

Victoria University

*WHO AM I AND WHY?*

– *PRESSURES ON THE WRITING SELF*

by

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A thesis

submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy.

Department of Communication, Language and Cultural Studies

Victoria University

March 2004

FTS THESIS  
A828.409 SMI  
30001008090864  
Smith, Gary (Gary Francis)  
Who am I and why? :  
pressures on the writing  
self

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Wendy, whose omnipresent love, patience and understanding were the warm gardenbeds in which both writer and writing could winter and spring.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the postgraduate department of Victoria University for accepting my candidature and granting me the scholarship that made this project possible.

I am especially indebted to my principal supervisor, Professor John McLaren, for his invaluable advice and assistance in all aspects of the thesis, and for his patience and persistence in working through some of the more problematic stages of this PhD project.

Thanks also go to my co-supervisor, Doctor Ian Syson for his assistance and advice when I needed it, and to Judith Rodriguez for helpful conversations.

I would also like to thank those who've helped me keep my personal equilibrium – sometimes with advice and feedback on poems and stories, but mostly for their friendship and encouragement at tougher moments – thank you Max & Peg, Patrick & Gill, Jo, Mary.

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## Abstract

This PhD thesis, entitled *Who Am I, and Why? (WAW)* comprises a creative component, *Snapshots of Broken Things (SNAPSHOTS)*: a collection of poetry and short prose fiction amounting to 70 percent of the thesis, plus a critical and exegetical study of 30,000 words which represents a concurrent and retrospective analysis and reflection of the creative work in relation to the central research questions, plus a literary-critical study of issues of identity and function pertaining to writers of literary fiction and poetry.

The broad thematic concerns for the subject matter of *SNAPSHOTS* are personal and societal notions of identity: perceptions regarding the roles and functions of individuals within their families and communities; and the power structures, gender politics and social interrelationships inherent in these notions. In this regard *SNAPSHOTS* echoes the issues and concerns of the critical study, whilst the *processes* of its writing (detailed in a series of essays) serve as a major focus for investigation of the research questions regarding the function and identity of the writer.

# Section 1

## *Introduction*

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## Outline

Some explanation regarding the symbiotic relationship existing between *SNAPSHOTS* and *WAW* will be helpful. Though the nature of functionality and identity for characters portrayed in *SNAPSHOTS* and the issues therein being investigated in a fictional\poetic way are not identical to those of the identity and functionality of the writers under investigation in *WAW*, they are complementary aspects of the same thematic concern. The second, crucial function for *SNAPSHOTS* is that it serves as a creative artefact whose processes of formation, and their effects, are integral to the critical exploration, through *WAW*, of the research questions for the thesis.

*SNAPSHOTS* explores a range of characters in the context of their notions of self-identity, and the way their families and societies\communities identify them in terms of their status and functionality.

In a formative sense it's important to understand differences in the ways that different genres set about developing a specific thematic concern. A novelist's approach is generally to take a specific time, place, set of characters etc., and to create a single idiom or narrative entity through which the theme will be carried, explored and revealed. It is therefore both logical and prudent for novelists to spend a great deal of time establishing main characters, plot events and so on, and to do a chapter breakdown and plot development plan before proceeding to write the novel.

But poets and short story writers need to approach this task of thematic exploration (through a novel length collection) very differently. My project works to present a range of stories and poems that explore various situations and characters in a series of self-contained (though thematically linked) entities whose aspects will cohere to reveal the thematic concerns, and engage the reader with them by virtue of the variety of thematic instances they offer.

Two excellent examples of this particular model are Tim Winton's collection, *Scission* (Penguin Books, 1985), and Raymond Carver's, *Cathedral* (Vintage Books, 1984). The first contains a range of stories in which the relationships of characters are marked by physical and emotional violence and are revealed as having sharp edges of tension that disturb, disrupt and unbalance their lives. The main concern of *Cathedral* is the exploration of dysfunctional, working class males dealing with the problems of poverty, alcoholism, and so on. Again, slightly different aspects of the theme are carried through the collection by different characters in different situations and dilemmas.

Emerging from this, and with a firm focus on my thematic concerns, the characters comprise female and male (adult and child) protagonists and antagonists from a variety of familial, racial, social, political and religious backgrounds and situations. The settings in which these characters play out the various problematic aspects of their personal and social function\identity is diverse, but always converges on the thematic concerns. In light of my own origins, background and experiences the majority, though not all of the creative pieces have taken on an Australian context. With a view to giving the best expression to my theme, and in trying to demonstrate the universal nature of the effects

of perceptions of identity\function, thinking in terms of national boundaries became a restricting factor.

The theoretical exegesis, *WAW* explores notions of a writer's identity and function in both a personal and social context. This includes analysis of the nature and effects of expectations that critics, readers and writers themselves have regarding these notions of writerly functions and sense of identity. The investigations will centre on the pressures encountered by a writer addressing issues such as his or her responsibilities, morality, ethics and the attitudes that in turn inform and shape the nature of the writing.

Though a wealth of opinion has been articulated by critics and theorists regarding perceptions and expectations of a writer's role and function within literary fiction and poetry, my initial research indicates very little has been done to assess or explore the *effects* of these expectations upon both the person *in the act* of writing (the writer) and the writer when *not in the act* of writing (the person) – expectations that can then affect what a writer *chooses to write* (subject matter, themes, character types, etc) and the ways in which a writer goes about exploring and revealing that subject matter.

Through *WAW*, I believe that the revelation and analysis of these expectations and their effects contributes to a greater understanding by writers, writing students, critics and readers, of the tensions involved for writers, and thereby encourages an environment that maximises unselfconsciousness and a freedom of creative expression<sup>1</sup> in which

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst appreciating the ambiguities of this term in light of modern literary theory – such as the post-structuralist notion on the arbitrary nature of the sign, and contending views of the role of

writers can render their perceptions of subject matter as accurately as possible.

*WAW* also researches the issues in the context of incidents, both historical and contemporary, where writers have been observed to be influenced by the perceptions and expectations of function\identity, or where writers themselves have indicated an awareness of these tensions that in turn have impacted upon their writing in ways that can be identified as either positive or negative.

Throughout the history of literature expectations regarding the function and role of poets and writers of literary fiction have been defined and redefined. Comment, opinion and judgment have come from specific communities of readers, critics, theorists, and from writers themselves and have reflected or responded to particular agendas of literary movements plus a variety of contemporary social and\or political mores. My research is an attempt to feed into the debate and broaden the knowledge of these issues by articulating and analysing the *effects* of these imposed and self imposed expectations; the ways in which they contribute to shaping the identity of the *writer*, the tensions that are created for the *person* who houses the writer and, ultimately, the *writing* that is produced.

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the author in 'creative expression' – this project, focusing as it does upon the practicalities of creative writing processes rather than theories of literature, uses the term to relate to the notion of a writer being able to work in an environment that minimizes the pressures that inhibit\disuade\disallow a writer to produce work that the writer considers paramount to her\his function and identity as a writer. Impacting issues include censorship (external and self, subtle and overt\official); ideas of political correctness whereby ideas\expressions that may be offensive to certain individuals or sections of society are nonetheless deemed necessary by the writer (in terms perhaps of a faithful character portrayal), for the writing.

The thesis as a whole attempts to contribute to the knowledge on these issues within the creative writing, cultural studies and literature studies disciplines. Creative writing, (in this instance short literary fiction and poetry) is a powerful medium through which writers, readers and society can explore, understand and generate debate surrounding the effects on people's lives of imposed or self imposed notions of identity and function, both on a personal and social level. By virtue of whatever skill and originality I possess as a writer, my creative component contributes to the knowledge of these issues by portraying a diverse and stimulating range of their occurrences. The creative work also contributes to the knowledge of stylistics by striving toward imaginative and fresh approaches to form so that the strongest, most affirmative and original exposition of subject matter becomes manifest.

