routine from *Grease* —

"You can be Danny and I'll be Sandy"

"No, we'll both be Danny and then we'll both be Sandy"

"But that doesn't make sense"

"Yes, it does" (277).

While *Camille's Bread* thus glimpses subjective transgression even if it cannot deliver it, *The Riders* does not claim even to want to. Scully comes to reject the role available to him — the role of the riders — but the text is unable to imagine new forms of subjectivity, and its narrative remains locked within a relentlessly masculine identity-crisis. Krauth's title for his review of *The Riders* is apt for the sense of containment evoked by this novel: as readers we travel not somewhere transgressive, but on a familiar journey, 'riding to hell on Tim's back'.

9. Barbara Creed, 'A Journey through *Blue Velvet*: Film, fantasy and the female spectator', *New Formations* No. 6, Winter 1988, 97-117.

Bells Are Ringing

If you've never spent an evening listening to the pressure cooker, don't! You won't enjoy it, believe me.

I've spent many unhappy evenings listening to the pressure cooker because its particular high frequency hiss is the best tinnitus masker that my husband has, so far, discovered. He made a cassette recording and tried to use that instead but it was useless because the cassette version lacked the high frequency sounds that seem to be so critical. DAT equipment might produce an acceptable recording, *might*, but until such time as we acquire DAT equipment, back to the pressure cooker, hissing away all evening and raising the humidity level in our tiny flat so that it's almost a live-in sauna. A selling point perhaps? Sleep, eat and clean your teeth in sauna style comfort, enjoy the beads of sweat decor as you stick to the chairs, grow bananas in the kitchen....

Don't be so bloody daft.

OK, OK.

Then the lemons started arriving: a bag of a dozen or so very large, very juicy lemons left outside the back door every other day, left by the bottle collectors who have been given exclusive rights by my husband, the caretaker, to take all the bottles from the garbage area of our block of flats. They acquire many bottles this way, and seem to be converting half of them into lemons to give back to us. I increased the number of lemon drinks I have every day and start eating lemons instead of other fruit but still cannot keep up with the supply. As lemons are a fruit with a high salicylate content, which aggravates tinnitus, I am the only one who can eat them.

Make marmalade, I was told. Fine. The only container large enough to use for marmalade is the pressure cooker, in use so often that the inside is coated with a thick layer of scum (from the tap water) and the rubber sealing ring has melted into

the lid. Not fit to be used for food. So it's taken to the workshop to have a new seal fitted and to be cleaned up.

Marvellous, wonderful.

You never learn do you.

The replacement masking device is a set of bright green radio headphones tuned off station to provide a loud hissing sound and positioned slightly off the ears, which means turning up the volume, for maximum efficacy. This is accompanied by slurping noises, tweeting noises, sucking through the teeth or popping the lips noises. The combined sounds are loud enough to make it very hard to hear the ordinary radio set; soft passages of music and softly spoken speakers are completely drowned. I'm good on Shostakovich crescendos and trumpet concertos these days, should think myself lucky I can still hear those I suppose.

Forget conversation. Anything I say has to be repeated several times until either I shout or the volume on the headphones is turned down. I prefer to persevere, to force the latter, but when it's "Turn the tap off, the sink's overflowing" the need for speed forces me to shout. Replies are usually shouted back at me; at my protest, "I'm not shouting" is bawled at me, then the next sentence is whispered so that it is drowned by the hiss. Either way the conflict continues until I've forgotten what I wanted to say. Worst of all: the tweeting, slurping, sucking, popping noises are driving me mad.

Come back pressure cooker, all is forgiven.

I listen to a radio programme about the problems of life in a wheelchair and the thought that comes to mind is of my husband telling me that tinnitus sufferers are far worse off than paraplegics because people whose disability is obvious attract sympathy and consideration whereas tinnitus sufferers, showing no sign of the condition, are perceived as being fit, 'normal' people so don't get that special treatment and understanding, even within their own families. Then I remember an article I once read, in the International Journal of Obesity, which claimed that people usually regard their own handicaps as being less disabling than other peoples' (better the devil you know?) but when a group of overweight people was surveyed they all took the opposite view, saying they would prefer to be normal weight and blind, or deaf, or diabetic, or one-legged, or suffering from serious heart disease. One of them was quoted as saying, "When you're blind, people want to help you. No one wants to help you when you're fat." A psychological link between tinnitus and obesity? What if you have both problems? Or are the conditions

mutually exclusive? Develop tinnitus and lose weight? No, or someone would have marketed it by now.

— Reduce!! No tiresome diet. No bothersome exercise. Send money immediately —

I try to remember if there were any fat people at the tinnitus group meetings I've been to, but no, my recollection is of a room full of elderly people, some of them well covered, but not fat, certainly not fat. I would have been the fattest person there, and the youngest. It was like a club for retired people, walking sticks and hearing aids all round, who all knew each other and met together to swap symptoms. I found it depressing, frighteningly so, but my husband, the next youngest there, obviously relished the attention he got as a 'bright young thing'. Listening to them I got the impression that some were not that bothered by tinnitus, it was just a focus for regular social evenings, with the inevitable tea, coffee, cakes and biscuits. Biscuits full of additives that aggravate tinnitus, but everyone tucked in, including my husband, who would never allow me to buy such things at home. I wondered if the rest of them would be in the state of collapse that he would be in the next day, I doubted it.

The last meeting I went to was the only one where I have ever seen younger people, two of them, a meeting that had been far better publicised than usual because a world renowned expert was coming to speak. The jovial Teddy Bear image projected by the world renowned expert was soon blitzed (for me) by his constant reference to the need for a stress-free home environment and, in particular, a sympathetic wife. No mention of a sympathetic husband for female sufferers. He made (in his view) a great concession and (in his view) great joke, saying that tinnitus should not be used by husbands as an excuse for avoiding the drying-up. Any half or even quarter way militant feminist would have made mincemeat of him but this audience there sat smiling and nodding approvingly. I saw my husband nodding every time the sympathetic wife was prescribed, and felt the noose tightening around my neck. If thought could kill the world renowned expert would have died on the spot, but I lack that sort of power. I am sure it can be developed, I read a book about it once, something else I need to work at.

That was the last time my husband asked me to go with him to a tinnitus group meeting so now I seldom see other members of the group. Very occasionally we see a couple at the market on Friday night: they look at me with horror, then turn away and talk only to my husband. I guess he's doing a good line in the my rotten unsympathetic wife doesn't understand me department. If that would only stop

him tweeting I wouldn't mind, it takes all my effort not to jump up and down and scream as he sits there reading and tweeting all evening. He is part of a telephone 'hot line' for tinnitus sufferers and I pray for the 'phone to ring, he can't tweet while he's 'counselling', something he does rather well. I just wish he would put into practice himself some of the advice he gives to others. He belongs to another, much smaller, group as well, working on making a masking device and spends more and more time these days at Leo's place, Leo being an electronics engineer who has a business making aids for the disabled. I'm glad that he goes out so often to Leo's place, it's relief from the tweeting, but I wish I weren't so glad that he is not around.

The one time I protested about the tweeting I was told that I must put up with it, think how lucky I am not to have the problem he has, it's the least I can do etc., etc. Obviously he had decided that if he has to suffer then I am going to suffer along with him. He is, of course, following the advice in the latest tinnitus newsletter which contains personal (horror) stories, statistics on suicides due to tinnitus, many comments about the cruelty of doctors (who tell you that you must learn to live with it but don't tell you how), a strong message that you, the sufferer, are number one and have the right to expect friends and family to accommodate your every whim. Also an advertisement for tea-towels, offered at a 'special price' to raise funds for the group. I send off a cheque. There must be someone I can give them to at Christmas.

Friends are rather thin on the ground these days, mostly because they're not adequately sympathetic. There are — were — two with the same problem, but to them it's not a problem; both have said that you just get used to it and you don't notice it any more. This is not what my husband wants to hear. Others just don't understand about the low salicylate diet, or live too far away. Driving for any longer than half an hour is difficult because the vibration makes the tinnitus worse. So now we no longer see them.

On the nights he does not go to Leo's we walk on the beach. The sound of crashing waves is soothing to both of us, though even on the beach he wears the headphones. Few people walk the beach at night but we often see a tall girl with long, blonde hair walking with two small, fluffy, white dogs which come scampering up to us and even follow us. Their owner calls them back but only the smaller one obeys, the other continues to follow us and quite often we have to chase it back. We hear the owner, who always ignores us, shouting at the dog for being so naughty. They are beautifully kept dogs, and never seem to bark, for which I'm grateful as sudden, sharp noises like dogs barking or plates being dropped, provoke extreme reactions; like throwing himself into a chair, head in hands, turning up the

headphones to full volume and twitching as well as tweeting for a couple of hours.

I often drop plates in the sink, trying hard not to do it seems to make me do it all the more. Tonight I manage to drop five plates and the reaction is so extreme that I just walk out, leaving the washing up in the sink, and go to the beach. Packing my case and going home to mother is not an option because mother is a patient in a dementia home, hardly an attractive venue, and doesn't even know me any more. So it's the beach and the soothing sound of waves. The dogs are there and rush over as usual, but tonight they rush back to their owner without even being called. My negative state of mind is so strong that I'm even frightening little dogs, steam coming out of my ears perhaps? The sun has just set and I notice that the owner is wearing wraparound sunglasses and a floral cloth sunhat which has a short veil that shields the ears and the back of the neck. I have a hat and glasses like that but somehow that which makes her look stylish and elegant makes me look like Saddam Hussein. Because she's tall and slender while I'm short and dumpy I suppose.

They leave the beach and I walk on making non-new year resolutions to be more careful with crockery and saucepans and to be more tolerant (of the tweeting) and sympathetic. When I get back home my husband is not there, nor is the car. He must have recovered remarkably quickly: he's unable to drive when the tinnitus level is high. The washing-up is still there, of course. So I clatter away happily, and manage to break the hand-painted plate his Aunt Ethel gave us last Christmas. Damn.

Next day starts my career as a pincushion, I get a message in the morning that something untoward has shown up on the mammogram and I can be squeezed in this afternoon for further investigation. Not a happy afternoon: repeat X-rays and needle biopsies, five of the latter because they just can't hit on the right spot so keep having another stab at it. Finally, a cyst is drained. So am I by then. I get home feeling very sorry for myself and am shouted at by the sufferer, still suffering from the stress I caused him yesterday. Why am I so late? And looking so miserable? I explain, and am shouted at again: it is all my own fault, I should not have let them do it, I have no business coming home in this state when his ear is bad and I should be looking after him.

So much for the non-new year resolutions. I deliberately crash saucepans around while getting the meal ready but it seems not to penetrate the headphone hiss, not to worry there's enough upset when he finds out about Aunt Ethel's plate. He spends the evening twitching and tweeting in his chair, lips pouted out like Donald Duck. Or Marilyn Monroe. He is still there when I return from my solitary

walk on the beach. No fluffy dogs tonight, perhaps they were there earlier like yesterday.

Things have to get better.

And they do!

Possibly because he spends much more time at Leo's, testing the masking device. I enjoy walking alone on the beach, hearing waves without headphone hiss. Always I walk after dark so I don't have to do the Saddam lookalike wrapup. Nonetheless, several months later, I find myself having skin cancer treatment. While waiting I curse myself for not bringing a book to read. I see a newspaper on the table, the local paper, something I seldom see because we are usually missed out by the people who 'deliver' them — if throwing something on the garden can be called 'delivering'. The front page is filled with a story about the mayor resigning because other council members are disrespectful: the words "Behaviour disgusts Mayor" take up a third of the page. Inside I see the heading "Last bell tolls for Leo"; there is a picture of a box with knobs and dials, one of the many devices that the former electronics engineer produced to help disabled children.

There's another picture, of Leo's widow, "to whom we all extend our sympathy", with her two fluffy, white dogs.

The date of the paper is seven months ago.

You never learn do you.

Before School

Big bony haunches, legs
Like skittles, her belly distended
And blotched, with soft orb eyes
Protruding and scanning your hand
For food, and rubbery lips—
She wasn't much to look at.

Then we noticed the change.
Her udder got bigger, a tight
Pink bag full of milk, teats
As long as your fingers and wrinkled.

One morning our father called us
A solemn occasion we stood
Quietly watching her straining.
A little blood flowed, she bleated
But: 'No!' he said, 'you can't help her'.

It shocked me that something so
Large could emerge, to flop
Sloppily onto the sand—
Then another! Sickened, I turned
Away to trail all day
A bloody white slime, no one knew.

Perfume bottle

One Christmas I remember, but not
For joy. My father's present
Thrilled us all. We watched, as from
Its nest of coloured crepe she drew—

A perfume bottle. The pear-shaped
Vial was amber in the light,
A glass grenade. Months later
I found it, still in its box: untouched.

Sandra Goldbloom Zurbo

Unsent Letter to My Therapist

Occasionally — on a night such as this
(in the witching hour,
after a driving rain has spread clear glassy sheets
over the ground,
there to glitter
with reflections of the moon-like orbs of street lamps)
when I am heartsore
from the choices I must make —
I hate you
for guiding me to this oft-times lonely place we call
maturity.
Make no mistake:
this is not a love letter.
Merely a note of gratitude.

Change or Pass

How it began; some said that all things would pass
since everything by definition has an end
but Papa was right the nights were the worst
he said it was essential to know the night
but I could never change
I could never put my shoulder to the wheel.
The wheel turned.

Hearing only small talk
I stuck the postcard of the Russian icon
in my pocket.
a keepsake I told myself.

In the incandescent light
when light is so much like water
I read an old book by chance: those horses are horses
not symbols of something
not grinding out what you want
beautiful but flawed beneath the wheel instead
a feeling of caution, the texture of bones.

Night camp

We are strangers, again. I've been away.
Galahs fret in the trees at creek edge,
ore train sighs through the membrane of sleep,
the bush is haunted by night.

Beyond our clearing carpeted by gravel,
we sought passage along lifelines of scars.
Our palms imprinted with spinifex spines,
how can we know each other in the dark?

We plot courses with the tips of our fingers
across the contours of our bodies,
compasses confused by magnetic North,
we've no light to read our maps by.

Then, in the moment — the blink that passes
between one awakening and another —
constellations shift in the vault of Heaven:
satellites shed ballast, comets semaphore from the ether,

the firmament is spanned by a river of stars.

Nathan Spielvogel

Stories about Jewish life by Nathan Spielvogel began to appear in the *Westralian Judean* in the 1930s. This marked a change of emphasis for the writer, who was already in his sixties. Previously he had written about Australia as a young, secular society looking forward confidently to the future. Now he felt the call of his Jewish temperament more insistently. The life and writings of Nathan Spielvogel (1874-1956) were an attempt to show how the two could be harmoniously combined. For six decades Spielvogel produced a continuous stream of writing. His characteristic mode was the factually based short sketch; from this he moved out into short stories, novels, travelogues, poetry, autobiography and history, but in much of this writing the subtext was of a person of Jewish descent who found himself in a land which welcomed him rather than making him a pariah.

Spielvogel came from the Ballarat goldfields Jewish community, which in the 1850s was as important as its Melbourne counterpart. In 'The Beginnings of Things', a sketch included in his *Selected Stories* (1956), he described it as composed of Jews "from the ghettos of Russia, Galicia, Roumania, Germany and England" (44). Spielvogel's father, Newman, originally settled at Smythesdale near Ballarat in 1853 as a storekeeper, but later moved to Ballarat, where he ran a drapery and then a pawnbroker's business. Newman Spielvogel came from Kolomiya in Galicia, originally a part of Poland, but after Poland's partition in the late 18th century, under the suzerainty of the Austrian Empire. Kolomiya, now in Ukraine, has recently been described by Anne Applebaum in *Between East and West* (1994) as "one of the great, remote Jewish cities of the East" (242). One account says that he came from the family of Levi, and that Spielvogel (Playbird) was one of the derogatory surnames imposed on Jewish families at the time. In 1867 Newman Spielvogel contracted an arranged marriage in Ballarat to Hana Cohen. Nathan, born

in 1874, was fourth in a family of seven children. He attended the Dana St State School in Ballarat, and from 1892-5 became an apprentice teacher there. This turned into a lifetime's career as a country primary school teacher, mainly in Western Victoria. It was not only his livelihood, but was the stance he adopted in his other, parallel, career as a writer: he speaks to us as 'a backblock State School teacher', a bachelor mentor detached from events, curious about life, and tolerant of human follies.