A second and equally important function for the creative work is to complement the critical study as it investigates the effects of notions of personal identity and function on writers themselves. By utilising *SNAPSHOTS* as an object for detailed processive analysis, the critical study contributes significantly to the knowledge of issues to the benefit of both the literature studies and creative writing disciplines.

From a cultural politics perspective the question: how faithfully and accurately will the writer portray the lives, functions and identities of those within a given society? is of vital significance if that society is to fully understand, acknowledge, debate and effect change to those aspects of its living that prevent or disrupt the equality, harmony and wellbeing of its citizens. In achieving these ends an environment that understands the pressures on the writer and encourages freedom of expression, is paramount. It is hoped this detailed, first-hand reflection

and analysis of these tensions associated with notions of the identity\self identity and functionality (of the writer) will assist significantly in achieving this aim.

## **Tensions for the writer**

What happens when we do acknowledge a connection between the means and ends of writing, when the two meet in a particular appearance? The next questions tumble out, elbowing each other for place, the high-minded jostling the venial: What good or harm does the act accomplish? Who is responsible? Who benefits? Is their intention? Or should we speak rather of cause? What constitutes virtue (if it is not only the “just” word)? And sin (original or not)? There emerges, in short, as for any other declaration of agency, ethics – the nature of what should be against the reality of what is. Observed from this perspective, the writer’s self is always in motion, advancing on the “other” (that is, the reader), affecting that other for good or ill, rightly or wrongly. Writing... if it does not begin with this concern, must sooner or later come to it. (Lang, 1991, p 3)

For a writer, tension begins at the simplest building block: word level. Linguistics and critical theory, especially post-structuralism, have exposed the very subjective nature of language, and the impossibility of separating a writer's background and personality from the written end product:

Post structuralism argues, then, that the sign is not stable; that there is an indeterminacy or undecidability about meaning and that it is subject to ‘slippage’ from signified to signified. So, if literature, the author and the text no longer have an identity outside of difference, neither do they have a single, fixed and determinate meaning; they are relativised and unstable.

(Rice & Waugh, 2001, p 179)

... the concept of an ideal language that serves without expectation or regret, that admits neither the uncertainty of an open future nor the constraints of a historical past – in other words, that would escape human subject – has proved illusory, the more painfully so because the prospect is so tempting. Like the philosopher’s stone, it would produce gold; like the philosopher’s stone, it shows only that matter – including now language and writing – is recalcitrant. The fact that writing is firmly attached to history means, even if we knew nothing else about it, that it does not exist without friction, without being affected by the world outside it and to this extent disclosing the form of the world as well. What writing is “about” has much the same character; here, too, there is no way of telling the dancer from the dance. The what and the how of writing thus converge, adding that convergence to the text itself. (Lang, 1991, p 3)

From as far back as Plato (427 BC - 347 BC) the dynamic between poets and writers of literary fiction and their community\readers has been problematic. Tension has often surrounded reader expectations of the writer’s function and identity – what attitudes, ethics and responsibilities should a person adhere to in the act of creating a fictionalised account that seeks to understand how and why we live and what we do to each other in that living? In his dialogue, *Phaedrus*, Plato explores the two basic insecurities that most writers come sooner or later to experience. First, in terms of the situations, emotions and the dynamics of characters invented for a particular fiction, does the writing achieve a *fidelity* to the real life situations and emotions as they occurred? Writers have always worried over how accurately any given moment can be transcribed from observation into written texts. These feelings can arise from an imposed or self-imposed sense of ethics and responsibility toward the writing and to the readers who will receive it – that is, the

writer's self-identity and notions of functionality within the context of his\her society.

Plato, in transcribing the ideas of Socrates, indicates the depth of the latter's concern over the fidelity of his writings, evident in his preference for engaging people on a personal level to articulate his ideas and, when he felt it necessary to write, compelled him through compromise to *choose* one particular form and style over others. Second, Plato explores Socrates' notion of loss of proprietorship over the works, and the meaning contained within them, once they are given into the public arena.

It should be clear to virtually any reader that Plato greatly enjoyed writing, and enlisting his literary powers in the service of philosophy. We are confronted, however, with a well-known passage of his *Phaedrus*, which questions whether written compositions have any serious purpose. Certainly Plato valued face-to-face teaching more than any written message which he left behind, but an important part of his criticism of the written word concerns its habit of addressing all alike; moreover the literature criticised always says the same thing when the reader tries to ask questions. The dialogues, however, are asking *us* the questions, and as we change ourselves so do the answers. For an author who had a fear of the finality of the published word Plato did at least choose the most flexible form of composition possible... (Tredennick & Tarrant, 1993, p X11)

**Socrates:** I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not

understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not; and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves. (Plato, 274b – 277a)

The fear expressed by Socrates, regarding the loss of control over meaning within texts once they are in the hands of a variety of readers, is a tension with which most writers must come to terms. This fear betrays a desire – an especially strong one for beginning writers, to hold exclusive proprietorship over the meaning within their texts. And it is a well grounded fear – any writer who has performed public readings, or has workshopped written texts, and then engaged in discussion on those texts, soon comes to realise that any group of readers with different gender, age, ethnic or socio-economic profiles can arrive at a range of meanings disconcertingly at odds with those intended by the author. In a sense every new reader of the text – by virtue of his/her distinctly complex background, emotional and intellectual capacities – will 'overwrite' the text with new meaning, or, we could argue, mentally *re-writes* (informed by the bias of these unique personality capacities) a *new text* that will invariably manifest (minor or major) realignments of textual interpretation.

This notion resonates strongly with Roland Barthes' contention in his essay, *Death of the Author*: that the genesis of meaning within texts will come from the reader/receiver rather than the author/communicator. For a writer, reading Barthes' essay for the first time can be very confronting, often leading to a pronounced sense of creative dispossession. A more detailed exploration and analysis of why these feelings (and their effects) emerge, and how valid they are, will perhaps be helpful in reducing them.

## The Pressure of Critical Theory – *friends and foes*

On the one hand it is clear that every sentence in our language is in order as it is. That is to say, we are not *striving after* an ideal, as if our ordinary vague sentences had not yet got a quite unexceptionable sense, and a perfect language awaited construction by us. – On the other hand it seems clear that where there is sense there must be perfect order. So there must be perfect order even in the vaguest sentence. (Wittgenstein, 1953, No. 98)

Most, if not all writers want to be given at least some recognition – and the gold and the glory if it can be managed – for written works falling from brain to page. Many if not most of the dominant schools of contemporary critical theory undermine; sometimes dismiss any notions of writer-centricity in the production of originality or meaning within the writing process. Writers then, read theory with greater emotional investment than most scholars or general readers. Tensions arise; feelings of ‘them and us’; ‘friends and foes’ are formed of certain critical theories and their theorists, as they either resist or give sustenance to the writer’s part in the production of meaning in written texts.

At this point I would like to discuss what certain schools and individuals within critical theory have had to say about the function and identity of the writer and the tensions (for writers) that arise from these. In doing so I would like to focus first upon two seminal notions put forward by post-structuralists Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida that have a continuing currency within the literary academy and are a cause for particular tension and contention among contemporary writers in that they question the importance and reliability, with regard to the *intentionality of meaning*, of both the author and language.

The first concerns Barthes' positioning of the author in his celebrated essay: *The Death of the Author* (1968) and the second is Derrida's calling into question the reliability of the writer's primary tool: language, in his essay: *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* (1966).

## Barthes

Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing... linguistics has recently provided the destruction of the author with a valuable analytical tool by showing that the whole of the denunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without their being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors... Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the Author... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.

(Barthes, 1968, p 189)

Whilst agreeing in part with Barthes' assertion that the variety of readers of any given text will imbue it with a number of different interpretations, I believe he overstates the situation to say that writers can play *no part* in giving meaning to a text.

... For him (the writer), on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins... *the writer can only imitate* (my emphasis) a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a

way as never to rest on any one of them. (Barthes, 1968, p 188)

Many writers would take as an insult Barthes' use of the word *only* in this assertion. It carries with it the implication that what writers do is an easy thing, something that might be done by anybody if they put their mind to it. That the 'tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture...' is just sitting there ready to be copied by mere 'inscribers'. In reality there are important judgments and choices to be made regarding the juxtaposition of the linguistic elements (Barthes' 'variety of writings, none of them original...') into a resulting textual artifact which, if not original according to Barthes' definition, becomes one that is, nevertheless, unique. No other writer has managed to so successfully arrange the linguistic code in *just* the way Shakespeare did – an arrangement so well made it has stimulated, entertained and 'connected' with several generations of readers differing in age, gender and cultural background. Was there no part played by Shakespeare's honed and practiced craft; his powers of imagination; his intellect; his research skills? It could be strongly argued that Barthes' use of *only* (a deliberate and emotive use of the linguistic code in order to devalue the role of the writer, and so defend his essay's title and central premise) goes a step too far. It seems like an overreaction to what he regarded as the excessive and misplaced focus of both reader and critic on the centrality of the author's life and experiences to the text, and to the commonly held, romantic notion that writers can simply be 'inspired' to write. Remove the word, *only* and Barthes is much closer to the truth of the writer\text relation.

The main thrust of Barthes' essay becomes the fact that *meaning* within a text lies *entirely* with readers. For many if not most of their texts, writers

have a meaning *they intend*. Surely that meaning has at least one equal place alongside those meanings gleaned\imagined by the variety of readers? Very often the meaning intended by the writer will be the same as that received by readers – if only *one* reader then that is validation for the writer's meaning and confirms that the writer has not undergone the death described by Barthes.

The contemporary reality for writers – in a public\commercial sense anyway – is that a great focus still occurs on the author as the *source of meaning* for the text. Everything Barthes detested about the writer\text dynamic persists; has in fact grown into a literature industry that thrives on perpetuating the centrality, or at the very least the prominence of the author in relation to the text: Virginia Woolf, Dylan Thomas, Stephen King, JRR Tolkien, Sylvia Plath, Bryce Courtenay, William Shakespeare, Barbara Cartland, Ernest Hemingway, the Bronte sisters, Joyce, Kerouac, and on and on. Add to this the on-going proliferation of book launches; author luncheons and interviews across all media; writers festivals (international, national, state and regional); articles, essays and book length texts by writers explaining their writing, all attest to the fact that reading communities and critics are insatiably curious as to an author's relationship to, and explanation of, their writing. Whether or not an author *should or should not* be central to the text is irrelevant because in very many cases they have *been made* central – and so they *are* central. It could be argued that this insistent focus on the author\text relation (not just the *how*, but the *why*); becomes for readers an inescapable *aspect* of the reading, something that will influence their reception and interpretation of meaning for the text.

So the reality for writers is that they have only been nudged a little off-centre by Barthes' contentions; have been made aware – those that were not already – they must *share* their intended meanings with those assumed by readers.

## Derrida

Translation was never possible.  
 Instead there was always only  
 conquest, the influx  
 of the language of hard nouns,  
 the language of metal,  
 the language of either\or,  
 the one language that has eaten all the others.

(Atwood, 1995, p 55)

Similarly Jacques Derrida's *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* (1966) creates tensions for writers in that it highlights notions of instability\unreliability of the writer's primary building block: language. Many writers construct their texts with some sort of *intention*; there is an *idea* or central *theme* they wish to convey to readers through their coded words. In many cases the intent may be to simply entertain with a murder mystery or to evoke laughter through a piece of humour. But many writers have a *meaning* or 'truth'\perspective (about life; its aspects) they wish to articulate or to have readers 'discover' within their texts. Derrida's basic hypothesis denies *any* possibility of this occurring via the writer and his\her works.

'Logocentrism' is the term Derrida uses to cover that form of rationalism that presupposes a 'presence' behind language and text – a presence such as an idea, an intention, a 'truth', a meaning or a reference for which language acts as a subservient and convenient vehicle for expression.

(Rice & Waugh, 2001, p 182)

... the implications of deconstruction, and of Derrida's work in general, are profound. Literary studies has traditionally been concerned with the interpretation of texts, with revealing the 'meaning' behind the text (be that meaning the author's intention or the 'truth' of the human condition). Deconstructionist logic disrupts that interpretive mode. If the meaning of the text is unstable, undecidable, then the project of literary interpretation is compromised; interpretation is doomed to endlessly repeat the interpretive act, never able to reach that final explanation and understanding of the text...

(Rice & Waugh, 2001, p 183)

In her poem at the opening of this essay, Margaret Atwood resists this notion and recognises that, as a writer\communicator she finally has to settle on and trust one word or one phrase to achieve the communicative act.

But in reality readers and writers manage, as the German philosopher, Wittgenstein put it, to 'find ways to go on with each other' through what he deemed 'language games'.

How do words *refer* to sensations? – There doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about sensations every day, and give them names? But how is the connection between the name and the thing named set up? This question is the same as: how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations? – of the word "pain" for example. Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural; expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.

(Wittgenstein, 1953, No. 244)

There is no doubt that the language code used in *many* literary texts can impede or even prevent their understanding. This can be so for works

of translation where individual translators may have a conscious or subconscious bias towards certain elements of the writing being translated that then results in a narrative emphasis that might lead to a version of the original text that is less than satisfactory in terms of the author's intent or readers' expectations.

There are people who cannot stand Dostoevsky in Constance Garnett's plain-sailing literary translation with its mid-Victorian or Edwardian mannerisms. And I know people who are just as vehement in saying that David Margashack's mid-20th-century versions, with their fluency and leanness, are execrable: only Garnett reveals the greatness of the writer. And there are critics, including Susan Sontag, who praise to the sky the contemporary translations of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, whose virtues are not apparent to me.

... All of these matters appertain to the endeavour of translating Proust. A new translation is likely to offend against authorised versions when what preceded it held single sway. If we are particularly picky about translation when the writer in question is a monster – and he can also be a monster through *excess* of style – and when we perceive him as a poet, then any new Proust will meet with resistance. (Craven, 2003, p 1, section 7)

Distortion of meaning can also manifest itself in older texts where the meaning of words has changed over time. Scanning a selection of definitions in *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Williams, 1981) quickly reveals a textual minefield for unwary readers who may assume for instance that the definition we apply to the word *culture* in 2003 is the same applied to it in 1703; or even that a consistent definition can be held for the word from country to country or from discipline to discipline.