By the turn of the century he was appearing in the *Ballarat Courier*, *The Bulletin* and soon after in *The Lone Hand*. His first big literary break came in 1904, when, after a bout of ill-health while teaching at Dimboola, he used his accumulated £120 in savings for a six months *wanderjahr* in England, Europe and the Middle East. He wrote back letters describing his travels, which when published in the *Dimboola Banner* were well received. The paper published the sketches in book form in 1905 as *The Gumsucker on the Tramp*, and then George Robertson (and E.W. Cole of Cole's Book Arcade) took up the volume and republished it in at least six editions, selling over 20,000 copies. Australian literature (for example, Lawson, Paterson, Steele Rudd and C.J. Dennis) sold in great numbers in the first two decades of this century. Most of Spielvogel's books went into multiple editions.

It was Spielvogel's distinctive style, established in *The Gumsucker on the Tramp*, which made his writings popular. His narrator is an ordinary person, humorous, whimsical, low-key, but also a sharp-eyed observer and a teacher gently educating us all the time. The title of the book exaggerates for effect his own assumed naivete — he is a laconic Victorian humping his bluey through the Old World and not being taken in by its claims to superiority. He manages at the same time to be self-deprecating. While contemplating the beauties of Lucerne, an American says to him: "But you should see the Falls of Niagara! It's a hundred times more beautiful," etc, etc. I had to keep Australia's end up, "Niagara," I said with all the contempt I could muster up. "Have you seen the Wimmera at Dimboola?" Like other Australian writers overseas at the time, the experience of Europe increased his patriotism — he saw it as allowing slum conditions and inequalities which would never be tolerated in sunny, free, democratic Australia. Coming to literary consciousness in the 1890s and in Ballarat, the home of the Eureka rebellion, Spielvogel adopted the nationalist stance of *The Bulletin* school, but without the mateship persona.

A more serious theme is present in his book, though in a minor key. The author visits his mother's relatives at Kolmar near Poznan, then in Germany, now in Poland. He observes the Jewish community in London's East End. At Cairo in a

bazaar, he startles sellers of ancient Jewish manuscripts by being able to read the texts. In Rome, gazing at the Arch of Titus with its sculptures of conquered Jews brought to the capital to honour the Emperor's triumph, he reflects that he is a descendant of those slaves. The implication, not spelt out, is that formerly downtrodden peoples, like the Jews and the races represented at Eureka, can lead a free life in Australia.

In 1907 Spielvogel published his only novel, *The Cocky Farmer*. His forte is still the short sketch, and the book is really a series of vaguely related folk yarns, in which one character, Joe Brady, comes to the fore, just as Lawson's Joe Wilson series moves from short stories to a condition approaching that of a novel. The characters are poor Wimmera smallfarmers and townspeople, struggling to survive. They squabble, drink, have fights, lose money, fall unsuccessfully in love, at the same time trying, with fitful success, to improve themselves educationally and financially. As in Lawson and Rudd, the men are feckless and the women steadier, but it's a much milder and more benign version. Respectability is a stronger compulsion than mateship, and the conclusion is not tragic but sentimental, with the hero Joe Brady ending up with his loved one, Ettie.

Spielvogel decided to do a follow-up volume to his successful book on his European travels. This was to be about travelling around Victoria, so he joined the relieving staff of the Victorian Education Department to see the state. At this time he mixed on Melbourne visits with writers like E.J. Brady, C.J. Dennis and Louis Esson at Fasoli's cafe and other literary haunts. *The Gumsucker at Home* (1913) consists of sixteen sketches of different places, about half in Gippsland and the other half in his familiar Western Victoria, which enabled Spielvogel to contrast the two. Gippsland he found disturbing, not a place he felt at home in. It altered one's mood — when shadow and shine played through the ferny gullies on bright days, you felt uplifted, but on gloomy, grey rainy days you "felt like a worm and want to be left alone". Nostalgically he wrote: "I miss the placidity of mind that was mine while living on the plains of the Wimmera". He added that at one stage "Dimboola people suddenly woke up to the knowledge that Dimboola was worth living in. It was more than a place to flee from as soon as enough cash was collected". For Spielvogel, now approaching forty, the urge to settle down and to recognize a particular locality as worthwhile in its own right was becoming stronger.

At the end of *The Gumsucker at Home*, Spielvogel tells us his days as a bachelor teacher relieving around Victoria suddenly ended when he became engaged. A decade earlier he had wished to marry a gentile girl, but parental disapproval

prevented this. In September 1911 he married Jessie Harris from a Sydney Jewish family; her father was publisher of the *Hebrew Standard*. The marriage produced three sons. In the same year as *The Gumsucker at Home*, 1913, a book of his poems, *Our Gum Trees*, appeared. Expressed here in traditional poetic forms are the views which became the staple fare of school readers and curricula in state schools in the first half of this century. Australia is a great free land in the South Seas. Gum trees and kookaburras are our floral and faunal emblems. We should admire our explorers, miners and pioneers. In one poem miners' wives who suffered a great deal are singled out as our real national heroes, not those who made fortunes as agents trading in gold.

In 1924 Spielvogel was appointed headmaster of his old school at Dana St Ballarat, and remained there until he retired in 1939. From 1924 he wrote a monthly column in the *Teachers' Journal* of the Victorian Education Department. For it he used the persona of old Eko, a wise old rural schoolteacher, unimpressed with departmental red tape, inspectors and corporal punishment, but still devoted to imparting knowledge, and to philosophizing in his school garden over a quiet pipe as evening came and the children were gone — a type of the popular, allround schoolteacher once common in state primary schools. Selections from these columns were published in book form as *Old Eko's Note-Book* (1930), the book Spielvogel liked most of all his works.

Between the wars the relationship between Spielvogel's two main identities, Jewishness and Australianness, gradually changed. His Australian interests contracted to Ballarat, where he felt contented and became a revered and popular figure. He wrote a *History of Ballarat* (1935), and monographs on its gold, Mechanics' Institute and Eureka rebellion. In addition he resurrected the Ballarat Historical Society and conducted a radio show on local history. As he became more physically settled, his interest in his Jewish background broadened. Spielvogel had flourished in the British and Christian atmosphere of his time, but in a poem 'Credo' in his 1913 collection we already find him dissociating himself from the Christian view of the afterlife in favour of a view perhaps more in keeping with traditional Jewish belief:

I have no time for those who are us teaching
That we are born to sigh and toil and weep;
That we are born frail sinners ever reaching
To Hell; that we in dread should daily creep.
I hold that Life is not a preparation

For After Life. But Life itself is Life,
And Afterwards no Heaven! No damnation!
But blessed rest, where comes no pain nor strife.

Between the ages of sixty and eighty, Spielvogel wrote stories of Jewish life in another literary tradition — simple moral tales of incidents reflecting Jewish identity, like the Yiddish writers of East Europe. Gone were the humour, the irony and the detached commentary which characterized his previous Australian works. Mostly stories about family life in the Ballarat Jewish community, they are direct, serious, and told from the inside; outside society is not so much hostile as uncomprehending. He had published one such story 'Solachti' ('I have forgiven') as early as 1907 in his father-in-law's journal. But most appeared in the *Westralian Judean* in the 1930s and the *Australian Jewish Herald* in the 1950s, and were published as *Selected Stories of Nathan Spielvogel* (1956). They are often moral fables about a personal weakness which needs to be overcome for the individual to fit in with traditional Jewish communal ways. In one story a Mr Bronstein of Ballarat is happy to be thought by the general community to be a German, a prestigious nationality; then the war comes and he is ostracized until he finally reveals he is Polish Jewish. He has learnt his lesson and is hereafter proud to acknowledge his true background. Another story relates how one of the community organizes a meeting in September 1853 which leads to the founding of the Ballarat Hebrew congregation, whose history Spielvogel chronicled in a monograph in 1926.

He also wrote three stories in which he imaginatively absorbed himself into his remoter Jewish past. In a preface to these stories he muses: "I have some glimpses of some far off past...And so I feel that I have lived again and yet again and every stage of life has left some trace on me and made me the man that now I am. The 'I' is made of many men and many lives." These are stories of suffering and displacement. The first is on the fall of the temple in Jerusalem in 70AD, when Jews were brought to Rome to grace an emperor's triumph — the slaves he had seen depicted when visiting Rome in 1904. The second story takes place in Seville in 1556. King Ferdinand has forced Jews to convert or leave Spain; professed Jews are being burnt at the stake. The story is told by a Marranos who has publicly converted to Christianity but has secretly kept his old faith. The third story is about his father, who, forced to leave Kolomiya, lives with Gypsies and Bulgarian brigands, makes his way to Istanbul, joins a caravan into Asia, is befriended in Bombay by the wealthy Sassoon family, hears about the newly discovered goldfields of Australia, and sails for Melbourne, his roving days at an end.

These stories are illuminated by his poem 'The Call of the Wandering Jew', first published in *The Bulletin* and then issued as a separate publication by the Bread and Cheese Club in 1940. Growing older, he feels "the drag of the Wanderlust" more. As he reads at night he roams in his imagination and desires "to join with my forbears". He lists in the poem episodes in which the Jews have suffered throughout history, until attempting a final reconciliation of the divergent forces within himself:

But I was born in this Southland sweet,
 In it to manhood grown;
 I love this land, as I love my life,
 I call this land mine own.
 Yet here, tonight, my blood runs mad,
 To go with these and roam,
 To wander off with these gaunt, grim ghosts
 That ever seek a home.

Nathan Spielvogel died in 1956 a few months before his Jewish stories appeared in book form. Judah Waten believed Jewish literature in Australia began with him.

(For biographical details, acknowledgment is made to Weston Bate's *ADB* entry on Spielvogel, to the *Ballarat Courier* obituary article of 15 September 1956, and to L.E. Fredman's Introduction to the *Selected Stories*.)

The Hang

The girl's father made her a jungle-gym for Christmas. He had collected iron bars of various sizes and welded them together in a large square. The square was almost as big as a garden shed. A horizontal bar ran across one side of the jungle-gym, for doing the hang, and at either end was an old tyre suspended by a thick rope.

The girl liked to hang upside down until she could feel the blood rushing to her head, making her dizzy. When she had had her jungle-gym for a week, she was able to hang for seven minutes. She timed herself with the Mickey Mouse watch she had been given for her birthday. The tip of her ponytail swept the ground as she rocked herself back and forth. Sometimes she flicked herself off the bar so hard that the soles of her feet stung as she hit the ground.

Remember what Mummy told you? I said wear shorts under your skirt when you hang from those bars — long ones, not those skimpy running shorts.

That Christmas, the girl's father had decided that they should share their Christmas lunch with someone who had no family. He invited a man who lived two houses down to have lunch with them. The man was very old and did not say very much during the lunch. As he chewed his food, the girl could see his false teeth leaving his gums and moving up and down.

After they had finished lunch they sat in the garden. The man signalled to the girl to come and sit beside him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small square of chocolate that was partly covered with silver foil. The sides that were not

covered with foil had bits of grit and dirt stuck to them. The girl accepted the chocolate but did not put it in her mouth.

She noticed that the crotch of the old man's trousers was yellow and stained. The man must have seen her looking because he crossed his legs quickly, as if to disguise the stain. The deck chair he was sitting in was on a slight lean and as he crossed his legs the chair tipped backwards, and the old man fell on to the grass. The girl's father repositioned the chair in a more level part of the garden, and poured the old man a frothy beer.

Most evenings the girl went outside to play on the jungle-gym while her father worked in the cellar. It was not really a proper cellar. Although it was underneath the house, the cellar could only be reached by walking down the steep concrete pathway that ran alongside the house. The girl was only allowed in the cellar on washing days. The rest of the time it was kept locked, except in the evenings, when her father was down there.

As well as the wringer washing machine, the cellar housed all the tools, paints and bits of junk her father had collected over the years. The girl liked to sit and look at the things in the cellar, while she was doing the washing, and wonder where her father had got them from and what he could possibly use them for. There were old doors and window frames, bottles covered in dirt that looked as though they had been just dug out of the ground, car parts, pictures in broken frames, boxes full of clocks that didn't work and the entire chassis of a vintage car.

Useless bloody junk, cluttering up the place — I'd put a match to it if I had half a chance. I'll ring the Sallie Army one day, get them to take the lot away.

The cellar smelt of earth and damp, oil and turpentine: unusual smells that the girl had only ever noticed in the cellar. Her father spoke about concreting the cellar one day, and maybe even putting an extra room down there. The girl hoped it would never happen. She looked forward to washing days and the strangeness of the cellar. Every week there seemed to be some new object to look at, something her father had picked up to add to his collection of bits and pieces.

There was a pipe at the back of the cellar that dripped constantly. A platform of wooden slats had been nailed together to stand on, but the earth was often so wet that mud would squelch up between the slats as the girl walked on them.

I'm too sick to help with the washing today. You do it — but don't hang around in the cellar. I don't like you down there — filthy place. Time we got a proper washing machine upstairs.

On washing day the girl walked down the path to the cellar holding the brown plastic washing basket that contained the dirty clothes. She put the clothes into the washing machine and filled it up with cold water from a hand-held hose. Once the machine was full, the girl liked to sit and watch the agitator moving backwards and forwards, slapping the clothes clean, as a thick scum formed on the sides of the machine.

Do your father's stuff separate — dirty socks stinking up the washing. He cuts his toenails in the bedroom you know — I find them on the carpet.

After the clothes had been washed, they had to be fed through the mangle. Often they would become tangled, and the mangle would have to be switched on backward to release a sock or handkerchief that was going around and around. Then the wet clothes were hung on the line. The girl hated hanging up the sheets, which slapped back around her legs, if it was a windy day.

The girl's father was a printer. The factory he worked at printed packaging for food cartons. The cupboards in their kitchen were full of packets of OXO cubes, asparagus soup and other foods which were free samples from the companies who were pleased with the packaging. The girl wished her father would do some printing for Cadburys or Nestles, but it never happened, and the free samples always seemed to be things that she did not want to eat.

Don't ever eat his samples. You don't know where they've been. They roll around in the bottom of his work bag for weeks before they come home. I wouldn't touch them.

Occasionally her father brought home his magnifying glass which he used to study printing textures with. It was an especially strong magnifying glass, and sometimes he allowed the girl to look at things through it. Once, she placed a blowfly underneath the glass. The girl could not bear to look at it magnified straight away, so she hovered above it, slowly lowering her eyes over the glass until the fly was almost in focus. She was never able to get it into focus completely because the magnified mass of shiny blue made her feel sick.

The girl studied a wart on her hand under the microscope. The surface had reminded her of a crumpet, except that the wart was uneven and crusted with blood where she had been picking it.

You've picked some disgusting habits up from your father. Foreign men like dirty things — remember that — don't copy it.

The girl's father had a special sample book that he used for picking colours for printing. It folded out like a fan, and contained every colour that the girl could imagine. She liked to study the colours and try to remember their names: magenta, emerald — she liked the rich sounding names the best.

Be warned, never marry a printer. Grimy fingers on my wedding gown — I'll never forget it.

Sometimes, he gave her sheets of cardboard he brought home from the factory. One side of the cardboard had been printed with a food carton. The girl liked to cut the cartons out and make them up. Her bedroom was full of Weetbix, soup and custard cartons that she used to keep her nature collections in. The girl collected shells, seedpods, leaves and flowers. She pressed the leaves and flowers between the pages of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* before storing them in a carton.

The food cartons had cardboard slots that fitted together. Sometimes it took her a long time to figure them out. The most difficult one she ever put together was a hexagonal-shaped cheese box. Some of the cartons would not fit together at all because the printing was defective.

After a while the girl was able to recognise the defective cartons before she began to

put them together. She put these misshapen cartons in a big cardboard box that she kept in her wardrobe. The girl had heard that defective stamps were worth a lot of money, and she kept the cartons in case one day they became valuable.

You're a bloody weird kid. I used to collect things for my glory box
— sheets and towels, white and clean and folded beautifully.

Before she went to school in the morning, the girl's father had a shave at the kitchen sink. He had propped a handmirror up on the windowsill; he told the girl the light was better in the kitchen. Sometimes, the girl sat and watched him. Before he started, he put the radio on so that he could listen to the morning news. Then he tied a teatowel around his neck, to protect his clothes, and lathered up his face with the Sunlight soap they used for hand-washing clothes.

After he had finished shaving, he dipped his finger into a large tub of moisturising cream he kept on the bench. The girl liked to watch him applying the cream. He screwed up his eyes, clamped his lips together, and rubbed the cream into his face and neck with quick up and down strokes. The girl thought he looked as if the cream stung him, and he wanted to get it over with quickly.

He forgets to clean out the sink — leaves his black hairs stuck to the sides. It's disgusting. I've a good mind to wipe it out with one of his shirts.

The old man came to visit them again. The girl and her father took him for a walk in the Botanical Gardens. The girl's father held on to the man's arm as they walked slowly around the gardens. The girl walked ahead, occasionally turning around to make sure she had not lost sight of them. As she walked she scanned the ground for interesting leaves and seedpods to add to her collection. Sometimes, when she was sure her father was not looking, she picked a flower and hid it in her shirt pocket.

The girl saw the old man disappear behind a bush. Her father sat on a bench to wait and the girl joined him. She hoped he would not notice her bulging shirt pocket. Once, she got caught picking flowers in the Botanical Gardens by a man who was weeding a flower bed. He had told her that she should be ashamed of herself for picking the flowers that were for everyone to share. She had been much more careful since that day.

After a very long time, the old man came out from behind the bush. He was buttoning up his fly as he walked. The girl noticed that there were brown flecks on the backs of his trousers and she thought that her father looked embarrassed as he took the man's arm.

They stopped at some tearooms on the way home. The man reached into his pocket and gave the girl a grubby ten cent piece. She had a Raspberry Spider. He fell asleep in the chair before he had finished his tea, and the girl's father had to shake him hard to wake him up.

That night the girl could not sleep. She put on her Mickey Mouse watch and crept out through the back door and into the garden. The garden was lit by the light that was coming from the open cellar door where her father was working. The girl went down to the jungle-gym and hung for eight minutes. She felt so dizzy afterwards that she had to lie on the damp grass and shut her eyes for a few moments.

The girl walked up the garden to the cellar and leaned against the door-frame. She could see her father standing at his workbench with his back to her. A naked globe hanging above his head flooded the cellar with light, and she had to blink hard to adjust her eyes. The fully-lit cellar looked completely different to the gloomy cellar of daytime. The girl could see right back into the far corners of the cellar. She could see more car parts and other bits and pieces that she had never noticed before.

The girl's father turned around and saw her standing in the doorway. He beckoned to her to come in. She sat on a wooden wine crate and watched him work. He was glueing an old picture frame together. He squeezed a tube of glue and ran the nozzle along a piece of wood, leaving a long white trail of glue. Then he took another piece of wood and carefully placed the two pieces together. Excess glue oozed out between the two pieces. He wiped this away with a rag. The girl held the two pieces together for him, until the glue had set.

After the frame had been repaired, the girl's father told her to go back to bed. The girl ran down to the bottom of the garden, did a quick hang, then made her way up the steep concrete path to the house.

You've been down to the cellar.

The girl thought about answering, but instead she wiped her hands down the front of her nightgown, leaving a dark smudge.

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Meeting Doris Brett

At the University of New England there is a legend about a bull in the library. The story goes that once upon a time, in the early seventies, there was a PhD student who was doing research which involved the study of the diet and digestion of a bull. A group of mischievous undergrads let the bull loose and the animal made its way to the library where it proceeded to eat the curtains. The PhD experiment was ruined.

Could this story possibly be true? Enter Doris Brett. Doris is a first year, majoring in Psychology and Philosophy, and she and another girl sometimes creep into the library at midnight bearing wine glass and letters for a spot of table-turning and divination. They see movement behind the curtains, and when they shine their torch, they are confronted by a browsing bull. I almost expected Doris to say, in the manner of Darby O'Gill — "And I have the glass to prove it!"

I first met Doris when she read from her book of poems *The Truth About Unicorns* in the early eighties. I didn't know about the bull in the library then, but now that I align my memory of Doris on the stage with my imaginary sight of her in seance mode, I can very easily impose one image on the other. The small, quiet, dignified woman who read her poetry (in, as it happened the Carringbush Library) resembled, in her greenish grey silk dress, a lovely moth. She was petite, serene, with a great puff of curly dark hair.

The Doris I met at her house recently resembled a vibrant storybook figure. Her wide-eyed face was perfectly made-up, her feet were bare. She was bearing black trousers, white shirt and a scarlet cummerbund. And on her head she wore a huge elegant bunchy beret. Her hair was gone, and the hat was a substitute, a statement, a defiant splash of red. For Doris had recently had chemotherapy.

She greeted me at the gate which is something she designed herself, a keyhole shape in a high brick wall, the entrance to an enchanted place.

In 1994 Doris was successfully operated on for ovarian cancer but in 1996, the

disease recurred. In 1996 Doris also published her second collection of poems *In the Constellation of the Crab*. The book opens with 'The Waiting Room' in which the pictures in the magazine are described as "flat princesses" — the thread of myth and fairytale and storybook-creature runs deep, not only in Doris's work, but also in her life.

As we talked she served up gingerbread horses, figures that could only recall to my mind the unicorns of the title of the first poetry book, and also those in Doris's novel *Looking for Unicorns*. She said that the figure of the unicorn fascinated her, that it is a symbol of duality, of life's two sides, with the power to kill and the power to heal. The creature is beautiful, graceful, yet wild and dangerous. And she said that is also how she sees chemotherapy — it is poison that purifies.

Doris always speaks with realistic and gracious humour when talking about cancer, musing on the intimate impersonality of surgery, describing it as fabulous with a mysterious tension. She emerged from the operating theatre in 1994 reaching for pen and paper, longing to write poems, even though she had been unable to express herself in poetry for about a year. Phrases and lines of poetry were pouring from her mind, and she knew they were good. Poems in *The Constellation of the Crab* have won four major prizes. Doris speaks frankly of the experience of ultrasound, of the transducer wand sliding backwards and forwards over her abdomen, and of the screen being "alight with the inside story" of her body.

Her dreams, the flowers of her unconscious mind, tell her the story of her own body. Just before the return of the disease she dreamt that she was trying to catch a number 15 tram, but could only get a number 42. The next day her doctor gave her the result of a blood test on which she usually scored 15 or less; this time the score was 41, meaning the cancer might be active in her body. After this she was to have relatively minor, exploratory surgery, but the night beforehand she knew it was going to be a major operation because she dreamt of going to an old writing desk where she found a pile of decaying banana skins, things to be completely cleaned out.

Doris Brett's life seems to move on two planes at once — conscious and unconscious, earthy and ethereal, realistic and fanciful. The room in which we were eating the gingerbread horses is the room where Doris sees patients — she is a clinical psychologist who works with hypnosis. Part of her study of hypnosis was carried out in seminars in the United States; and she travelled to these seminars on the proceeds of workshops she ran in Melbourne. Workshops in writing poetry? in psychology? no, workshops in making bread. For Doris's first book was *Doris Brett's Australian Bread Book*.

The bread book came out just before *The Truth About Unicorns* which was a prize-winner, and soon there was the book she wrote in response to her own daughter's fears and shyness *Annie Stories*. The Annie stories mirror the real-life emotions of children, and help parents to build their children's confidence with stories. They were an instant and international success. She followed this book up with *More Annie Stories* which came out in the United States in 1990, but which was not published in Australia until 1997. What comes through in Doris's books is a quiet confidence in her own ability to communicate and create. Poems come "like gifts" and yet they are accompanied by steady and constant work, and a lifetime of attention to the mind and the body.

Patients have been astonished to run into their therapist in a department store where she was up to her elbows in flour at a bread-making demo. Others have been startled to find her reading her poetry in public. These days, she who has counselled so many sufferers of illnesses, is herself being counselled.

During the illness she started using a computer and now belongs to a newsgroup of cancer survivors who meet on the Internet and give each other a particularly powerful kind of support. There is a sense, with the Net, that the others are there all the time, always ready to listen or to talk. Illness has emphasised for her the duality of things, and as we looked through her poems, in both books, she discovered for the first time the insistent presence of mirrors there. And water — and mermaids — creatures of mythic duality, creatures of the unconscious, of the dream world. And she laughs and tells the story of how she used to make mermaids when she was a bread-maker, but she always had to give them mastectomies because their breasts exploded.

There are the two planes again, or perhaps there are more than two — the fantasy of the mermaid, the reality of the exploding breasts, and the underlying motifs of the woman, the mother, the bread, the breasts, the threat of destruction and annihilation by disease. And the ability to collapse in genuine laughter and hilarity in the face of fears, our deepest fears. It is these fears as they manifest themselves in children that are the impulse behind *More Annie Stories*. With all the experience and wisdom and love of woman, mother, therapist, storyteller, poet and cancer sufferer, Doris Brett, with a gracious wit and a compelling seriousness, guides parents and teachers through this storytelling method of helping children overcome their anxieties.

We say goodbye under the keyhole gateway, and then we began to chatter endlessly to each other on the Net. This was the conversation that you could say got out of hand and took off joyfully into cyberspace, as any good fairytale might.

Solstice

The window showed her leaning towards the dust of the road, rocked by the slope of the hill. She walked with red sweat and feet heavy with mud. From my darkened nest of glass and wood I watched, my eyes straining to see through the fine gauze age had placed over my eyes. It was not until you were almost at my door that I recognised the woman as you. You who had written so long ago the words that were to keep me awake, rigid in my bed, the darkness whispering and wailing. You had written in carved letters "the sun stood still ... I swear to you". For days I waited for change, for a change greater than the feeble lashings of wind and rain, greater than the softening effect of water on earth. There was nothing but grass, longer, eating at my door. Until now, this morning, when I saw you bent, walking slowly with the weight of the sun on your back.

You knock with the hands of one who has seen nothing but open doors. I can hardly hear it. My back aches as I stand, it has curled and shortened. The skin of my hands has hardened, giving them the shapes of crescent moons. I have taken to scooping things with them. It is not precise. I place them on the door handle and it opens with your push. You swing a bundle to your hips. I'm surprised because I didn't see it, didn't even guess. "His name's Jacob" you say. A small hand clutches the end of a worn blanket. I can see nothing else but a spray of black hair in a gap of layered blue. "Jacob" I sing, softly. You pull out a chair and sit down in a mountain of cloth. Then I notice how you have tied each cloth bag together and wound them around your small frame. I take Jacob and feel the lightness in my arms, the unbearable fierce heat. I am suddenly afraid. You sway as you untangle the cloth from your body and for one brief moment I think you'll fall. You watch me silently, with Jacob in my arms. It is then that I feel the stiffness, the shortness of my breath. Your smile lowers my eyes and sends an eyelash floating to the floor.

A small plate is on the table, offering bread. You add another plate. I watch a small transparent spider glide across the floor. You don't see it and it scuttles behind the cabinet away from your heavy foot. I bend my head to smell Jacob and hear the clang of a pot lid. At the table you cut carrots and peel potatoes. I have these solid things. My kitchen is full of their hardness, their dimmed colour, brushed with earth. "I watched the sun move" I say "each and every day". You brush your hair back and concentrate on the curved peel.

"Are you sure it stood still?" I say.

You nod and I see that your eyes have blurred, that your hands are not so sure.

"I saw it melt. Could that be it?"

"No ... it stood still and the air was black and thick".

"Was it near?"

"No ... it was so far that you could believe that it never existed".

I pull back the blanket from Jacob's face. He has the opaque skin of Chinese silk and a small red open mouth. You push your chair back and it catches on the uneven floorboards. Kneeling, your hand stretches down to feel the air move cold and silently through the gap into the room.

Your fingers push the vegetables into the pot and I hear the plink of water rising as they fall heavily against the black iron. I place Jacob gently on the bed and surround him with high pillows. He sleeps silently in his house of cotton and feathers. I make tea to warm your hands. You wipe them on the towel but they remain wet and red. I carry the china cup, my curved hands give it the look of an offering. You don't say anything about my body, stiff and fragile, for that I am grateful. The scent of jasmine rises with the steam. You say:

"It was the fields, and the work. My hands were cut, sliced by flowers. I would bend and grasp the thick green stems near the base where they were strongest, then pull them from the earth. Sometimes they would snap and break, then they would be useless no matter how perfect the head. I knew the name of every flower, knew the spidery petals from the round, smelt the green sticky scent. When they were all plucked from the ground we would prepare the soil for new seedlings. Those days were the hardest. Our hands would become tools, we would force them, dig our brittle nails into the soil. My clothing would be wet with mud. In the evenings the other workers would ask me the names of the flowers. They'd pronounce them with the whine of the wind, with the sound of Asia. I'd laugh and to equal the score try

to say something in their tongue. They in turn would laugh at my heavy sounds, the thud of the earth. They bent and moved with slow movements and soon my rhythm matched their own. I learnt to hold the lightest things with a strength that did not crush. The seedlings flew from my hands into the holes that my fingers had made, not one was broken. It does not surprise me that I didn't recognise the boundaries of this seduction. I blended into their lives until I was no longer sure if the scent of sesame oil was not coming from my own skin and my breath did not carry the heat of jasmine. In his room I slept behind billowing sheets that covered the windows and felt the sun fall lightly upon my shoulders. When I woke his sister would brush my hair, plaiting it in elaborate coils. We drank spiced tea and I would drift to the sound of their voices, whose meaning I made no attempt to decipher. I heard the sounds mingle into the tinkle of saucers, the muffled voices outside our closed door, the laughter of his sister as he moved above me with the same slow movements of the field workers. His skin was as smooth as stone, impenetrable. I was the earth into which he sunk. I parted, cradling the hardness. I knew the moment I conceived, felt the heaviness in my breasts as soon as the next day. Soon I began falling asleep between pickings. I'd curl up anywhere, sleep soundly with the earth against my ear, the straight green flower stems rising to the sky. As I worked I would chant the names of the flowers, softly to the seed growing inside me ... *Fireflash ... Golden Market ... Snowcap ... Cleone ... Primrose Cricket ... Lemon Tench ... Oakfield Pearl ... Red Rockery ... Ensign ... Lucida*. One evening his sister led me into her room. The room was filled with broken flowers whose stems had snapped as they were pulled from the earth. Their bright heads rested on the edges of glass jars, floating. She smiled at my wonder as she rummaged through a box that stood against the wall. Sitting down beside me she showed me a photograph of a young girl, bright and brittle, with flat dark eyes. With soft sounds she spoke, whispered her brother's name, pointing to her finger. Her words seeped into my ear, they stormed and blew, until there was nothing but the hollow sound of rushing wind. This was how I became aware of her brother's life, of his life outside the fields and these smooth floored rooms. Whether he was engaged or married I don't know. I tell you that this was when it happened. I left silently, the sound of my feet stifled by cloths that were spread across the floor. Outside it was dark, although it was early afternoon. There was no sun in the sky and the trees bent forward leaning towards the ground. I walked through the air that had thickened, clinging to my throat and lungs. I heaved it out through my mouth and heard the heavy blackness of my breath. It was later that I discovered that the sun had stood still, that at that moment it had been at the

furthest possible point. Even if I had known I would have held my gift, made no sacrifice. I felt my child grow, felt my body swell and shift..."

You stop speaking. Your hands rest on the flat of your stomach, they move across the fine material stopping when your eyes see Jacob, the wound bundle on the bed. I don't ask you if he had known, if it would have made any difference. It is not lack of curiosity. Perhaps I trust your judgement or have stopped believing in choice.

Steam is rising from the black iron pot, it is lifting the lid and sending a hiss into the air. You stand and take the pot from the stove. Jacob sleeps soundly as we scoop the hot soup into our mouths. When we have finished you lie down next to Jacob and close your eyes. I leave the house so that you may sleep. The ground falls away into a valley and I watch some white birds fly across the top of the dark green trees. It is all below me, far away. The birds streak against the sky, leaving streaming colours behind them. After a while I go back inside. I watch you asleep on the bed. Your shirt is half open as though you had suckled Jacob while I were gone. I rinse the dishes out in the sink, washing away the ants that have crawled onto the spoon. It is then I see a long dark hair. It rests on the side of the bowl. I pick it up and place it into a black lacquered box on the kitchen shelf. I close the lid and smile. It is almost invisible, my gift.

The Dial Painters

I am Edward Granville.

Call me Ed. Call me the developer, the perfector, no, the nurturer if you will, of Darklite. Perhaps, if you are conversant with science or with the business world, you have heard of Darklite. It is a paint named (I invented the name) for its luminous properties. The name conjures up a sense of wonder, of mystery, does it not? It articulates a union of opposites, the perfect marriage, marriage being the institution around which all human life is based. Why, ponder if you will what such a paint might accomplish. Imagine a house in which the electric light is not needed. As darkness envelopes this ideal house, a gentle luminosity will begin to shine from the walls themselves, walls that are covered with Darklite. Imagine a sick room that must remain shaded. The nurse will read the patient's details without the need of a lamp if the ink is luminous. Doll's eyes. Fish bait. Gun sights.