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical

development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought. (Williams, 1981, pp 76-77)

But in a practical sense, Derrida's notion of 'slippage' occurring at the moment of signification can *in many cases* be overcome by the reader's ability to come (or research their way) to an understanding regarding the *context* in which that signifier appears (and the possible slippage occurs). Through the existence of *Keywords*, for example, is it not possible to eliminate many of Derrida's slippages and get much closer to the intended meaning of the word 'culture', as it is used in particular texts? For a significant number of these non-contemporary texts, classroom and critical analysis over a number of generations has resulted in a surprising consistency of unified opinions regarding the intended (and some unintended) meanings for these texts. For example, it is difficult to miss (or misinterpret) the meaning – in terms of gender power structures inherent in fundamentalist regimes\societies – being explored in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Similarly I have experienced a surprising unanimity of meaning reached during classroom analysis of Raymond Carver's short stories. This despite the fact that Carver is an American, writing in the seventies and early eighties, writing about dysfunctional, alcoholic, middle-aged American men; and using the vernacular code of his particular time and place. He still manages to impart a meaning agreed upon by most readers – writer and readers have 'managed to go on with each other' despite vast separations of time, age, gender and culture. What writers have working for them, I believe, and what undercuts Derrida's theory, is the universal and timeless nature of what human beings feel in given situations\relationship dynamics: love, hate, jealousy, envy, sadness etc

are emotions most readers, writers and critics of every time and culture feel and have felt *in the same way*. Each successive generation of writers then proceeds with a new contextualisation of these basic emotions and human dilemmas. Even in science fiction characters can have only those emotions their writers know about. Anton Chekhov, in a quote Raymond Carver used as the preface for his poem, *The Ashtray*, captures this notion. Though as readers *not in* Chekhov's time, language and culture, we need to be alert to what Derrida would see as a 'slippage', that of Chekhov's heterocentric idea of the sexual poles, and to mentally insert a backslash between 's' and 'h' in the last word, and so get closer to his *precise* meaning for *us* in *our* time and culture:

You could write a story about this ashtray, for example, and a man and woman. But the man and woman are always the two poles of your story. The North Pole and the South. Every story has these two poles – *he* and *she*.  
(Chekhov, 1985, p 61)

This is not to say that Derrida's theory does not hold true for some, perhaps many texts, both historical and contemporary. And poetry can be particularly problematic for readers out-of-time\culture. An unresearched first reading of T. S. Eliot's, *The Wasteland* becomes a baffling experience for most readers.

So in a practical sense Derrida's slippages and the constant deferral of meaning he implies can thwart *some* readers in determining meaning for *some* texts. But, for the good reason that language – as Wittgenstein has pointed out – is *all* we have, writers and readers continue to manage a communicative accommodation. And is it not ironic that Derrida himself has managed through his (at times very difficult, almost deliberately de-communicative) essays and interviews, to have a large

number of readers over a couple of generations agree on what *he means* about the impossibility of communicating meaning in the act of writing. Wittgenstein would be happy Derrida has managed to ‘go on with’ us so successfully.

## **Bakhtin**

Like Wittgenstein, Bakhtin articulates theories and ideas about the writing process that (to this writer) give far more comfort and validation to notions of a writer’s functionality and positioning within the writing process.

Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of dialogic: the continuum of intentional and value-ascribed dialogue that is attributable to every word of every language of every time; and heteroglossia: the diverse stratas of both languages and voices that can be found within a work – are explained in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Holquist, 1990):

Languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each of which in its own way reflects a little piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp behind their inter-reflecting aspects for a world that is broader, more multi-levelled and multi-horizoned than would be available to one language, one mirror. (Bakhtin, 1990, pp 225-26)

Bakhtin also espoused a theory of open-endedness brought about by the intersection and ‘layering’ of these different social languages (dialogism) that contrasted with the closure inherent in epic literature. Both these notions are something I have tried to achieve for the short fiction in this thesis – life rarely affords us definitive closure on issues of personal and social relationships because our lives and the lives of those with whom we choose (or are forced) to interact, are always in a state of

flux. And secondly, I believe that if the deepest understanding of problematic personal and social issues, situations and traumas are to be achieved, then the perspectives of both *predator* and *prey*; of both the *dominant* and the *subordinate* event-players need to undergo balanced exploration. All voices need to be heard.

Thus where Lukacs championed epic closure, Bakhtin highlighted novelistic openendedness; where Lukacs advocated a strong narrative presence, Bakhtin advocated the maximalization of multilingual intersection and the testing of discourse. Bakhtin takes a stand against Lukacs; dialogism becomes analogous to Hegel's *Geist*, both describing the social whole and standing in judgment over those eras in which the dialogic imperative is not realised.

(Brandist, 2001, p. 20).

## **The person\writer split**

Having written poetry for around 20 years and having had over 100 poems (plus a handful of short stories) published in national literary magazines and journals, there is one tension relating to a writer's self-identity that I find particularly discomfoting, and one that can have a profound effect on the *person* who is the writer, and the writing itself. It is a feeling I would liken to a *schizophrenic split*. This is an intermittent (metaphoric) feeling by many writers of having two people – one the *person*, and one the *writer*, inhabit the same mind and body. Aligned to and compounding this is a third split which can occur when a writer 'takes on' the persona of a character. Writers often give themselves great freedom and license to manipulate or imagine form and subject matter, and construct characters toward a desired end for the writing. At this point a total absorption with the writing process occurs. But when the writing stops (and so too the *writer*) the *person* is left to contemplate the outcome, often with a feeling of discomfort regarding

the ethics of what has been intended for the writing, and the means used to achieve that end. The Argentinean writer, Jorge Luis Borges articulates the effects of this tension very creatively in *Borges and I*:

It would be an exaggeration to say that our relationship is a hostile one; I live; I go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature; and that literature justifies me. I do not find it hard to admit that he has achieved some valid pages, but these pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good no longer belongs to anyone, not even to him, the other one, but to the language or to tradition. In any case, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of me may live on in him. Little by little, I yield him ground, the whole terrain, and I am quite aware of his perverse habit of magnifying and falsifying. Spinoza realised that all things strive to persist in their own nature: the stone eternally wishes to be stone and the tiger, a tiger. I shall subsist in Borges, not in myself (assuming I am someone), and yet I recognise myself less in his books than in many another, or than in the intricate flourishes played on the guitar. Years ago I tried to free myself from him, and I went from the mythologies of the city suburbs to games with time and infinity, but now those games belong to Borges, and I will have to think up something else. Thus is my life a flight, and I lose everything, and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him.

I don't know which one of the two of us is writing this page.

(Borges, 1964, p 766)

Borges here relates a feeling of extreme self-consciousness – even oppression – for the person ‘housing’ the writer, and he experiences the sensation of wanting to escape the effects of ethical dilemmas associated with being a writer. Of particular interest is his admission: ‘I am quite aware of his perverse habit of magnifying and falsifying...’ This alludes to one of the most fundamental and vexing issues that writers of literary fiction must face – the judgement on how *fictional a*

writer can become and yet still show fidelity (as opposed to relating a *strictly truthful* account) to events or characters taken from real life.

## Ethical considerations

In looking at the effects on writers in terms of their ethical considerations, I would like to explore the element of the writing process that seems central in attaining an accurate rendering of subject – the *agenda* or *motive*; the question every writer becomes aware of at some point in the process: *Why am I writing this?* Inherent in this are notions of a writer's sense of identity, purpose and integrity, inextricably coupled with his or her judgments on choices regarding subject matter for inclusion\exclusion and, as a direct consequence, the level of trust that readers can place on the writing. Although critical theory has for all time destroyed the notion of universal or absolute truths, the great hope is that writers of literature aspire to write their *perceptions* (of subject matter) as they honestly see them, not as they *want* to see them, or *want them to be seen* by others in order to affirm some personal, social or political agenda, which might then transform the work into propaganda. At this point it is worth quoting American poet, Ezra Pound (1885 – 1972): 'Fundamental accuracy of statement is the *one* sole morality of writing.' (Carver, 1983, p 71). Again, much that critical theory has revealed to us about texts renders terms such as *fundamental accuracy* and *morality* as impossible expectations, either by the writer or by his\her readers. But if we insert the preface: *The attempt at*, then we are coming close to what a writer *can* do, and to what readers (of literature) expect and place some trust in them to do.

Taking a selective look through Australian literature, we find there are writers who would disappoint Pound. Delys Bird in her chapter: *The 'Settling' of English*, in the *Oxford Literary History of Australia* (1998) provides an interesting example of the ways in which writers of literature have worked towards trying to shape, rather than merely observe and define, Australian identity. In *Tales for the Bush* (1845; 1995), the author, Mary Teresa Vidal, the wife of an Anglican clergyman fearing that an influx of Irish (Catholic) emigrants would become 'a threat to the Anglican ideal of a morally righteous society,' fashions her stories as an educative didactic 'to confirm their intended audience among the labouring and servant classes in their position in a sober, thrifty and dutiful population of workers.' From Bird's exploration of Vidal's stories it seems a fair assumption that they were written not from an honest perception of the *way things were*, but became instead an idealised fabrication of events and characters, aimed at a specific working class audience in order to warn them of the 'evils' inherent in a classless society such as she feared would be fostered by the Irish emigrants. (Bennett & Strauss, 1998, p 38). This sort of writing amounts to a public relations exercise on behalf of a personal ideology, rather than literature which values honesty of perception.

An interesting example of a writer using selective omission to present a more idealised version of national identity than was actually observed is that of Mary Gilmore. In a section titled *Writing the Real Australia*, from the *Oxford Literary History of Australia*, Jennifer Strauss points to Gilmore's admissions regarding revisions to her narrative, *Old Days, Old Ways* (1934): The irony is that the genre this piece falls into has the term: (bush) *realism* attached to it.

I have taken out two chapters. One on scalping the blacks and the bonuses paid to the scalpers, as I thought it too horrible for the book: whose aim is to suggest romance in Australian historical associations, to excite wonder at what was done and endured, and to awaken pity for both black and white.

(Gilmore, 1934, 103)

There is a similar irony to the work of many of the writers who deemed themselves socialist realists. As David Carter points out in his biography, *A Career in Politics, Judah Waten and the Cultural Politics of a Literary Career*, Waten, a member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) often shaped the events of his narratives to portray a working class optimism that conformed to his communist ideological line rather than portraying the reality he observed or experienced.

Likewise, Katharine Susannah Pritchard, a contemporary of Waten and also a member of the CPA, is another writer cited by Strauss as succumbing to ideological pressure and writing less than honestly about her perceptions of life. In her story, *Intimate Strangers* (1937) Pritchard chooses to portray ‘an outcome indicative of positive systemic change rather than reality’. She thereby achieves ‘a resolution described by Pritchard herself as a failure of her “literary conscience”’ (Strauss, 1998, pp 123-124).

Another, more recent example of the effects on a writer of imposed or self-imposed notions of ethics and responsibilities is that of Thomas Keneally. One of Australia's most prominent authors, Keneally has stated that it would be inappropriate for him (as a white author) to write his award-winning novel, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1972) today, on the grounds that it would usurp the role and function of black writers: “It would be insensitive to write from that point of view now...” (The

AGE, 18/1/01). Without debating the issues surrounding Keneally's decision – and they are many and complex – the effects of it, and the broad ethical responsibility for which it seeks credibility – appropriating the narrative perspective of 'other' – represents a serious limitation of subject matter for Keneally personally, and for other writers who may be influenced into adopting the same stance.

The ethical bind for Keneally would seem to lie in where, and for whom his notion of literary appropriation applies. If it sits in the narrow context of a *white* writer not availing himself – through sound research plus a writer's crucial skill of empathy – of a black narrative point of view, but instead deferring *at this point in time* to the abilities of *black* writers, it carries with it an almost patronising tone: *I did the job for you in 1972 because you weren't ready, but I think you can do it now. I will stay out of your way.* If on the other hand the appropriation of the narrative perspective\voice of 'other' is the principal Keneally is invoking, then how are we to judge his Jewish and German perspectives in *Schindler's Ark* (*Schindler's List*)? What to do with the narrative point of view of his women characters? Perhaps Keneally sincerely believes that none but black writers steeped in their cultural traditions and mores could fully understand and articulate the destruction of that culture. But there is no doubt that Keneally's status is such that his decision on this issue will be discussed by writers and students of writing, who will then feel the effects of it via a rethinking of their own ethical stance on literary-cultural appropriation; they may readjust the *way* they write, and even *what* they write – the effect then being one of self-censorship and subject limitation.

## Internal Pressures

One of the strongest internal pressures on a writer is that of output. The volume of quality work a writer produces is an important factor in how that writer is identified and 'placed' within the larger writing community. The possibility of making a reasonable livelihood is greatly enhanced by a large output. For beginning writers it allows for good circulation of a variety of writing to magazines, competitions and publishing houses, thereby increasing the chances of being published, getting paid for it and establishing a viable place in the writing community. For established writers it means a continual flow of books, articles etc are available for their editors, publishers and for their readers. It also provides some assurance of a continuing source of income and writerly status.

A low writing output is counter-productive to all of the above, and can place enormous pressure on both established and non-established writers. J D Salinger, the American author of *Catcher in the Rye*, is one example. Though Salinger's story sold millions of copies and offered him celebrity status, the *person* Salinger was could not deal with the notoriety that accompanied the novel's success. He became a recluse whose total published output amounted to three novels and 37 short stories.

Contrasting this we have the Russian-American author Isaac Asimov whose writing output was nothing short of stunning. At the time of his death Asimov had published 477 novels and hundreds of feature articles for a variety of journals, magazines and newspapers on subjects as diverse as Shakespeare and astro-physics. In the last 13 years of his life he averaged 20 novel-length books a year and was described as 'the

nearest thing to a human writing machine.’ Asimov described this ability as something not of his choosing. He was thankful for the celebrity it brought him, but his propensity to write for extended periods of time had its emotional and physical downside. The physical side-effects he suffered, such as haemorrhoids and obesity were bad enough, but a heart attack in 1977 held a far worse fear than these – his doctor ordered him to reduce his writing time (and thus his output) by half. Asimov refused point-blank, the obsession to produce a voluminous output dominated his existence at the expense of everyone and everything else and defined and controlled not just the *writer*, but the *person* housing the writer as well. When asked whether he would like to live to be 150 years old he replied: ‘only if I could write... if the time came when I couldn't spend all day writing, there'd be no point in staying alive.’ (Curtis, 1982, p 92)

In relation to output it is sometimes the habits or frailty of the *person* that impacts on the identity of the *writer*. The American author, Raymond Carver is one such example. Carver wrote only six collections in all – four of short story and two of poetry, and his inability to master the novel length manuscript can almost certainly be put down to his drinking problem.

Back in the mid-1960s I found I was having trouble concentrating my attention on long narrative fiction. For a time I experienced difficulty in trying to read it as well as in attempting to write it. My attention span had gone out on me; I no longer had the patience to try to write novels. It is an involved story, too tedious to talk about here... (Carver, 1985, p 67)

For my own part, I find my output to be relatively low, though I put in fairly long hours – especially in the editing phases. Part of this, I believe, relates to the fact that poetry is the first genre I wrote and the one that concerns me most as a writer. Somewhere along the line I became obsessed with the notion that a poem is not complete until the emotive elements – most essentially those pertaining to rhythm and sound, are perfectly formed in a way that affirms the denotive elements. For my poetry, this requires fastidious editing and reworking at line and word level, and for my short stories it means a frustrating and laborious job to be done at paragraph, sentence and word level. I find it almost impossible to run alternative words, sentences, phrases etc, through their hoops in my head. I need to put everything down on paper, and in freehand, in order to ‘see’ that everything I want to happen on the page and in my reader’s ears is formed as it needs to be. I can’t *hear* what the writing is doing unless I can *see* it all in front of me like a painting.