All can be made bright with a touch of Darklite. It is 1923 and we stand at the very beginning of the future. We move towards a society of ease and benevolence. No need for hardship if all can be provided for. Here at the General Radium Company we produce light pulls, watch dials, and crucifixes that glow in the dark—we do the work of the Lord in our own small way.

My office, which is situated on the second level, has enormous windows that oversee the factory floor. When I stand at these windows I am unnoticed, invisible. Yet I like to think that in some way all are aware of my presence. My attention nourishes them as the sun's rays feed the plants. It encourages them to work even harder. They want to please me.

I am a modest man. I do not promote myself as perhaps I should. My fame is of the sort which gathers momentum slowly. It is a fame reserved for future generations. Do not feel embarrassed at not knowing me for what I am. You will.

I enjoy my current anonymity. Only my people here, and some few scientific experts, know me. I hole up in my office and gaze down at the workers in their flamingo pink overalls, their long brown limbs machine-like in their piston repetition. It is like glimpsing a bright and innocent alternate world side by side with my cave existence. We are only separated by the thinnest of membranes, the cool skin of the glass, but they seem unreachable. It is a moving picture, all silent activity. I only need an orchestra to make the experience complete.

The morning rays flood through the vast eastern windows of the factory floor. I am hardly able to see through such a density of light. It is like a cathedral, a cathedral in which hope is worshipped. The girls swim through the light like mermaids, their arms lifting in graceful arcs, their legs pushing through the brightness with fluttering jets.

They move slowly on these mornings as if the light, having substance, resists their motion. The girls are paid by the number of watch dials painted, so if they are sluggish it is of their concern, not mine. Besides, they are so lovely to watch.

At odd times of the day when I am at my desk finishing reports for the government investigators or on the telephone speaking with an important client, I find myself pulled towards this window. What magnetism draws me? Is it the energy of young girls, blooming and ruddy in their health? It is difficult to resist at any time, but overpowering when they assemble. They are one hundred and twenty four in number and I am helpless.

They know I am here watching. Sometimes one of them looks up at me and smiles slowly, gently, then returns to her work. It reassures me. I return to mine. Until I am again called to the window.

Ah, the cool of the glass against my hot cheek.

I sense a wariness of radium industries, particularly that of luminous paint. Allow me to reassure you. The paint itself contains only one part radium to 30,000 parts zinc sulphide. The alpha particles that radium emits are unable to penetrate the skin. Any tiny amounts of radium that may accidentally be ingested would be excreted almost immediately.

But anything worthwhile has an element of danger. To achieve, to push forward into the womb of the future, to give birth to Paradise, risks must be taken. Cowards! Sheep! Come, witness what we do here. It is a hymn, a prayer. Ban luminous paint? Dock science?

Go to your home cooked meals, your slippers, your pipes, and your sleep. Just allow me my work.

I intend to write a book. Science needs communicators. I will provide a window to the great world of scientific endeavour and then all criticism will rest. I will seduce with words, with images made of light. Let us banish darkness from our lives, for only with light shall we see.

My factory is the perfect machine. Having begun it will never cease.

The girls. I interview each one. I hire them for their cleanliness. I question them closely in their habits. Do they wash their hands regularly? Scrub their necks? Brush their teeth? I am entitled to the best, after all. Their wages are absurdly high, nearly as much as a man's. Sometimes I interview twenty five in a day, a production line of teeth, legs, eyes, fingernails, necks. There is so little to choose between. But I possess an instinctive sense of excellence. It has rarely betrayed me.

"Oo, yes Mr. Granville, I'm most particular with hygiene." That was Kathleen during her interview. She left her chair and crouched before me, smiling with teeth as big as tombstones. "See, Mr. Granville, not a cavity in the whole dashed lot." And she was right, not one blemish in Kathleen's perfect mouth. Ah, Kathleen, my lovely Red Delicious. She was paler then, just about to ripen.

Kathleen, looking up at me, smiling, as I watch her work.

I am hollow without you Kathleen. I am a stuffed olive with the red pepper sucked out.

It is 12.00am and the girls eat their tomato sandwiches on the factory grounds. They spread tablecloths beneath them. They kneel under trees, and surround themselves with flasks of weak tea and cupcakes made by their mothers that morning. They are a nurtured, a privileged generation. Their laughter rises with the wind and skips over the tops of clouds.

We went to the pictures, Kathleen and I. We sat in the darkness and gazed at the flickering light. It was a romantic comedy. We were side by side, holding hands, a curiously intimate situation for two people who had just met. But what am I saying? Already, we knew each other totally. Our souls, lit from within, were transparent.

It was but a short distance from that intimate situation to the next, which occurred in the park later that night.

I tickled her under the chin. Kathleen preened and we were away. She squirmed a little at first. Cried out. Her tears were fetching, so beautiful in the moonlight. I swear, I saw my own face in the wet sheen on her cheeks. Ah, my fruity femme fatale, my plump princess. Oh, what beautiful teeth you had. I have their marks still on my skin though you have those teeth no longer.

Despite their avowals, hygiene is sometimes lacking in my workers. I have introduced a Dental Hygiene Program for our employees: regular checkups and an apple each two times a week. It is another first for the General Radium Company. The rest must be up to them.

I cannot work. It is afternoon and the light is leaving, and I am caught in its outgoing tide. I drift to the glass. I caress the glass with my hand. It is warm now.

Their little snake tongues flick in and out as they lick their brushes to a point. In and out. So quick, so dainty. The curved numbers on the watch faces are the most difficult—the plump double arc of the three and the eight, the narrow downstroke and rounded bottom of the six, the swanlike two. They all take artistry and a steady hand. The brush must be shaped and fine. The gosling throats of the girls lift, swallow. Any radium slipping down those beautiful necks will tomorrow be expelled in the most private of circumstances.

All my time with Kathleen was spent in darkness. Odd, for we were creatures of the light. A discrete restaurant lit only with candles, a quiet beachside walk, a rendezvous at the cinema. One night she showed me the bloodied gap from where one of her teeth had fallen. I tasted blood when I kissed her. 'Your hygienic habits must be wanting,' I told her. 'We will have to end it.' I am particular about such things.

Her underwear glowed in the dark.

'I have nothing to be afraid of,' I told my wife. 'Whilst you risk poverty and public censure if you insist upon divorce.'

It was in my capacity as Owner and Manager of the General Radium Company that I visited Kathleen at the hospital. I took her some fruit. We talked though her speech was muffled. The right side of her face was severely indented. She resembled a wizened apple, a windfall. That was the jaw operation. The ulcers under her chin looked like weeping sea anemones. They discharged continuously. There was a smell in the room as of rotting seaweed after a storm. Her teeth were pitted with dark cavities and, the room being dark and her mouth permanently ajar, I could see secret and green glowings, like jewels. Kathleen sucked oatmeal through a straw whilst I chatted. She no longer chews or bites. "This generous amount," I told her as I handed her the cheque, "is totally without admission of any liability whatsoever." It was all very civil.

"They are overstimulated," said the doctor later. "It is a hysterical condition arising through sympathetic coincidence with the others. For after all, do not doctors themselves prescribe radiation treatment for all manner of female problems.

All it would take is for our dear Kathleen to be willing to take a long, hard look at herself. But that is the most difficult thing of all to do, is it not?" He frowned.

"Yes, doctor," I agreed for I, too, am a man of the world and I understood his meaning.

We will miss her.

Each evening, when it is time for me to leave my office, my musty lair, I am already looking forward to the next day's work. Science is my calling, my ministry. I am a priest for these new times, the dial painters my flock. The future is as clear as the window I look through.

But now the factory is filled with the subtle light of evening, and all is reduced to shadows and angles. I have found the night to be a time of hallucinatory fogs, though I am beginning to think that sometimes these wavering shallows of evening light reveal more than the brightest and clearest morning.

Last night my leaving was delayed; I was missing an important file. When I ventured into the dark corners of my office in search of it, my breath misted. In the cool evening air my breath glowed like a hundred tiny fireflies winging silently at my face, and I backed rapidly out of the corner and into the lamplight at the centre of the room. I asked my secretary to search for the file instead. I must take more care of where I look.

Shrimp-catchers, Syros

We return each year in spring,
too transient to leave a trace,
but having so few rituals
to call our own we cherish this:
you with the small red shrimp-net,
a hopeful boy hop-scotching rock-
pools, me with the notebook idle
in my hand, pen fallen slack,
watching a wily octopus
sidle through shallows out of reach,
an x-ray-pale sea-spider weaving
water-nets; hearing the hidden night-
bird's cuckoo-cry, monotonous in dusk,
in haling musk from blossoming
acacia-trees that screen the beach;
drawn into the island's gentle alchemies
that take us back, stripping away
the layers of dead memory like husks
from wheat, until we remember
how to breach, rediscover peace.

Through the Broken Glass

She recognised the address immediately. Not that she'd known it at the time, only an odd compulsion sent her back years later, to walk down the road under the towering beech trees, and quickly on passed the house, not daring to look to the windows, risking only a sideways glance at the letterbox, at the number now indelibly engraved on the first page of her memories.

There was no mistaking it as she drew up the roster for the cleaning teams, even as she let the address masquerade as one of many new clients, of no interest once the account is paid. It was just a house with carpets to clean like any other: the hall a neutral beige fleck, the bedrooms blooming into a dusky pink, the living areas softening to cream beneath rich vibrant rugs, deer leaping through crimson Arabian nights. Carpets that she could describe with more conviction than those she had grown up on.

Madeleine was glad she hadn't taken the call. Yet envious. Every detail a moment lost, for she could not ask Mrs. Leski to reveal the tone and texture of the exchange, to ask whether a ghostly intruder with no substance outside its own mind, was missed from the fabric of the house with dirty carpets.

Romanticism aside, it had been a very stupid thing to do. Exactly how Rat had talked her into it was unclear even at the time; how anything said by someone who chose to be known as Rat could ever be persuasive was not questioned. Rat didn't acknowledge questions. She wanted Rat's approval of course. And that of her father.

There was only one thing she'd ever been good at: using words. She'd started at an early age, startling the postie off his bike with a trumpeted "Hello Man" when she could barely walk. Her mother maintained she'd be able to talk her way out of hell itself; her father's ritualised response countered with her puny size and the assertion that she wouldn't be able to fight her way out of a wet paper bag let alone the final abyss. When it came to the pen and the sword, in her father's mind, there was no contest.

Madeleine and Rat had both been puny. The morphing hormones of puberty were late, held up in traffic on the highway of life, cut off at the lights by the up market Porsches of the popular girls with their breasts and bras, height and overcrowded diaries. The rackety bicycles of their pubescence were still coming, sending only forward messages, troublesome emotions and stray hairs in awkward places. Still, their size made it easier to climb in through the window.

Rat had taken them round the back first, away from stray headlights and the curiosity of neighbours. Madeleine produced the screwdriver, the tool a second crime, stolen from her father's shed, a clue intended to lead him to the knowledge of her bravery, then hastily returned, the bravery a chimaera, more goat-headed than fabulous, braying emptily in the night. Rat showed no fear. With a star dance along the metal she worked the wedge in and effortlessly flicked the flyscreen from a back window. The window itself was not so readily open to their intrusion: age had fused the wood of frame to architrave, time strengthening rather than enfeebling. A side window was similarly intransigent and Rat led her incautiously to the street facing wall, behind the limited obscurity of an affable wattle. The window there was of a different, more ostentatious and ornate kind, as befitted the best face forward. Rat jiggled at the metal lock with the screwdriver and the weakest element capitulated.

It was Madeleine and not her friend who fell into a rodent like squat against the stucco at the crack of the window pane, dropping as fissures of noise radiated from the still intact lock. Rat did not hesitate. She pushed shards of glass into a comfortable thud on the carpet, eased her hand in, and unlocked the window from the inside.

Hindsight is a powerful torch. Madeleine had shone it back often after a term of blacked-out censorship—fear persuading her that only thoughts could keep an event alive, without them, without remembrance, the break-in could never have taken place, and, if it hadn't happened, she couldn't be caught. Only hindsight told her that Rat had already known there was nothing to be scared of. Rat had known there was no-one inside, and hadn't been for several days. She'd passed the house daily, twice daily, to and from school, watching and waiting, yet Madeleine tried to hide from an avenging householder at the first audible evidence of their trespass, believing their crime driven by spontaneity and chance. Rat had come to her in the playground at the very end of lunch, black smudges of heartbreak smearing her dark eyes, and the idea seemed to be thrown up as the random child of this distress.

I hate them, I hate them, was Rat's cry. But who? There were so many people to

hate. Teachers, siblings, the popular girls for whose attention each would gladly forsake the friendship between them. That day, Rat hated her mother. On creeping home to avoid Maths she'd found her mother in bed with the youth she thought was her own boyfriend. Blame guillotined home from house. Rat knew he was a sleaze, but she couldn't allow any justification for her bored mother. Rat would do over a house, just as her loved ones had well and truly done her over. This crime was not an action, but a reaction.

Years later, when she was fifteen, Madeleine wrote it down, using all the words her father would never appreciate, describing the house as a mansion, the window a casement, the shattered glass as crystalline fragments of childhood, the criminal act as an innocent rite of passage. She changed the names, the town, the details, retaining the emotions alone as the truth of her story. Her English teacher encouraged her. Ms. Cook must have been the age of the mothers of the girls she taught but the years had left a different pattern of erosion on the plains of her face, and her eyes were not dulled to the light of possibility. It was she who suggested Madeleine enter the story in the contest, she who shared the pride of success.

The pleasure of the written word was an escape: playing with words she could never use in speech, creating a world she could never enter in reality. She wrote that her friend's excuse belied her actions, liking the subtlety of a word that left the lie in but softened the utter bullshit. Rat's lies: the break-in had been planned for weeks, any incidental betrayal was merely a convenient excuse. Did the provenance matter? Climbing through that window, entering the home beyond the broken glass, offered a precious glimpse into another world. That mattered.

One evening was all they spent in there. The hours stretched; they flew. The first moments, captured in Rat's skipping torch light, were drawn out by the fear that would not allow her draw in breath. Then Rat flicked the switch. Bold lights cast brightness over the next hours that were gone as no time.

The first thing she noticed was the books. It was hard not to: they were everywhere. Books on imposing shelves reaching to the ceiling and books piled in friendly groups on every available flat surface. Rat disappeared, scavenging through cupboards and drawers, but Madeleine was captured in the first room, down on her knees, pulling out books to stroke, crack open, concentration lost as another spine suggested itself. There were books huge with history, books timid with flickering lines of poetry, pictures to go with words, and a library of literature. Nowhere the thick romances her mother stuffed under sofa cushions; everywhere possibility. Frenchmen with long hair wrote books, Australians were published, Indians,

Czechs, a Pacific Islander. Within the multiplicity of authorship there could even be one who was once a girl just like her.

A call dragged her away, down the hallway passed an old map of the world before Australia was there. Rat was in a bedroom at the end, a room named on architectural plans as the Master bedroom, though there was no master for it. This was a woman's place. Not a girl's room of pink and lace, but a deeper, warmer refuge of burgundy and mahogany. A drawer stood open like a mouth in protest, its contents spread on the burgundy bed covering. Gold and gems emptied from a treasure chest, necklaces, bracelets, rings and pins, rubies, turquoise, pearl. Nothing of any great value, but treasure enough to be gloated over by those there for sightseeing not thievery.

Rat was off again once her pretty find was shared and Madeleine automatically began to tidy the glitter away. Prying hands of younger sisters and brothers invaded her own room daily: tidy away, tidy away, or lose. Each ring had a box as everything loved deserves a home, the necklaces were easily back in the drawer, never having been tangled in a knotted ball of indifference. When all was cleared Madeleine rested briefly on the bed, amidst a lingering smell of flowers. Maybe it was lilacs and lavender. Maybe shampoo bought from a Salon not the supermarket.

Rising again, a last necklace slipped to the floor. It was small but heavy, a flat pendant decorated with hieroglyphs, writing from the ancient Egypt of Pyramids and Social Science class. The symbols meant something, civilisation and communication: someone's name, someone's identity. It felt good in her hand. It went back in the drawer—with a sad reluctance.