I also write from the standpoint that whatever I create *needs* to be stimulating and original enough to *move* readers and to be published. It is purely a matter of choice, but there is certain subject matter I consider worth my time and other subject matter that I don’t. I find it very difficult to force myself to write subject matter to fulfill a quantitative agenda.

*Passion* is a key factor – I find I cannot write convincingly or well if I’m not in a fairly pronounced emotional state about my subject matter. This is especially true for poetry and I always feel pressured by the notion that in terms of the little time it takes to get through one, the reader has to get a big pay-off in terms of the *lingering* quality of the subject matter – it needs to have the effect of giving them something to

think about after they've finished reading it, and a feeling that they will want to read it again. I see little point in spending 10 or 20 hours turning out a poem that readers will take one minute to finish and then never want to read a second time – I would consider that to be *failed verse* rather than *poetry*.

Similarly, if I am to spend three months on a short story I want the idea contained within that story to be interesting enough to provoke thought or even debate, and ultimately to have a longer shelf life than myself.

## **Ramifications**

For me, these issues and the way they are experienced; the way the pressures they exert are either absorbed or deflected – ultimately defines each writer by his\her choices of subject matter; the range and types of elemental devices; and the intellectual mindset that will decide exactly how these devices will shape that subject matter. Central to these are the outcomes and the agenda for the end-texts: what then, as a result of the writer's experience and engagement with these issues, becomes the writer's purpose\agenda for writing? And what is the resulting impact on readers of these texts so formed?

This is important because therein will be the stories and poems that define the lived-generations of a world of *actual* interacting identities that is also the society that each writer experiences but then constructs idiomatically according to his or her formed identity. These texts – those that are (arbitrarily) chosen and published – then become, in both a contemporary sense and also for posterity, representational of a particular society's mores, attitudes, politics, group and individual inter-

relationship dynamics. Ideally, they become a historical moment rendered, through a fictionalised fidelity, as true as any 'factual' account.

# Section 2

*Snapshots of Broken Things*

(The Stories &  
The Poems)

# The Stories

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## Fixing the Renault

Billy had been to see Doctor Bradley on one of those ambiguous Autumn days – the frost, not yet winter-hard, had hung till nearly ten and then the sun, not summer-strong, but sun enough to make you glad, had held its yellow up till four. By five the warmth collapsed against the patchwork grey retaking every hue.

He'd been feeling ill for weeks. *You look like death*, his mother, Mary said.

*The way he lives*, – his father's told-you-so reply. *The ferals he calls mates. Well what do you expect.*

The father marked these pivotal family moments with his small, bittersweet victories.

*Hepatitis C, Billy*, Bradley finished and I thought, yeh, I've heard of that, knew it was bad – not like cancer though and so I said, *well what's the fix?* And it was running through my head he'd say, *well Billy, we'll need to put you on a course of injections for two weeks* – Jesus, wouldn't that've been ironic? Two weeks tops, that's what I thought, but the look on his face sent cogs spinning; created a pitch black space within my head.

I'm worried; my son looks yellow most days. He's been to Doctor Bradley but he won't talk to Geoff or me about it. His own parents, won't talk to us. It's breaking me, the not knowing.

Even as a little kid he was a dirty bugger, worse than normal I reckoned, though Mary didn't. Messy room. Bloody matchbox cars all over; clothes. The same now, shaves once a fortnight, that's it. Some days he

don't even tub up. Can't understand him. Now this, whatever it is he's got, I just don't want to know.

And those feral mates of his. Drugs, anything goes, and Billy went along with it all. *Serves him right*, I said to Mary, *he was heading for it*. Couldn't stick to beer like normal blokes. Won't have his mates, those bastards in the house, bugged if I will, she can say what she wants.

Love him? Christ, I'm his father of course I love him. Not that we're close. Jen and me are close – I can't tell you why one and not the other, it just is. Whatever he's got I want him to take it somewhere else, I can't wear it. If Mary or Jen catch it, then by Christ I'll...

Bradley said I'll have it forever and it'll keep coming back. There's no cure. He said my liver's on the way out. How can I tell them? I'm scared, what have I done to myself. They're coming at me again, just won't leave me alone.

'Talk to us, Billy,' and as Mary spoke her face worked away like a plastic bag being sucked of all air.

'Just a gastro bug, that's all.' He said it to the ceiling.

'Any wonder you're crook, look at the bloody state of this...' The father's eyes flowed over the room then burned back onto Billy.

'Can you leave, this is *my* room,' was Billy's muffled request.

'In *my* house – we'll leave when we're bloody ready.'

'Don't, Geoff. Please don't talk to Billy that way.' A thumping began in behind her temple. 'Billy...' And she was going to say, *we love you*, but the son cut her short.

'Just get the hell out.' But they didn't.

'You bloodywell talk to your mother like that and I'll...'

‘And you’ll what!’ Billy blazed up off the bed, a patchwork of strange pink straining up into his face. ‘Well, come on, fuck you, have a go if you want,’ and Billy brimmed with intent as the spittle-spray of his words crossed the small rampart between face and face, and his arms held themselves, stiff as gun barrels by his side, but fist-ended if that’s where the old prick wanted to take it. His mother was an invisible notion until she spread herself between them, grabbed Billy’s wrists, held and begged them limp.

‘Billy...’ But he was locked with the father, ‘you must look after yourself.’ And she wanted to know. ‘Billy, what did Doctor Bradley say? Please tell us. If it’s, you know, a men’s thing, I can leave. You can talk to your father... I’ll go.’

‘I don’t want to know,’ the husband spat, ‘he can take it with him when he goes.’

Billy’s eyes never left the father’s: ‘I’ve got the gastro.’

‘Gastro, my arse.’ The father’s eyes made a contemptuous sweep down to Billy’s feet then up again before backing off and turning to Mary. A round had been lost that would later be retrievable, he knew. ‘Come on, let the pig wallow in it.’ Her butterfly frame was invisible against the shadowed hallway as she hovered hoping Billy would look up to her and betray his need. She would fling herself upon him then. But he gave her no such permission and anyway, he had already shrunk back into worn denim jeans, and the steel-blue cotton sheets, too cold for July, gathered him in and the familiar, tepid yellow retook his face.

Winter now, barely a clay-coloured handful of sunlight came in twelve weeks.

When Billy was small I'd take him shopping. Little bugger knew how to push my buttons – never came home without a lolly or one of those little matchbox toys, had the whole set, he did. Always loved cars, spent hours in the garage with that old Renault he and Geoff were fixing up. In the beginning. Maybe, when he gets better, they'll get back to that.

They were never what you'd call close, even when Billy was a kid. Geoff tried hard. Well, sometimes. I remember he took Billy to the football a couple of times. Then Jennifer was born – light of Geoff's life, she was. He'd get in from work, *Where's my Princess?* he'd yell, white teeth jumping out of his face, arms wide to catch her running at him. I can't tell you why Jennifer and not Billy. It just was. Geoff bought Jennifer a beautiful gold brooch one time. *You're mad*, I said, *she's only ten years old*. Jennifer's always loved things that were bright and sparkly. The brooch that Geoff gave her got stolen a few weeks back, along with some other stuff.

Geoff bought the Renault to try to make things better with Billy. Geoff tried hard, he was out till ten, sometimes eleven o'clock at night working on that car. I don't think Billy appreciated all that. He'd just turned seventeen – you know what boys are like at seventeen – girls, going out with mates. Geoff would never let Billy's friends stay over, said they were too rough. He wanted Billy to stay in and help him fix the Renault. One day Geoff just downed his tools, *Bugger him*, he said, *he can fix it himself*.

Whenever Geoff tears into Billy it feels like a hand is clawing deep into me, to my very womb. They don't listen, neither of them. I feel like I'm disappearing. I do.

Jennifer sides with Geoff. *I'd kick him out, you're a bloody fool, mum*, she says to me, *he's a loser*. She says it was Billy stole the jewellery – her brooch as well – and the new TV and video. *He's robbed us to pay for his*

*filthy habit. His own family.* That's what she said. But Billy wouldn't steal from us. He wouldn't.

I don't think he's on anything heavy. I had some marijuana once. I like my wine now, reds mostly. Geoff drinks nearly a slab of beer most weekends. We've all got our poison.

When he was a kid he was affectionate, he really was. I'd be daydreaming, standing by the sink peeling spuds, I'd feel a tug on my dress, look down into those round brown eyes – he'd hug my leg, little bugger. God it warmed me. But he *was* a boy, you know, messy room and all the rest. Geoff'd tell him a million times and once, he thumped him hard. God, I flew at Geoff for that. Jennifer though, she was neat, only had to tell her once. Jennifer's angry at Billy. She's wrong, I think, we can't give up on him. I can convince her of that. I know I can...

His eyes, oh my God, they're like bloodied egg-yolks now.

I phoned Bradley today but he wouldn't tell me what the boy's got. Found a needle thrown under his bed. I'll kill him if he infects Jen or Mary.

Can't understand him. When he was young he wasn't such a bad kid. Yeh, he was messy – Christ, it made me see red. I whacked him behind the ears once, made me feel crook to my guts, I'd never touched him before, never have since. Mary came at me, never seen her so angry. *Jesus, did you have to hit him*, she screamed at me. *Your own son. Can't you just shut the door and ignore it?* Then she didn't speak to me for a fortnight. I tried to see it her way, I wasn't happy but, I came round to it, in the end. Two weeks later, when I hadn't needled him about his room, she comes up to me, puts both her hands on my arm, her fingers digging in a bit. *Thank's*, was all she said, and for a moment I didn't

know what the hell I'd done right. Then the penny dropped and I felt good – it was only a room after all. In the end, I came round to that.

But, I can't bloody ignore this. The feral doesn't seem to care about the rest of us. Do I hate seeing him so sick all the time? Jesus, yeh, but what can I do? He looks like he's ready to rip out my throat if I try to get him to straighten up.

I hope it's not AIDS, for all our sakes I hope it's not AIDS.

I remember taking him to the footy once, when he was a little tike. Bugger wandered off, got lost – had me running around like a bloody madman. Got to the stage where I thought – you know how you think the worst – that some pervert might have grabbed him, that the cops'd find his little body crumpled up behind a toilet or somewhere. The thought of that hollowed my gut. When I finally found him playing with a bunch of other kids I shook the Christ out of him. Then those big brown eyes filled up and welled over, stuck me with the guilts. *I knew you'd find me, Dad*, he said and be buggered if I didn't feel like pulling him into me then, wrapping him up.

Those eyes are like pools of pus now.

He found the needle and stood over the bed like Billy was a little kid.

'Mary! Jen!' It was his victory call, 'come and look,' and as the mother and daughter came in he held it up to them and to Billy. 'What are you shooting up with, boy?'

'You're a user,' said Jennifer.

'You've got *your* poison,' Billy replied.

'And you've got AIDS, haven't you?' The father was trembling; redfaced.

'And a thief,' said Jennifer.

Billy turned slowly to his mother. ‘I *haven’t* got AIDS.’ Belief and relief were one on her face – but not on the father’s.

‘And you live like a pig,’ said Jennifer.

‘Don’t care what he’s got,’ said the father. ‘I want him *out*.’ And at the word, she looked at her husband like he’d pronounced a sentence of death upon the boy.

Her eyelids slanted and finally her lips broke open to form a wide, incredulous hole. ‘But Geoff, he’s our *son*.’

This was now a foreign notion to the father. He looked through his wife and rounded on Billy. ‘You scum. Bringing your bloody disease, whatever it is, into my house.’ He took out his wallet. ‘Here’s two hundred,’ and he flung it onto the bed like it was dogshit. There was a moist film across his eyes but he let nothing well over. ‘And that’s the finish of you. One week. Want you gone.’

‘Where will he go?’ Mary pleaded, turned slowly to her son. ‘You’ll get straight, won’t you, Billy. You’ll go to a clinic, Doctor Bradley will know one.’ Turned again. ‘He’ll get himself right, Geoff, he will.’ And again. ‘He will, Jen.’ And full circle. ‘Won’t you Billy.’ But the husband and daughter went and the son’s gaze was fixed on the bedside wall greying in diminished light. No one could find anything more to say.

*Why is nothing clear?* the husband thought, gazing out the bedroom window that night. The sky was obscure and uncomfortable – not near moon enough for understanding; too much of it for sleep.

‘We’ve got to cut him loose, Mary.’ He placed his hand on her side then and gently stroked her. ‘He’ll send us mad, the lot of us.’

But the umbilical that tied her to Billy could never be severed – though this, she knew, could never occur to Geoff. It was a conduit through which ran every memory she kept of Billy’s life – a multiplicity

of matchbox toys zoomed at his touch and his deep brown eyes rolled along the nerve ends of that invisible, unbreakable tunnel of light.

‘Geoff, we can’t,’ and her misery dribbled and expanded over the pillowcase.

I’ve been planning it for a week. Started drawing the whole thing up staring at my wall that night he told me to go. The vacuum hose is tucked away in the back of the bastard’s garage. I’m glad we managed to get the motor running on that Renault, if nothing else. But the body was pitted with rust from the start. Did he think we were ever going to fix that?

I’ve packed his clothes and books and chucked them into a suitcase. He’s messing around in the garage again. Heard the door of the Renault go. Christ knows what he thinks he’s doing. I worked my guts out trying to make it work.

I remember going to the complex with Mum when I was a kid. She always bought me stuff, a lolly or one of those matchbox cars. They filled in some lonely hours when I was a kid, those cars. I’ve got the whole set in my wardrobe. Glad I didn’t to have to sell them, they’d be worth a bit now, to collectors. Another week though, Jesus, there was nothing else I had – you’ll sell anything for your next fix.

Don’t know that we’d have ever got it on the road, with all that rust. I bought it so we’d have something to do – together. Thought it might bring us back to something like a father and a son. But no, he started knocking around with them ferals and there was no more time for the Renault. When he’s gone I’m going to dump that bucket of rust.

I've worked it for today because I know Mum will be out shopping. I need to do it, I've got no energy and there's no light at the end of the tunnel.

While I'm here I'll get lots of fresh vegetables and fruit for Billy – he's not eating enough fruit, that's why he looks yellow. And I've taken his matchbox cars and put them in the boot of the old Renault for safekeeping. I'd hate to see them get stolen too.

As soon as he comes in I'll tell him.

I do love him. I only wish he were the sort of kid I could say it to out loud. But I need to tell him to get out. For all of us – Jen, Mary, me – all of us.

Those matchbox cars, he can take them too. Real thing wasn't good enough. Preferred his mates.