Rat wasn't a thief that night, but she was later she boasted the last time Madeleine saw her. Rat did not go home when the pendulum clock in the dining room chimed a melodic midnight, a reminder of shattered glass slippers and the evidence outside the window. When Rat did reappear she was at the Youth Refuge refusing to ever go home again. Madeleine visited her there a few times, without telling her own parents, who condemned the very idea through mouths of chop in front of the television. Youth workers broke up families it was clear, though Rat looked far from broken apart in the ordinary suburban kitchen of the Refuge. She liked it there, and it seemed a nice enough place to Madeleine, except for the other kids. Madeleine only visited her once when she was locked up in the Remand Centre. They had nothing to talk about save Rat's ominous boasting, pathetic cries of bravado from a little girl to frighten her smaller friend. Later Madeleine heard a foster family was found, and tried to forget Rat, hoping she too would be forgotten,

worried sick Rat would blab about their shared break-in.

It was Madeleine who was the thief that night. She wanted to steal the life of the woman who inhabited every breath in the house. She wanted a life with a dining table and a chiming clock, and she took the smallest of mementos, as if she would ever need reminding of what she wanted. She still had it when she wrote the story that won the prize from the local newspaper.

There had been a collection of them: fine eggs, delicately painted in various hues, and Madeleine only took one. She carried it around in her pocket mindful of its fragility, remembering it even when Tom was groping her in the storm water drain under the bike path. Until one night she rolled over in her sleep and the egg shattered. An undramatic end. It took weeks to fish all the diamond chips of emerald and crimson from the flannelette and greying candy stripes. But by then, by the time the egg was crushed, there seemed no point in being upset. Her memories of the night had hatched into something larger. And her hopes were already as small as one of the fragments of shell.

The curtain above her bed fed the memories. It moved into the room upon breezes that had no source and she would lie in bed certain the window was open, that someone had opened it. She would lie in bed sure an intruder could see into her privacy, was poking here and there. How they would laugh—at the lack, the lack of all things, the lack of beauty.

Rat found the computer in the back room. She got it started but couldn't find any games in the orderly files. Madeleine flipped in the promising disc, "Monsters in the Labyrinth" and Rat moved away in disgust: the file was just a bunch of poetry. Venice: time seeping between love and memory. Madeleine found it less strange that she fell in love with a woman than that it was someone she met only in the lines of a poem.

There were no photos of the householder, no image to remember, and Madeleine left only smeared finger prints over the house and upon the front door as they fearlessly left through it, ignoring the shattered glass reflecting up their dreams.

The window pane would shatter more as it was cleared up and thrown away; the night fragmenting in the trash.

Madeleine had her job with reception and the rosters, and in a drawer at home in a small flat, the glory-gold of the medallion the newspaper sent, tarnished now with neglect.

There are always so many hopes when fifteen. Top of the class in English: a gift. Even better next year, Ms. Cook said at the school's Award Night. I'm looking

forward to it, Ms. Cook said. The teacher looked fine, so fine and right in a cashmere cardigan of burgundy. The gold shone against it, the hieroglyphs shadowed in the School Hall. But unmistakable.

Of course she'd had to give up English. There was no choice though even Rat would not have understood it.

Still, sometimes, only sometimes, she allowed herself to wander in the house of memories, muddying the carpets with her awkward dreams.

Yannis Hondros

Ritsos' Recovery

The statues have slowly returned — poet, one by one;
on the backs of donkeys, in trucks, in cars,
in brown paper packages, on planes,
in the belly of ships, in your words, from your mouth—
and so now they gather in cold marble rooms;
under the gaze of those whose job it is to gaze.

The door has been a long time in the opening
and the old key has rusted — thank your Gods
that the new key is spooled from different earth.
Pick it up — I sense you feel a resurrection in the air.
Notice now, that the wind has stopped;
notice now, that the thorny stems carry roses,
and notice now, as the statues face up to eternity,
that the birds have come back — slowly, one by one.

Charles Darwin Contemplates the Coastline of Australia for the first time in 1835

Almost at the end
of his first voyage
his ship already
a floating encyclopedic dream
weighted down
with the minutiae and maze
of links that would take
a life's work
to connect
sailing eventually
into his second
from which
he would never return
the long passage of reverie
is a tiny English village

to this strange
margin through the haze
that became the fossil cliffs
of his imagination
in which he foraged
with wonder
and childish eyes
mistaking the metaphor
for solid ground
reaching out for landfall
rest and safe harbour
found only a shadow
that moving towards
he could never catch.

Mr Nabokov Misses the Train

Vladimir Nabokov, the author of our most essential lie, wrote, between 1921 (in Russian, in Berlin, an anxious thin emigre) and 1958 (in American, in America, a solid tenured professor), sixty-five stories, to appear, twenty years after his corporeal vanishing, for the first time, in hefty hardcover, all together — Relax, Mr Nabokov, the couch has seen weightier weights.

Where's my son? My collaborator! My translator! My prefacer and presenter! (Calling) Dimitri! Dimitri!

Cool it, Nab, the lad is no doubt at the typesetter eating crow, that *Tatler* you misspelt page 27, and isn't that at the whole and entire heart of the matter, the crux of it, the nub, the falseness we pass on, in poisonous pollination, father to son?

(Silence.)

Of course silence. Naturally silence. Goes without saying silence. What else but silence from the author of the somewhat dramatically overworked if not outright hysterical *Ultima Thule*, a tale of the dangers of (as though there could be such a thing) total knowledge, which, just in case your average lummoX lip-sync reader doesn't quite get the metaphor, comes affixed with the following fluttering flag: "Freudians are no longer around, I understand, so I do not need to warn them not to touch my circles with their symbols."

(Deeper silence.)

Or *First Love*? Should we look at *First Love*? May we look at *First Love*? Which isn't technically a short story at all and in fact constitutes a chapter in your memoir *Speak, Memory* (previously published as *Conclusive Evidence*, go figure) but here it is rubbing shoulders one of the sixty-five so let's discuss.

(Deepest silence.)

Astonishing coincidence! For here you are in your opening pre-First War St

Petersburg paragraph lusting after the "three-foot-long model of an oak-brown international sleeping car" complete with mirrors, reading lamps and other "maddening details" in the window of a travel agency, unfortunately, as you say, not for sale. And here is the Rumanian Gregor von Rezzori (*The Snows of Yesteryear, Portraits for an Autobiography*) on pre-Second War holiday with his mother at the Black Sea, a similarly not for sale travel agent's display detailed steamboat the focus of his whining and desire, which she, however, Gregor's mother, for the price, as she tells him and he us, of a diamond ring, for her beloved boy buys, to walk him down the pier with it, to lower it into the water, to demonstrate, beloved son, display purposes only, its sinking to the irretrievable bottom like a stone, and should we do an exam question on this, I wonder, write on one side of the paper only, all answers strictly in ink, who had the better mum?

(The body rigid, the insomniac eyes tightly closed, two quick fingers pinched quickly together, locking the lips, throwing away the key.)

But let's slip on. For look, several paragraphs deeper into the narrative our young hero has boarded the actual train, is playing actual cards (at a collapsible table) with his actual mother, is travelling, is observing, is outwitting insomnia, is sleeping, is dreaming, is waking, is arriving, is finally on annual sea-side holiday with his family in pre-War Biarritz. Where, aged maybe ten, he meets, plays with, courts, falls in love and plans elopement with almost-ten-too little French Colette. To last see her, their youthful marriage thwarted, aborted, in Paris, by parental arrangement, "in a fawn park under a cold blue sky," she with hoop and driving short stick, "some detail in her attire (perhaps a ribbon on her Scottish cap, or the pattern of her stockings)" reminding our hero of "the rainbow spiral in a glass marble," which marble, oops, haven't we seen earlier, page 602, rolling under a grand piano, in his dream, on that rushing train? Which, hey, wait a minute, hoop, park, Paris, this isn't Proust's first love the gorgeous Gilberte you've dreamed up for yourself and us here, is it, Nab?

Oh quack quack! (*Rising. Bolt upright. Flinging himself to the wrenched-open door.*)
Quack quack!

Thank you, Mr Nabokov! Same time tomorrow! Oh, wait, you've forgotten your butterfly net!

* * *

Or let us knock on this door, see who's home here, *The Flight*, an early story, 1925.

Our man Nab — Come in, come in — had got himself married the year before, this to a Jewess, the beautiful former Miss Slonim, which we may read as rebellious, courageous, who is to know, who is to say, his loinlight, his chessmate, his favourite four-letter word, *To Vera*, he sings, *To Vera, To Vera*, volume after volume, book upon book, his happily forever after sole dedicatee. (Except where, inexplicably, including his capstone *Lolita*, saved from incinerator extinction by her intervention, what's more, go figure, he didn't dedicate at all.) But *The Flight*. A first person narrative. I. Which I observes young love in the pub where he forms the habit of taking a beer after his daily Berlin summer swim, Otto, a young typesetter or electrician, Emma, the tavern keeper's daughter, to see it end, this love, this romance, for unknown to him (and us) reason, in a fight, the young girl crying, the electrician (or typesetter) knocked down by her angry and outraged dad, and if this is a story of envy, which it is, then who or what is it exactly that the I of the story is envious of? Recently married, our Nab, as we've noted, so it can't be *that*. Or you doubt envy? You don't see envy? You are oblivious to envy here? You have swallowed the quote or perhaps what matters is not the human pain or joy at all but, rather, the play of shadow and light upon a live body, the harmony of trifles assembled on this particular day, at this particular moment, in a unique and inimitable way unquote ahem poetic ending with which our author slams shut his shoddy story? As you will no doubt have swallowed that earlier detail, page 145, three-quarters of the way down, the I of the story rushing out to see the fight suddenly reminded of "a splendid scuffle I had once had in a seaport dive with a beetle-black Italian, during which my hand had somehow got into his mouth and I had fiercely tried to squeeze, to tear, the wet skin inside his cheek."? And never mind that gung-ho Boy's Own "splendid scuffle," those clichés of "beetle-black Italian", "seaport dive", but a mouth, Mr Nabokov? *A mouth?*

Maybe it's a metaphor.

Your broadcast anathema, Mr Nabokov, to the theory and practice of Freudian psychoanalysis, or the Viennese delegation as you so geographically decline us, never a minute missed without its jab, its stab, its superior scornful deridement and mockery—

(*A rattling.*)

—has required on this singular occasion that not only your limbs be bound to the couch, a chained session, as it were—

(*A battling*)

—but also, to facilitate the possibility that a beneficial word or two might actually penetrate that robust Russian skull, a prosthetic hush placed upon your Russian mouth—

(*A rattling and battling is heard*)

—for our subject today is *The Thunderstorm*, another early effort, 1924, a parting of the portals, no less, to peer, if not at the announced nature of your distress, except that too, of course, inescapable, after all, that too, but full-frontally, and as we said and trust beneficially, at the ploys and gambits of your wily and beleaguered soul. In short, Nab baby, enough pussyfooting. Let's talk hard meat!

(*Phenomenal rattling and battling, also spinning orbs, rivulet-running steaming brow etc.*)

Deceptively simple, the story. A lad in Berlin (another of your first person I's) awakens to a thunderstorm, imagines the god Elijah in his chariot above, which loses a wheel, which Elijah comes down to fetch, which turns into the storm's abatement, the shining reborn sun, upon which our first person I, in soaked bedslippers and worn dressing gown, runs off to a second person you, to tell her what a lovely story he's just made. A fair summation, Nab? What do you think? I've left something out?

(*No reply, naturally.*)

You bet I have! The words! The prose! The poetry! The shining rooftop! The crackling foam! The white-haired giant with furious beard! The fiery chariot! The jet-black steeds tossing their blazing manes! Have I omitted something? Have I left something out? Some cliché unturned? Some bombast unstoned?

(*Naturally, no reply.*)

I have a son along the same lines, Nab, the same tiresome gambits and predictable ploys of those determined to be unloved. What a clever boy am I? Hmm? Mummy will be pleased?

(*Stock still silence, the pair.*)

Arise and go, Mr Nabokov, I have bound you with silken words only, you are free to depart.

So, if the name of the game (if you'll pardon, Mr Nabokov, this drop into common parlance, the stern talk of psychoanalysis having moved along somewhat since the sayings of sober Sigmund, although we do honour his habit of the handrolled Havana, a stumpy stogie, a slender cheroot, when the purse permits) is naughtiness,

which it is, that unloving mother, is being naughty, we'll show her, thoroughly naughty, we'll hurt her for hurting us, totally bad, allow me to congratulate you, sir, how manifold your ways of its expression, scarcely a trick missed!

(*The little Russkie this session eschewing the couch back turned asquat in a corner on a child's low sulky stool.*)

So here you are, the little boy called Peter in your story *Orache* holding back fearful tears (your mother, sorely missed, is away with your ill sister), your father, you learn, is to fight a duel, which he does, and survives, more than survives, the detail supplied of his pistol honourably discharged into the air, Daddy unharmed, now the tears can break, and do, but aren't you crying, little Nab, "do not tell anyone, please," you say, too frightened to do in your abandoning mother, you wanted your father dead?

Or in *Torpid Smoke*, which is seemingly about being all abuzz with poetic illumination (dank smoke, grey sky, a poem surely emerging), except oops, third paragraph from the end, suddenly there's a dead mother, the "hurt look" noted by you with "merciless, irreparable sharpness" of the father's shoulders "powdered with ashes and dandruff," and when the story ends "my face is wet with tears, my heart is bursting with happiness, and I know that this happiness is the greatest thing existing on earth," are we to believe this is the poem emerging, not how you've felled your father, what you've just done to your mum?

So then you pop a playful tumour (*Recruiting*) into the stomach of a stranger observed on a Berlin bench.

Or whip in a paragraph (*The Assistant Producer*, page 551, the abduction scene) to tell us that what you've just told us isn't so at all.

What a clever boy am I.

An Englishman (*Spring in Fialta*) packs his pipe with his thumb — Didn't you ever smoke a pipe, Mr Nabokov?

Another puffer (can't find the story, look for yourself) with the butt of an amputated finger — another way of doing it the hard way, I would have thought.

Or maybe it's a metaphor.

And we've noted the usurpation of Proust's first love, and this in a supposed memoir, is nothing sacred?

What a bad boy am I.

But no, let's not tiptoe through all sixty-five stories (I'm tired, I need a haircut, my waiters in the waiting room have waited long enough), not through *The Admiralty Spire*, a rehearsal for *Pale Fire*, a madman twisting the story in front of him to

tell his own, now there's a metaphor if ever, not through *Sounds* with its snide mockery of the lovelorn, *An Affair of Honor*, a cuckold jeered, *Lips on Lips*, a writer derided, and *A Slice of Life*, and *The Potato Elf*, and *Lik*, too many to list, make what you will of Dimitri's prefacing proclamation, echoing, to these ears anyhow, his father's signals to Sigmund, those flashes to Freud, "But perhaps the deepest, most important theme, be it subject or undercurrent, is Nabokov's contempt for cruelty — the cruelty of humans, the cruelty of fate — and here the instances are too numerous to name."

Nor is there time (for cakes must be baked, shoes shined, hedges clipped, a new roof erected for the guest wing before the coming carnival of crashing rain) to catalogue, pinpoint, select (but examples in every story, browse at your own risk) the endless animation of objects without a human heart, the houses which totter up from their knees, the trees that point, friendly foliage, the crack that runs like a dragon across a ceiling, a moon performing calisthenics, all wonderfully charming, certainly clever, but what, one wonders, is such insistent Disneyfying masking, what is the flipside being so neurotically concealed?

And finally (the gym, a portrait sitting, the neighbourhood annual jam sale and souvenir swap card meet), let's not even skim *Breaking the News* or *The Doorbell*, those twin stories of mother torturing, even less *A Russian Beauty*, wherein his heroine — as later too his capstone masterpiece heroine Lolita — expires in childbirth, now there's anger for you, there's rage, there's revenge, I didn't ask to be brought into this rotten world, wail, wail — but no, too late, it's been nice, here comes my train.

Choo choo, Mr Nabokov! Choo Choo!

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Perched Egg

We skip to this:

Faithful, fruitful.

Fidelity, fertility.

Fecundity. Fecundity. Futility.

The profundity of fecundity. It is not always easy to bring life forth. Fertility is not the only problem, although we all know the stories, of the available intervention and the ethical dilemmas.

There are also nauseated, blood spotted, fear drenched pregnancies.

There are difficult births, the ones that you know would not have happened were it not for forceps, scalpels, drugs, pain, fear and too much blood. Then the others where all is lost at what should have been the beginning. Unbearable paradox.

It is not always easy to sustain life once it is here, tiny, fragile, whisper breathed. At the very moment a new life is placed in eager arms the fear comes in. Little one, let us die in the right order.

The dwarf rabbits were a Christmas present. Enchanting creatures with grey ears and tails soft against shimmery white fur. Eyes the colour of quince jelly, said the grandmother. One had a charcoal smudge nose, the other a tiny white inverted horse shoe in the middle of the smudge. This one, being the slightly larger of the two, was assumed to be male and called Truffle Hunter, the other called Poppy. At first they were kept in a hutch, and great care was taken to keep cats at bay.

Just after New Year the father made them another enclosure to be their run in the day time. The family watched the creatures, entranced by their transluscent petal ears, the soft stretching and plumping of their limbs as they hopped. One morning the mother watched aghast from the kitchen window as they circled the pen in a frenzy of fur and sharp claws and just audible shrieks. Was Truffle trying to mount Poppy, or was Poppy trying to mount Truff? They were separated, Poppy bleeding

profusely from one eye.

The vet said it was play that went too far, examined Poppy and said she was a female but that the other rabbit was not necessarily male. She gave ointment for the injured eye and said to watch them. Such sex play was common in young animals.

On the vacant block near our house was an old baker's cart. We used to climb inside the cab and play houses. Then we would stand on the shaft and have peeing competitions. My cousin always won, he could reach over the other shaft and make patterns in the sand below. Mine was an uncontrollable stream that frothed below me. I envied the winning, not the penis, but the envy had an effect. I needed there to be something special about me so I let the boys look at me and then play posting into my vagina. I can no longer remember all the objects we experimented with, but there were sixpences — like the Christmas Pudding, and smooth ends of soap.

Recently I heard of a man in a pub who was laying odds on how many twenty cent pieces he could fit under his foreskin. Vagina envy.

The rabbits grew and the family became more relaxed with them. They ran free in the garden; diminutive as they were they could not fit through the fence and the tough buffalo lawn made burrowing difficult. On late summer evenings as the family sipped icy drinks on the lawn the rabbits would hop among them, snuggle and nuzzle and nibble. The children carried them wrapped in shawls, pushed them in their dolls' pram and the rabbits acquiesced with grace.

There were no more fights, and as autumn progressed with no signs of a union the mother examined them both as the vet had shown her. The concave pink star under Truffle Hunter's grey bob tail indicated that she too was female. Very Nineties, said the milkman, who had a long black pony tail and wrote poetry when not delivering milk. He promised always to shut the gate into the garden where the rabbits basked in afternoon light under the honeysuckle and ate the dried out marigolds.

Menses. The curse, Eve's curse. The monthlies, it, the flags are flying. I can't swim. Fred. My first time was during a Sunday visit to a great gallery with my father and his uncle. Strange draggings pulled at me as we walked through endless echoing rooms. Finally the warm dampness made sense. I wadded myself as best I could and kept my wonderful secret all the way home. I lay in the hot bath prescribed by my mother who said yes, she would tell my father, but later, once I was asleep. I wanted to shout and sing and dance with the wonder of it. I watched the pale crimson feather up through the water between the cream of my thighs. I imagined my belly full with baby, I imagined kisses on my breasts. Now I was a woman.

But it lasted so long. And we used dreadful, thick cotton wool towels with knotty little elastic belts that slid around your waist. My mother told me to slip the towel under the arm pit as you wandered through the house so noone would be offended. She said I was lucky I didn't have to wash out rags. But disposing of them meant repeated trips to the incinerator in the dank corner of the garden, coaxing nasty bundles to ignite. The unspeakable stains, stealthy bleachings and the injunction after I left panties soaking in a bucket in the laundry, with slovenly habits like that my girl how do you expect to keep a husband?

My friend's daughter collects tampons. She sends away for samples, hordes the pretty little boxes in her top drawer, and yearns to use them. We say she is lucky not to have to use pads. We have watched, amused, hasn't the world changed? — as she and her friends fill glasses with food colouring and water and watch as the cotton expands.

The child's teacher sent a note home. She said they had a male dwarf rabbit as the classroom pet. A prime specimen she said, and if the mother would allow it, it would be a wonderful class room project to have one of the does at school for the day. Then as soon as the kittens were old enough they could come to school so the pupils could watch his development. His name was Arnold Schwarzenegger. The child was ecstatic, the father bemused. The mother wondered how to choose. To play with them in such a way, one to be impregnated, to achieve motherhood, the other to remain a virginal Aunt. She couldn't bear to condemn one to such a state. Her sister saw a different scenario, one to remain free and her own person the other to be sent off to a rape. The milkman said it would be very nineties if one were to assist the other and form an all female household.

The child chose Poppy. It worked Mum, she said at the end of the day at school. I know she'll have babies. They were doing it all day. You could tell because he'd climb on her and wiggle his tail like mad.

Egg — a word thick with hope. I love eggs, their wonderful shells. The sound, crack, against the edge of a bowl. No wonder children always want to crack the eggs, little jagged bits of shell in with the meat, no matter. I love saying that, the meat of an egg, how arcane. Then the mystery of the white, translucent until heated, the stringy, tacky chalazae, the wonderful density of the yolk. Yolk — a word thick with nourishment. Look, said my little girl when she saw her newborn cousin, he's still all yolky.

Women are born with their life's supply of eggs. I imagine refrigerator racks, round holes punched in plastic with eggs perfectly balanced, one on either side of my groin. Each month another egg drops down, down, and is never replaced until eventually the rack is bare.

Weeks passed and nothing, no changes, no signs. So the teacher asked if maybe

Schwarzie should come home for the weekend. The mother agreed, pleased that both does now had a chance to select, be selected. Charming, said her sister, dirty weekends for rabbits.

The child was delighted. The aggressive little fellow, smaller than both does and gnarled looking, leaped and chased and wiggled all weekend. Soon there were changes in behaviour. Previously, the rabbits hopped in the garden in the day and were returned to the hutch at night. Suddenly they were impossible to catch in the evening. Steadily and with amazing speed they dug a burrow, around the buttress roots of a large tree. When the rabbits were being cuddled the mother pushed her arm into the burrow and found several long tunnels and the the opening to a roomy chamber. There were two entrances, one large from where the excavations were carried out, the other on the far side of the tree, small and unobtrusive. The rabbits had nested. A baby rug, dropped from the doll's pram, had been lying on the lawn. The mother and child watched amazed as Poppy dragged it with her teeth, tugged and tugged across the lawn to the burrow and then Truffle helped push pull it under the ground.

Things you can do with eggs: Blow the egg and with tinted inks paint dainty, impossible worlds on the shell then balance on a stand carved from ebony. Boil the egg, crack the shell lightly and simmer in tea and five spice and when you peel away the shell there will be a veined marble marvel. Dye the egg crimson and nestle in sweet, plaited Greek Easter bread. Mash a hard boiled egg with salt, pepper and butter or mayonnaise, and make farty smelling sandwiches for your lunch box. Buy hard boiled from a vendor on a Thai railway platform, peel, dip in soy sauce to eat. Dry the shells on a window ledge, paint any colours you love, crush into tiny pieces, glue onto old jam jars, varnish and give to your mother for a vase. Watch the mystery as the white doubles its volume and stiffens when whisked, add sugar, whisk again, shape Bavarian castles from the pearly mixture, bake long and slow, till you have a gold burnished meringue. Get the boys over the road to throw them over the house and be amazed that most don't break. Make a cake from just one duck egg. Carve the whole world in an emu egg. Draw your breath in sharply when you find a leathery, empty snake egg. Say gross, when the fly blows its white mound onto the defrosting cat's meat.

Put them in a test tube. Put them in the fridge. Eat them. Fertilize them. Incubate them. Hatch them.

Waiting and waiting, and finally it became obvious that it was Truffle Hunter who had conceived. She was slow, and heavy and when held very gently, the mystery inside her belly seemed to send energy through one's finger tips. The

mother watched anxiously, they seemed warm and safe in their burrow, Poppy solicitous and busy.

It is not always easy to bring life forth. The broody hen, with no rooster in her yard, who sits and sits on a stinking egg. The budgerigar in her nesting box, changed, feathers fluffed, swollen. The manual says if she is egg bound she will die, you must feel gently and break the egg inside her and let it pass, hopefully then the others will follow. If not, they too must be broken. If she lays succesfully but the eggs have not hatched within twenty one days you must remove them or she will sit until she dies. If she triumphs and her young survive, you must take away the nesting box because otherwise she will breed again and again until exhausted, she dies.

My friend says what a noble little mother, no abortion option for her.

One morning there was a spot of blood on the footpath. A show, the mother wondered? Yet nothing else, for several days, but Truffle Hunter seemed too sluggish, slow, wanting to lie under the honeysuckle, not to drink or eat. Then the child, trying to tempt Truff with a baby carrot saw a tiny creature dead in the dry leaves. The father put her in a warm soft box inside near the heater. They watched her deliver two more tiny corpses. Next morning they couldn't bear it any more, and the mother called the vet. Yes, dwarf rabbits can have great difficulty delivering, bring her in. They waited for news, a long, slate grey afternoon.

I watch parents at the school concert, see heads bobbing, twisting to see their offspring strut their stuff. They can only see their own scoop of genetic mousse up there, not the others.

My friend says no-one should have an only child, it is putting all your eggs in one basket. But I say, what of the heart to heart joy of loving a child, watching it grow, how can having others insure against the agony of loss?

I'm so sorry, said the vet. We put in a drip to induce her, five more kittens were delivered, they were dead in utero. We thought we could save her, but she went into shock. Truffle Hunter is dead.

The child said she hated Schwarzie, and wanted to kill him. She never wanted any male animals at their house ever again. The father looked grim. The mother wept for the emptiness that followed such promise of fullness, she cradled Poppy and wondered what life would bring to this solitary creature, in her burrow nest. Her sister wept too. They didn't tell the milkman.

Despite theory it is not easy to experience time as being other than a linear progression. It is not easy to see death before birth as anything but the most unendurable paradox. There is too the wretched wrongness of death out of order, young before old.

How quickly the fear clutches. An inexplicable headache, a temperature that soars. A sudden scream, an odd silence, a face drained of colour. So fast it can all turn around, as quick as the cracking of an egg. A speeding car, running, urgent voices, long corridors, white tight sheets, metal sides to a bed for a child who has never rolled out. Glare of light, more voices, whirring, bleeping and life as it has been already seems for ever away.

Later, much later, after many miracles when all is well again the fear still claws sharper, deeper. It will always be there. Late one night, walking corridors to make sleep come a juggernaut had emerged from the shadows. Hard to focus, what could it be, blink, stare to make sense, and suddenly meaning jolts in. A terrible procession, a trolley phalanxed by people in green gowns, masks, a green sheet pulled over the trolley, such a little mound under it. A hand reaching under the sheet, holding for the last time.

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Secrets

“Sex”, my father said, “isn’t all that it’s made out to be. People talk about it as though they know what it is. Well don’t be fooled. No one’s really an expert ... unless they’re French Canadian”. He nodded seriously, and then smiled. “Like father like son, eh?” I agreed, gulping, wondering what my mother thought of all this. For the moment she was holding her peace. My father spread the *Men’s* magazine on the table. “This, though. This isn’t sex. These are pictures. It’s not real life.”

I knew there was a moral in all this. I was hoping it would be expressed entirely in words. I’d put them on the table earlier in the day, my guilt forcing me to confess that a friend had given them to me. I was eight years old. I’d never seen such things before. One minute I was sitting quietly at the track, having just bought a pack of matches for my friend, the other he was handing over three tattered magazines. *Men’s* magazines. “Nudes”, he said, and I gave them back. “Why would I want to see naked men?” I asked, scrunching up my face. Michael looked at me confusedly. “It’s girls”, he said, “Naked women!” “Then why does it say *Men’s* magazine.” He rolled his eyes and let out a string of curses. He finished, impatiently, with a curt, “Do you want ‘em or not?” He let one of them fall open at the centrefold. “Jesus,” I said. “What’s *that*?”

“You see”, Dad said reasonably, “These are images. There’s nothing here that should interest you. Not now. Later, maybe. But look. See. Two-dimensional. Just pictures. So if you want to keep these, well, son, it’s your choice. But *why* you’d want them....”

My father had a way of making something seem so unnecessary, so much beneath you, that you couldn’t possibly understand why it had ever been of any importance. When he used this tone, I thought it’d break his heart if I disagreed. And I certainly disagreed. I looked at the photograph he’d pointed out, and I feigned

boredom. But my heart was pounding so hard I could barely hear him. I wanted to pull the magazine up to within an inch of my nose and scrutinise it. This, I thought for the first time in my life, was excitement. "Keep them", I said maturely. "That's why I gave them to you. Totally boring."

My father nodded sagely and smiled at my mother as though to say, "You see, I told you there was no reason to panic."

"He'll grow up to be a sex maniac", I heard my mother complain after I'd gone to bed, and I wondered what that meant. Did it mean reading these magazines until I went blind? Or would I go crazy and travel the streets with a meat cleaver? Anything was possible, judging from my mother's tone. But as worried as I was, I shut my eyes and tried to recreate as many of the pictures as I could remember. They blurred into hazy images, but they never disappeared entirely. I had tasted something exhilarating, and I was hungry for more. And I hated myself for being such a goody two-shoes and giving the magazines up so readily.

* * *

Two members of our gang lived next door. They were twins — one girl and one boy. Danii and Daniel were the youngest of a large family. "Potential hoodlum", my aging aunt would say whenever she saw the girl. Danii had long blond hair and buck teeth, and as the only girl in our gang she had a rather special status, not hurt at all by my aunt's prediction. And she became more and more central with the on-set of puberty. The gang was a rather amorphous thing — three boys and Danii — although it also included Gilbert's little brother when it was convenient, and other members from the adjoining street when we needed to get a street hockey team together.

At about the time I discovered men's magazines, I also discovered my libido. I realised in some vague way that Danii was the closest thing I knew to a sex object, a phrase I'd misheard on television. I referred to her as a sex abject with all the seriousness of a doctor delivering a diagnosis. Gilbert nodded his head, happy for the information. We made our way to the local pool and sat in its shallows talking about sex. "It's a burden for her", he explained, "that's what Mum says. Women's lives are burdens. They have curses. So we have to respect her. And we have to kiss her a lot." Now it was my turn to nod agreement. I always enjoyed these moments best, when we could discard the frivolity of youth and discuss the meatier issues. "Yes", I agreed. "We have to kiss her."

I don't remember now how we thought this would lessen Danii's burden, but somehow, during that warm summer, anything to do with touching and contact seemed right. And so, when Danii made her appearance at the pool, we explained to her what we had in mind. She could see the logic of this, and relieving her burden momentarily, Gilbert and I took turns kissing her in the park. It wasn't easy. We negotiated for the first time the awkward angle of our heads, and the dangerous moment when teeth collided. Whoever wasn't kissing had to count. This was the trickiest part because, of course, you wanted to study your rival's technique, but if you did so you couldn't keep your eye on the wall clock across the street. In the end I won. I lasted longest without breathing. I even beat Danii because I heard her sucking air in from the corners of her puckered mouth at about the one minute mark. "That's cheating", I whispered to her confidentially, and she shrugged. "Doesn't count for girls. Girls can breathe because they have the burden", she said, remembering Gilbert's argument.

Walking home towards the end of the day we agreed that kissing wasn't very satisfactory. There was so much more to women, I explained in my learned way, detailing the photographs I had seen and pointing out that they were only two-dimensional. "What's that?" Gilbert asked. "It means made of glossy paper. We need to see the real thing." We looked at Danii. She stared at us without comment and kept walking. Perhaps we'd dealt with her burden enough for one day, I thought, and we let the subject drop.

* * *

Two days later it was time for our street fair and magic show. The eight or more kids who lived on our street looked forward to this event every year. Since the age of six Gilbert and I had pooled our resources — his basement and backyard, my chemistry set — and we put on a "tombola and pageant". The purpose of the event was financial. First the kids in the neighbourhood would pay us five cents each, and then they could play the assorted games we'd set up in the backyard. This included knocking down soda bottles, bobbing for apples, throwing a small bag of sand into a series of holes, and other taxing games.

Then, for an extra five cents, they could reassemble in the basement for the performance. Days before we had worked on our skits. Usually these consisted of brief, comic pantomimes. This year we'd expanded the production and Gilbert's six-year-old brother landed a part. The finale was a magic show, where I turned water

into wine. As a Catholic, I got a peculiar *frisson* from the performance. I knew that this was what the priest did every Sunday, and I was careful to execute the procedure with as much solemnity as possible. I dropped the chemicals into the liquid I had prepared and everyone applauded as it turned bright red. Then I put the glass down behind a canopy. I was meant to swap it for a glass of cordial concealed behind the cloth to prove that I'd made real wine. But I grabbed the wrong glass and had to smile as I swallowed a sip of the chemical concoction. Then I dropped a few more flakes into the brew and it went clear again. Even the priest, I felt reasonably certain, had never done that!

After the show Gilbert, Alan and myself counted our money. We sat in the solemn coolness of the basement and congratulated ourselves. One dollar. Our best year yet. As we talked about expanding the show, we heard a noise and looked up. Danii had wandered down the stairs and was standing coyly in the shadows. "The show's over", Gilbert said harshly, not wanting to share the glory. Danii just nodded and hovered around the door. He turned away in annoyance, and then changed his mind. He called her over. "If you want to stay here backstage you have to take your clothes off." She looked at us with a hurt expression, and I was about to protest, when I noticed her nod. I heard six-year-old Alan whimper, but I kept my eyes on Danii. My mouth was dry and my heart started to pound again, and I wondered if I was becoming a sex maniac. Was this what had happened in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*?

Gilbert was matter-of-fact. "All your clothes", he said. Danii didn't say a word. Then she took off her top and shorts, so that she was standing bare-chested, wearing only her underwear. Gilbert pointed at them and she took them off. "Can I have a soft drink?" she said, and Gilbert answered, "Only if we can kiss them". He pointed to her small, flat nipples, and then down at her bare mound. "One, two, three", he counted, pointing at each in turn. "Then you can have my soda." Danii didn't move. She was staring us down. "Who goes first?" she said. Without saying anything else, Gilbert stood and gave her a peck on each part of her body he had mentioned. I did the same, but barely remember doing it. Just that my head hurt from the pounding in my chest. "What about *him*?" Danii asked, pointing at Alan. Alan shook his head furiously. He was eying the door and Gilbert moved to block his path. "If he doesn't do it he'll blabber to my Mum." He grabbed Alan's arm and said, "If you want to be in the show next year, you better do it." Alan stared nervously, and then with a speed that surprised me, he pecked away at Danii's body and then fled the room. Danii put her clothes back on and grabbed Gilbert's drink.

What amazed me about Gilbert was that he never seemed to think about the

event again. He spoke to Danii as though nothing had changed. He went to the pool with her and he played on the monkey bars. But he never even tried to kiss her after that. I, on the other hand, became obsessed. I wondered how Gilbert could do what he did — could conceive of asking her to strip — and then forget it. I thought about it all the time. Even, in high school, when the class beauty had lent me a book of hers without realising she'd left an explicit note in it to her sister about what she'd done the night before with her boyfriend, I thought of Gilbert's tone. I fantasized about withholding the note. "If you want it, take your clothes off. Or I'll send it to your parents." In reality, of course, I handed it back, and dwelled on her deep blush as though she had temporarily been mine.

From the day I touched Danii's naked body I dreamed of doing it again.

* * *

In the backyard my father had built a small cubbyhouse for me. It had two small windows, was painted white and blue, and was fitted inside with chairs and tables. It became for a while a gathering place for the gang. One day, when Danii and her brother were over, she suggested that we should play punishments. I wasn't sure what she meant.

"You have to pull my pants down", she said, "and spank me."

I looked over at her brother. He didn't seem to object. Alan was sitting in the corner and had started his familiar whimper. But he didn't say a word. We grabbed some newspaper and taped it over the windows, and then shut the door. I turned my chair away from the table and Danii pulled her pants down and lay across my lap. "You have to put your hand in there", Daniel said, his voice cold and solid like a stone. "Between hits. That's how punishments work", he said sharply. "What are you waiting for?" As I started to spank her the door opened and my father, smiling jovially, looked in. "How's the gang today...?" he said, before swallowing his words. Danii leapt off me and pulled her pants up. He stood back and pointed angrily towards their house. "Get out!" he bellowed, "I won't have that behaviour here." Alan, miraculously, squeezed past everyone and headed home first in a display of speed which became his trademark in later years. He was quickly followed by Danii and Daniel.

I sat there looking up at my father, convinced that he now thought me a sex maniac. "Take the newspapers off the windows and come in the house", he said,

before turning and shutting the door. I was sent to my room early and nothing else was said. Somehow it was worse than being yelled at. In the morning my father took me aside and told me, in his serious voice, "You don't want people to think bad of you. That sort of behaviour, it's just not right. Do you understand?"

I nodded, relieved that that was all there was to it. Later in the week, when I met Danii again, we were too shy to look at each other. "What did he say?" she asked me, staring at her feet. "Did he give you punishments?" I shook my head and told her what my father had said. "You're lucky", she whispered. "My father always gives me punishments."

"It's the woman's burden", I told her seriously, remembering Gilbert's theory. She started to cry. "Then I don't want to be a girl any more", she whispered. I gave her a hug and we sat on the wall near the swimming pool. It was moving towards autumn and the pool was empty. It was already too cold to sit around without a jacket. I could hear her sobbing, but I didn't know what else to do. After a time she calmed down and wiped her eyes. "Besides", she said, as though there hadn't been a break in our conversation, "sometimes Daniel gets punishments too. So it's not just girls. But it's mostly me."

I looked up along the rough concrete of the swimming pool, and at the lion's head statue and its stone mouth, through which the water poured. Once I'd scooped a dead bee from the water just beneath the spout. I pocketed it and walked away, remembering how I had watched it struggle for what seemed to be hours, wanting to rescue it, but too afraid to touch. Later, on the swings, I thrust my hand into my jacket and pulled the insect out to show Gilbert. When we looked into my palm the bee was twisting lethargically. I screamed and dropped it in the sand, and then I stomped on it. I was so angry it was beyond description. My foot just kept pounding the insect until there was virtually nothing left of it except my hatred and fear.

That was how I felt as I held Danii's hand, in the shadows of the change room. But I didn't know what I was angry about. I remembered my uncle, once, grabbing my fingers and twisting them back until I thought they would break. I hated the way he had got to me in the first place, with his voice of reason and maturity. "Come here a minute, boy. I want to teach you something." And then he'd grabbed my fingers. "You see, don't ever let anyone do this to you. There's no way to get out of it." I thought of smashing my knee in his groin the way we did in the schoolyard whenever someone was stupid enough to try this. But he was an adult; he was my godfather and my mother was in the other room. "Say uncle", he said, rolling his tongue across his lips and pulling me towards him, forcing me down. But I wouldn't

let him win. I looked into his eyes which had turned glassy and distant. "Say it, boy!" He pushed my face into his groin just by twisting my fingers, and it wasn't until I heard my mother saying, in her clear, light voice, "For God's sake, Drew, don't hurt him", that he let go. I straightened up, and I could tell he was annoyed that I hadn't said a word. "Next time, boy", he said cryptically, and I had nothing to say. But the rage I felt was choking me.

Danii and I walked up along the highway until we got to the train tracks and then followed them back towards our place. We picked up pebbles and placed them on the track like little rows of soldiers. Eventually we got to the spot where Michael had given me his magazines. Michael who wagged school virtually every day; who showed up in class with dark purple bruises on his face like extraordinary flowers. He would send me into his local store because even at ten years old he looked too mean to be trusted. I used to ask for matches "for my mother", and they'd give me the matchbook without question. And then I'd pass them on to Michael.

Only once did someone refuse me. A short, squat woman behind the counter stared and said, "You're lying". I remember I was so outraged that she had said that that I forgot I really was lying. I was on the verge of asking her to call my mother to confirm it when the woman's husband, who usually served me, entered from the back of the shop. "Hey, how's your Mom?" he said, automatically flicking me a matchbook. I stared at the woman with eyes to kill — such a sense of indignation even in the face of falsehood. I marched out of the store triumphantly, ignoring the argument that was breaking out behind me. I heard her say, "If it was really for his mother he wouldn't have said, 'It's for my mother'. Not without me asking first. Sometimes you're so gullible."

We sat down on the tracks and watched the long tall grass bend in the wind. Danii picked up a handful of pebbles and threw them at a No Parking sign. "I hate this place", she said. "There's nothing to do."

"There's school", I said. "That's something."

She shook her head. "No. My father says I have to stay home to clean up 'cause Mum goes to work. But mostly all we do is punishments. So I'm always wagging."

We sat there in the growing darkness. Once we felt the rumbling of the tracks and retreated down the gravel bank. We watched the train fly past us, crushing our pebbled soldiers beneath its lethal wheels. We stood with our hands pressed over our ears until the train was long gone.

"Look", Danii said to me. She pointed at her chest. I couldn't see anything. "Look!" I moved in closer but I didn't know what I was looking for. She let out an

exasperated breath. "My breasts", she said. "I'm starting to grow breasts." She took my finger and poked herself firmly on the chest. "See." I nodded even though I couldn't see a thing. "Even my Dad says I'm becoming a woman now."

I didn't know what to say. She seemed to be expecting me to make a comment. I shrugged. "You're very ... three-dimensional", I said at last. She smiled then, radiantly. As we walked home that night we felt as though we'd exchanged an important secret. We let our fingers tangle together until we got to our block and then slowly moved apart. It was the beginning of a distance between us that I never understood. I longed to be with her, but she became increasingly removed, rarely accompanying her brother to our gang meetings. And then she virtually disappeared. Sometimes you could see her behind the curtains of the livingroom staring out into the street. If you caught her eye the curtain would float down, but its effect was like a slamming door, cutting her off. And somehow I wasn't surprised, years later, when I saw her bundled into a car and driven away. Her stomach, it seemed to me, had grown enormously, and I remember thinking how extraordinary it was that she could ever have grown so fat.

"She's gone to live with my aunt", Daniel explained when I quizzed him about it the next day, "Up north".

"Where?" I said, studying his puffy face, the bruises not unlike Michael's purple garden. "When will she be back?"

Daniel shrugged. "It's a secret", he said. "But Mum says she deserves it." And then he walked away.

REVIEWS

Gail Jones, *Fetish Lives*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 178 pp. \$16.95.

It used to be said of certain writers, that he, and it usually was he, was a novelist's novelist. A rather curious thing to say and its meaning not clear, I thought, but reading Gail Jones brought it back to me. She's a short story writer's short story writer, I said to myself. (A short storyteller's short storyteller? And, by way of an aside, should we be considering that this difficulty in naming the form is indicative of a much larger difficulty with the genre?)

What I mean by the description is an indication of the way in which she practises her craft, which is of interest not just to people who read stories but especially to those who write them, a sense of things to be learned. There's something quintessential to the form in her work, which at the same time extends, redefines, questions, even threatens it. I find myself, as a practitioner, enchanted and disturbed by her writing, and inspired to go and do some of my own, but in a completely different mode.

Hers is risk-taking writing, and one of the things it risks is suggested

in a set of ugly and heavily alliterative words with endings that hiss: *pompousness*, *pretentiousness*, *preciousness*. This is what makes readers catch their breath; this writing is so dangerous, she could so easily fall off her wire and into that hissing pit, but she doesn't. She has too much skill, too much control for that; it's a matter for marvelling. In fact she takes one of those poisonous words and makes a virtue of it, turns it from a procreative term into one with positive meanings. Her work becomes precious, in all the good senses of the term, at the same time as it is about the holding or the making of things precious.

Part of this is a matter of vocabulary. Again I am approaching this through my own practice, which tends to the paring down, the avoiding of the latinate, the florid words. Jones does the very opposite, she embraces these things. It's as though she wants to open her prose to every word in the language; the more multisyllabled, the more mellifluous, the more desirable they are. Opulence becomes almost a given. She goes beyond offering an embarrassment of riches, to making us expect such rampant largesse.

So it happens that her writing is about language itself. Habitually language represents: concrete objects, abstract ideas. Evidently Jones' does too. But it's also itself, it's about itself.

What we are thinking about when we read Jones is the words she uses, always. Consider this piece, from a story called 'Resuscitating Proust', which begins with "the image, eidetic, of a body suspended in water." It is

the body, in 1900, of Marcel Proust, French novelist *extraordinaire* of dilatory and arduous prose, French novelist of idiosyncratic and omniretrievable memory, of transposed sensations, of multidimensional desirings, of a neuroticism fanned open — flick! see its design! — into a fluttering ostentation. It is a body particular. It is a body that, even thus saturated, obliges our attention.

Now that is certainly about something and one of the reasons I chose it is because it is about a writer and writing and it's always revealing to read other writers on this subject, but it's also demanding that we look at the words as themselves, as amazing objects, that we examine and consider them, taste them in our mouths, roll them round with out tongues. (Try putting that extract through the computer's spell-check; mine has learned a lot of new words from this review.)

Language is also a game, full of play: puns, alliterations, echoes, rhymes, paradoxes, ambiguities. And of course a straightforward

connoisseurship of curious words; their author enjoys them as an ornithologist the sighting of rare birds. With odd joyfully bathetic swoops into the vernacular.

I have a theory that what makes us read and keep reading certain writers is their particular rhythm which catches us up and carries us along with them; this rhythm is why we like some books and not others, and perhaps the books we consider great are so because a lot of us are enchanted by them in this way. This is another area where Jones is a risk taker; she can write wonderfully charming and seductive rhythms but she doesn't always choose to; sometimes she makes it hard for us, makes us need to persevere to catch the subtlety and the import of the prose's movement.

To an extent this is the nature of short stories. They are supposed to be easy to read, small bites suitable for our busy lifestyles, a quick little snack because we haven't got time for the real meal of the novel. This is an entirely false view. Short stories are hard work. They begin before the first words and go on for long after the last, they demand that the writer work at what they are about in the same way that poetry does. Gail Jones' prose is more poetic than many poets' verse, but that's not what I mean; I'm talking about the participation in eliciting its

meanings that is demanded of the reader. A novel is likely to be a holiday, in comparison, of the kind where you can lie back and let it happen to you.

Jones' narratives aren't interested in plots, though they do have a great many stories embedded in them. What they are usually about is desire. Maybe all literature is, maybe all art; it is desire which makes us human and which we long to see expressed in forms that delight or frighten or enlighten us. Most of these stories are derivations, they take an historical event, sometimes literary-historical, and turn it into a contemplation of Jones' own purposes, from an impulsion of her own fierce intellect. Chekhov visiting Ceylon. Eleanor Marx reading and then translating Madame Bovary, choosing to kill herself by the same terrible means. Teresa the Elvis impersonator with her hair in 'a teased boofy arc like a cat.' Mata Hari 'the false Asia that every man wanted: feminine, collectable, brazenly voluptuous'. Freud giving Virginia Woolf a narcissus. The chosen stories are wonderful in their own right, but their point is not the pleasure of repeating them, although that is real; they are there to tell us about art and life.

Marion Halligan

Motherlode edited by Stephanie Holt and Maryanne Lynch Sybylla
Feminist Press, 220 pp, \$19.95.

All plots end in death. So writes Marion Campbell quoting Don DeLillo in her essay 'Spectacular Motherhood', the entry point to an anthology of writing about mothers, mothering, both literal and metaphorical. *Motherlode* ranges widely, and will (hopefully) be shocking at times as the selected writers track around different ways of thinking through ideas of mother, of bodily presences and societal limits, of joyous celebration and new definitions. Give a project boundaries like this one — the very idea of mother — and watch the sparks fly. Trust me. And every woman published here is either a mother or a daughter.

Sybylla Press, working as a collective, has been making good books, usually challenging ones, since 1976, and should be marked out for attention more often than it is. Their work covers the risky side of female expression, of current concerns and ancient matters. Feminist publishers so often do the groundwork for the rest of the market: if you don't believe me look at the work produced by presses such as Virago and Women's Press in England since the seventies for the spaces they open up in both

form and content, the boundaries they bend in approaches to autobiographical writing, popular history, feminist theory outside of the academic realm. Important stuff that is taken up much later by mainstream as well as academic publishing.

To this latest book, then, *Motherlode*. Not just about mummies and babies, either, but as the words on the cover suggest is inclusive of motherships, mother tongues, motherlands, m/others, and even motherboards (we all know about them, don't we?). A swingingly poetic introduction sets the tone for the playfulness within, with metaphors of digging and excavating, of exploring possibilities, of the gigantic, all-consuming interest in the subject.

It is, as with almost every anthology I have ever read, an uneven selection. And that's alright, because you don't have to like everything or even read it all. Pillage the contents for intriguing titles and favourite writers, and go for it. For me there were many pleasures: a recognition of how much good work is being made currently in Australia through hybrid elements. A mixing of forms, a breaking down of the niceties and codes between different expression. In *Motherlode* there is work made for this project but there is also extant work made in the essay form, the theoretical essay form,

as work for performance, fiction and poetry, as politics/propaganda. Whimsy and as serious as your life. I like this span of voices.

Some of the delights are finding published versions of works I have encountered and admired elsewhere. They include the essay by Marion Campbell that mixes up the personal and the political, the mythic and deeply felt and does it with her usual extraordinary grasp of the stretchability and playful potential of language. And a work by dancer/performer Deborah Pollard entitled "Mother Tongue Interference" that I saw a version of on stage in 1995. An essay by Zoe Sofoulis, previously published in 1990, about consumerist flourishes and postmodernism. And, most excitingly for me, selections from the script of Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman's performance piece *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, seen across Australia in 1995/6. A remarkable work, a one-woman piece, of identity and family, of mourning and recoveries.

These familiar works and the array of writers I actively admire made me a very good reader. Open, and generous. It's fine, too, to get angry with the irreverent work contained in here. It is, after all, meant to provoke. Such a loaded space this area of motherhood. So much still sacred, so

much invested, so hard to cut through the institutions and the personal pain of being mother or daughter (or son) and work out new ways forward. For this I am happy for such unevenness, that mix of funny and sad, reverent and otherwise. Some deep expression.

As the book's producers write, "mother as noun, appendage and agenda is mined for meaning in the context of contemporary Australian society." Books like these, made under duress and often scraped together (this one over a four year gestation) with scant resources and on kitchen tables, should be looked at at the very least for their commitment and their passion, for their catching together of ideas and a purpose.

Terri-ann White

Gordon Matthews, *An Australian Son*, William Heinemann, 230 pp. \$19.95.

When I read *An Australian Son* by Gordon Matthews, I became drawn in by its intensity and tried to consider the plot in terms of a novel: an adopted child grows up happily in his well-adjusted family until the bubble is burst by racist taunts of 'Abo' from his fellow students at a Melbourne

private school. Enter a benevolent university academic who encourages the searching Gordon to acknowledge his Aboriginal identity, a new identity which becomes connected to a diplomatic passport and a blossoming career in the foreign service. But Gordon discovers that his Aboriginality is in fact without foundation. As the plot unfolds, there are lies told and mysteries solved, international flights and exotic locations, drinks with newly-discovered brothers in mid-western bars, and a tempest of emotions to keep even the over-titillated turning the pages. It's the kind of plot which makes even the teratologies of soap opera look tediously plausible. Fortunately, though, this is the stuff of autobiography. The look-you-in-the-eye photograph on the cover is honesty itself while hinting at the racial ambiguity of the author. Sounding like a recommendation from Jill Kitson, the line beneath the photograph that this is 'an extraordinary true story' is all the support that the literarily naive reader could possibly require.

A couple of years ago Robert Dessaix wrote *A Mother's Disgrace* which recalls his own life as an adopted child and the search for his natural mother. Unlike the overtly disingenuous Dessaix, who urges at

the close of his book, 'I have told you the truth. Now trust me', Matthews has written an unsophisticated narrative. In contrast with Dessaix's less hurried recollections, Matthews' adventures carry the narrative at an energetic pace and are all the more evocative for being unadorned. The situations in which Matthews finds himself are so emotionally intense that it is very difficult not to render them banal through clichés and over-statements, to which he occasionally succumbs.

The story that Matthews has to tell makes captivating reading. After embarking on a successful career as a diplomat, Matthews decides that the time has come to verify his Aboriginal identity. The shock that he is not Aboriginal is followed by the discovery that his natural mother and father had married a couple of years after his birth and had emigrated to the United States. Matthews' reluctance to uncover his origins turns to terror as he arrives in Iowa to meet his natural parents for the first time:

Suddenly I could make out the airport, then the silhouette of the terminal, its lights dancing across the tarmac. It was difficult to believe they were waiting inside, these people I had never met. The parents I had never known.

Now escape was impossible. My sense of self began to disintegrate. I was about to be changed irrevocably and I knew it. No way to reverse the aircraft and thrust upwards again into the wintry night. Finally I was about the find out where I had come from; to meet the two individuals who had given me life. (144)

The imbroglio of the extraordinary predicament facing Matthews is palpable. Having crossed the globe to meet his parents for the first time, Matthews is only too aware of the peculiarity of his situation: "It seemed ludicrous that now, as a direct result of my racial problem, I found myself driving through rural Iowa, preparing to explain to my natural parents the story of their 'Aboriginal son'. I couldn't imagine anything more bizarre" (148).

His family, he discovers, lives in "quintessential middle America" and their house looks like every other in the street with "scarcely a blade of grass out of place". Inside, Matthews is given his very own housekey complete with a leather and gold ring bearing his initial, and there is a photograph of himself displayed in the bedroom of the two people who had been strangers to him only a few hours before. In an excruciating scene which captures the tensions which are to

define their relationship, his mother urges her husband and son, "Why don't you two guys give each other a hug? [...] You haven't had the chance yet" (149).

As Matthews' narrative develops, many equally worthy stories are told along the way. Jurra, an Aboriginal friend who grew up on the mission at Wreck Bay on the New South Wales coast, describes how the children would frequently hide in the nearby hills for fear of being taken from their parents. Another Aboriginal friend, Neville, recalls the miseries of his childhood and the fascism of his foster parents. Neville also describes "his joy when at eighteen years of age he finally met his mother [only five years before her death] who had pleaded with the authorities for more than a decade and a half for his return" (98). Margaret, who helps Matthew to find his natural parents, has her own traumatic tale of adoption to tell. Her adoptive parents gave preferential treatment to their two natural children while Margaret and her adoptive sister were forced to leave school and join the workforce. Finding her own mother is a turning point in Margaret's life: "After I first spoke to my mother I felt reborn. I could lift my head up and tell people who I was" (118).

An Australian Son is also about silence. Gradually it becomes clear

that the sudden arrival of another child has created tensions for which neither Matthews nor his natural parents were prepared. Despite the love and attention which Matthews receives, his newly acquired parents and siblings are in no rush to publicly acknowledge their new relation. Their reticence is part of the cause of the antagonism which develops between Matthews and his natural parents. While the initial contact with his parents is a success, Matthews realises on his flight back to Australia that "something had gone wrong", that "I had not been as open and generous emotionally with my mother as I had wanted or she had hoped" (196). As Matthews confesses to his natural parents soon after their first meeting, his search for them was motivated predominantly by questions of race. Filled with guilt and confusion, he too is unable to be reconciled.

An Australian Son is unpretentious and convincing. It is a demonstration of the ramifications of the obsolescent moral prejudices of the fifties and the genocidal policies of Aboriginal assimilation adopted by this country. More importantly, these issues are seen not as history but as concerns indissoluble from all Australians living today.

Tim Bowers

Bruce L. Russell, *Jacob's Air*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 288 pp., \$16.95.

That night I dreamt I was God. I took a kind of managerial approach to heaven, which looked something like Henry's bed with an infinity effect... The ladder stretched interminably down to a street scene where some earthlings moved about like fruit-flies. Climbing up the ladder was Jacob, wearing a kind of gas mask... I had the feeling he was going to fall off, I couldn't bear it, I had to turn away. When I turned back, he had the mask off and he had Henry by the heel. Henry looked scared and Jacob had become a kind of devil (42-43).

Jacob's Air by Bruce L. Russell, is an enjoyable and mostly satisfying novel. As a tale it is earthy, simple and at times, playful. It is the story of Glenys Waghorne, a twenty-seven year old reforming alcoholic and self-confessed "psychochondriac", who moves in to Octavia, a decaying bungalow on Glebe Point Road tenanted by the Metcalfe brothers. The novel begins with Glenys reinventing herself as Delmarie Fairbridge, an aspiring artist. It is 1984, "the year everyone was dreading — Orwell and all that", and Deli believes that she has found the

stability necessary to complete her recovery and satisfy her craving "to have the things happy normals have". In this frame of mind she moves in with Henry and Jacob, whom she describes as "unusual, middle-class boys, who'd come down a peg or two and had turned their poverty into an adventure" (17).

The action takes place in Glebe, a bohemian, inner city suburb of Sydney. Russell does full justice to the suburb and its eclectic community, depicting it as a place which stimulates and challenges its inhabitants, who respond in their own peculiar ways. Here, for example, we encounter Theresa, an earth-mother with "spangly suspenders and no knickers" and a husband and twins waiting for her at home. Then there is Basiewski, Deli's counsellor and confidante and Alan, her lover, as well as Ros and her "sizzling" sister Trish, and Jake and Ada Metcalfe. In the background there is also the mysterious Rosalie, Henry and Jacob's sister who went to Poona five years ago to discover herself and hasn't been seen since. Deli finds herself entangled in the problems of her new friends and acquaintances, and in this context she begins to unravel the complex and ultimately tragic relationship between Henry and Jacob.

The novel attempts to move

subtly beyond the maze of streets and trendy cafes which frame the characters' daily lives. In particular, it challenges Henry's "glittering vision" of communal living and Octavia as a sort of "Camelot in Glebe". In so doing, it focuses on the relationship between the Metcalfe brothers, the nature of which is suggested by the print of Gauguin's *Children Wrestling* on the novel's front cover. Henry and Jacob have spent their lives psychologically wrestling and the narrative centres on this, their final contest. Russell draws such a fine line between love and hate and between the mentality of the victim and his persecutor, that often the reader is unable to determine to which brother these terms apply. Perhaps predictably, questions of identity, time and place loom large. How have Henry, Jacob and Deli been shaped by past and present relationships with family and friends? We have glimpses of them at other times and in other places; Henry reading Erich Fromm in Mumbullah, Deli previous to Alcoholics Anonymous, Jacob carefree in London and San Francisco. As the narrative proceeds each is forced to re-evaluate himself/herself. During these moments we see them as they see themselves and also as they are seen by each other. However, the question of what the protagonists are really like is

left unanswered and the reader is asked to contemplate its validity in the first place.

Russell's writing is simple and readily accessible. It effectively conveys the protagonists' constant struggles to make ends meet, financially as well as emotionally. The rhythm of their days has been determined by outside forces, to which they must respond as best they can. The return of Jacob's asthma is just such a response to a situation he perceives as inevitable and inescapable. After all, as Basiewski has told Deli, asthma is a matter of trust: "You [can] breathe in all right, but once you [have] your lungs full, you [don't] want to let it go. You can never be sure you'll get a chance to take another breath" (158). In this way, Jacob's increasingly desperate gasps for fresh air parallel his efforts to define himself and establish his place within the framework of life with Henry and Deli at Octavia in 1984. Literally and metaphorically, his is a quest for "air" and "space".

Several of Russell's other protagonists are also plagued by uncertainties, which seem to prevent them from belonging anywhere for any length of time. This notion of transience is reinforced by the novel's circular structure. So, although the final chapters leave the reader with a

sense of hope for Deli's immediate future, there is also an uneasiness springing from the knowledge that, in the long run, the problems and conflicts embodied by the Metcalfe brothers' relationship can never really be resolved. They are at the centre of too many other lives; lives lived beyond the written text.

Ultimately, *Jacob's Air* is a well-crafted and eminently readable novel, which depicts believable characters reacting to the stresses and strains of contemporary living. In their apparently commonplace lives we find vibrant colours and a fineness of detail reminiscent of Gauguin's painting, *Children Wrestling*, in which the brothers engage in an embrace that could be tender or threatening or both. In effect, Henry and Jacob are these brothers and the tension of their relationship reverberates throughout the novel, touching all who come in contact with it. Not surprisingly, the final chapters resonate with the pain and damage suffered by Deli during her time at Octavia. However, we also see Jacob's influence on her as a source of inspiration for her most recent artwork, in which she deals with the question of both his and her own identity. In this there are echoes of her earlier comment to him that "maybe all these people [around us] are living as artistically as your precious

Gauguin. Maybe I should be painting them instead of houses. Maybe we're artists too, Jacob" (67). Such, then, is the direction of the novel. If Deli and Jacob are artists, each is also the other's work of art. In their distinctive ways they blend with and emerge from the shadow of Henry and Jacob's brotherly conflict.

Angeline O'Neill

Rod Mengham, *Unsung/New & Selected Poems*, Folio/Salt, 108 pp \$16.95.

Rod Mengham, a Cambridge UK poet, is part of what is being promoted as the British avant garde. Although the poets grouped together under that loosely useful term would probably not use it, it is a practical cover-all for a new experimental field of work that is only now becoming known in Australia. If Iain Sinclair's *Conductors of Chaos* is a fair guide, as the publisher of *Equipage* Mengham is one of several pamphlet publishers who have played an important part in encouraging and sustaining the new British writing that, but for some support from Paladin, has remained far removed from the publishing mainstream. The emerg-

ence of this work is a welcome relief from the stultifying conservatism of the New Generation poets and their promoters.

Reviewing Mengham's *Unsung* presents me with several problems. I am uncomfortable with the pretension of being able to assess his work within its context as I would have to rely on the very limited contextual material available to me in John Kinsella's magazine *Salt* and a few other accessible articles and reviews. Also, I feel that the urge to 'theorise' about this type of work is very strong, excessively so.

What interested me about this work was that, despite the difficulty of 'comprehension' (for those more speculative readers, the difficulty of finding its 'reading frames' or 'mental models'), I found that its conventions were persistent. If I may use a term that in the post-Structuralist situation now seems redundant, the poet's voice is very much that of the English poetic tradition. Much of Mengham's linguistic subversion depends on an understanding of the English Tradition of poetry reading in which a moderating voice emphasises or de-emphasises the 'connotations' of words and consequently regulates the energy of the convention-subversion dichotomy. This surprised me because I was expecting Mengham's manip-

ulation of linguistic conventions to undo the cohesion of voice, to unstring a generic, moderating self.

Since that wasn't the case, my approach to reading the poems changed. Rather than paying too much attention to my urge to interpret (to in- and de-scribe) 'meaning', I found myself reading for the dynamic of the voice and the mood of the imagery. This was more absorbing: the work was reminding me less of other poetry, English or post-war European, and more of other arts. The unfolding of the sentences, the particular monochromatic tone reminded me of Beckett. The musicality, detached and existential, brought to mind certain moments in works by Xenakis. And some of its imagery had me recalling the early installations of the Pole Miroslaw Balka.

These impressions made me curious about that Old Bogey Man, authorial intention. It may be reasonable to characterise Mengham's poems as "motivated but indeterminate", as the critic Anthony Mellors has the work of that other Cambridge poet J.H. Prynne, but as I found that several of Mengham's later poems partly function as commentaries, perhaps even statements, on poetics. I enjoyed tracing relationships between his comments.

How can the reader not take the

bait when it is written:

... 'Someone shine a torch on
the elemental night; not the pin
but the web, you go first
in the smokeless halls of Kiefer'.
('Neutrinos')

The synthesis of humour and seriousness is striking. The Teutonic *gravitas* of Anselm Kiefer's monumental paintings of The Shoah, its Germanic haunting, is undone by the ironic role played by the voice, the poet seemingly becoming (for want of a better word) 'a deconstructor'. Elsewhere it is written:

For the ballad of normal supply
which ends in the whirling
streams
of delegation, read the meter:
I have no trick(s) up my
sleeve(s) ...
('Dogs on Sticks')

Or:

I want no thing or
tongue with no intention
you can graft... ('Kobro')

And:

Your incredible shrinking
language
has no zero. I still exist
the errand-boy in jeopardy;
at midnight charges cease.
('31/12/92')

The closer I looked for the Old Bogey the more surprised I was in its presence. In fact my initial trepidation regarding Mengham's vanguardism has been almost entirely displaced by an appreciation of its heritage and an understanding of its situation within western European history. I can see that the unsung of the volume's title is engaged in an aesthetic project not unlike the philosophic projection of Derrida. I can also see that the heritage within which Mengham's work is embedded is very specific, and this causes his stance to be one insightful to observe but, for non-Europeans, one difficult to follow.

John Mateer

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