After it's done my sister can sell the matchbox cars and buy some new jewellery. She is his Princess after all.

And while I'm here, I'll buy that brooch for Jennifer, the one she pointed out at Bevilles. She'll feel better then. It's not the same as the one Geoff gave her but... How could she ever think Billy would do such a thing. She'll feel better then, she'll forgive him when I buy her the new brooch.

When Mary comes home from the supermarket I'll tell her he has to go. Jesus, she won't like it, but it has to be done – drugs, needles, he's

killing us. Mary will have to come round to it. Talked it out with Jen, she agrees. *Just do it, Dad*, she says, *he's just a pig and a thief*.

I'll build my son up again. I love him so much. He never lets me say that to him anymore, but when I get home I'm going to hold him – that's what he needs most, to be held. I'll explain it to Geoff, he'll see it – like he did with Billy's room, and the both of us will go to Billy and he'll tell us what's wrong with him and then he and Geoff will talk about it like father and son should and then they'll fix that Renault, yes, getting back into the Renault will be the beginning for Billy.

Arriving home at five the mother sees all the mellow light has been choked off by a frost winter-hard over sun no longer sun enough that you could call it that.

I don't want it to be Mum who finds me.

Geoff and I will take him in our arms, we'll hold him into us and together we'll tell him, *Billy...*

Fool's got the bloody engine running, but he's going nowhere. I'll leave his suitcase by the garage door. It's the finish. I lost him.

Dad will find me.

Black gas runs through the small tunnel from exhaust to cabin.

*... we love you, we love you Billy.*

## The Sunbather (6,890 words, *Version 1*)

Since his light bulb blew out nine weeks ago – around the time Thumper Dave moved in – Luke’s room seemed small as a coffin at night. His mother kept forgetting to pick up a new one, though she passed them in the aisle at Safeway every week. She had other things on her mind, she said.

Luke looked up at the ceiling as the wall adjoining his mother’s room gave out small thuds like arrhythmic heartbeats. Every now and then he heard her low moans sifting through thick summer air and then his neck tightened, his teeth clenched and his brow furled deep into the pillow as he imagined Dave and her in all the twisted positions he’d seen on the porn pages of the laptop he and Thommo stole from the Jap kid last June. Luke rolled on to his stomach, wedged the doona up over both ears and after a short while fell asleep.

And in that state Luke conjured his dream, the one where he swaggers past a naked sunbather, beautiful and with skin white as his own. In the dream she always pretends to be asleep, but he knows she is watching him out of one eye as the shore break propels him up toward the sun and forward to the warmth of waiting sand. In the dream he is never dumped by the crescendoing whitewater, but always emerges tall and clean and tanned, with the naked woman smiling as he stretches his immaculately dreamt self onto the sand beside her. She passes her suntan lotion and his fifteen year-old hands explore the imagined flesh like a blind man learning a new room. Finally he lowers his mouth, it widens over her warm nipple and in the dream he falls asleep – an easy little darkness nurtured in full sun.

Awaking from this dream always brought Luke to a loneliness, layered and multiplied.

But this night he awoke and resolved to chase it off. *Tomorrow*, he thought, *I'll go to Bondi beach tomorrow.*

Luke was small, just five four, and so light his mother could lift him off his feet with a good hit. His usual attire – a black tee shirt with *Kurt Cobain* written boldly across the front, his black and blue checked woolen jacket and the wide-legged denim jeans that crumpled up at the laces of his K-Mart specials – all worked hard to conceal rather than dress him. If anyone were ever to hug Luke they would feel his ribs, shoulder blades, a dotted spine.

But like his father, Ted, the boy had beautiful full lips and oval brown eyes that could save the worst of faces. Teddy Billings was a dealer in hash, speed, the big H, cocaine and other assorted mindbenders. Teddy was soft on the boy, she always said, and a clingy adulation – a childhood leftover – had nurtured a bond they shared. But Luke cursed his father for a lack of height that ran like a cruel joke down the Billing's sperm-line, and, because he was doing five to seven in Long Bay jail, Ted had left a vacant hole into which Thumper Dave had moved, and sat around, and ate and drank huge slabs of grog by day and shagged Luke's mother senseless into the night.

'Ya kid's like a pretty bloody ferret,' Dave slurred and laughed the first night his mother, drunk herself, had brought him back to their dogbox Ministry of Housing weatherboard. 'An them bloody lubra lips of is – dead-set looks like eez been suckin eggs all is life, eh!'

She had looked from Thumper to Luke then with a slow swivel and tilt of her head, teetered a little, slapped the wiry man across singlet-clad shoulders in mock-admonishment before allowing her giggles to run through a cupped hand and join Thumper's in pulling the boy down.

Thumper Dave was twenty three years old and in his short career he'd done over at least one house in every other street within fifteen Ks of his favourite haunt, the Bricklayer's Arms. The Bricky's was a clapped-out corner pub smoke-thick with stolen goods, cash deals and SP bookies that oozed sly winks & nods, and mutual distrust. The other drinkers there were petty thieves and thugs like Dave himself, a thousand years of done-time between them; close-knit through need though chronically resentful and suspicious each of the other. They had nicknamed him Thumper after he'd successfully cleaned up three cops who came to the Bricky's to nab him on what eventually became his second twelvemonth stretch for break and enter, plus another six for tearing off one copper's ear and jaggging a broken glass across the cheek of another. Back at the watch-house six truncheons whirled and laboured into Dave – he earned his new tag in the hardest twenty minutes of his ugly life. He acquired a small limp in his left leg from this and an extra layer of hate that loomed up quick at irregular times and surprised the christ out of everyone with its crudeness.

Luke's mother worked bar at the Bricky's – sometimes behind it and at others, off-duty rousing with a rabble of grogged-up blokes and their women at the tables. The pub was only two blocks from where she and Luke lived and that's where Thumper Dave chatted her up just six weeks after getting out that second time, and four weeks after Luke's father had gone back in, having been lagged in and lumbered with a kilo of H. She was older than Thumper by ten years, and well past her prime – which had been ordinary at its best – but Thumper's social skills endeared him to no-one better, and he needed somewhere to root down for a bit and tool up for another run on Bondi's glittering assets. A couple of losers bound ankle and wrist in folly was how everyone at the Bricky's thought about them.

‘Put a fuckin bag over er ed, Thumper, you’ll be right,’ one of his mates had suggested just before Thumper sent him cartwheeling across the beer-slopped tiles with his top lip split to the snot-line of his left nostril. And as he hoed into the bloke with his boots it was plain, even to this mob, that they did have something, Dave and her. It was brittle and it was tense – and christ knows the kid didn’t like him – the something they had was maybe so small it amounted only to a warm spine to belly into on a winter night between stretches in the slam. But Dave was smart enough to know that everybody needed at least that.

The next morning Luke came into the kitchen to find Thumper in red jocks and toes hanging an inch over a pair of his father’s thongs. He was slouched over a bowl of cereal; half a fag drooped, burning itself out in an ashtray; nine empty beer stubbies and a half bottle of scotch disassorted across the sixties-green laminate. The stench of stale beer, aftersmoke and his mother’s dried sex coming up off Dave turned Luke’s stomach.

‘Eh, champ,’ said Dave, ‘race up an gemme the paper wi ya. Wanna see wot gee-gees is goin roun this arvo.’ Just then the mother appeared in the kitchen and sat at the table, lightweight dressing gown falling open to expose her thighs; blotched and rashy. Before she could straighten it Dave had pushed a hand up to her crotch. She grabbed and pulled it away, catching Luke’s glance – contemptuous then gone in a blink – at the same moment. Dave snaked the hand back, smirking up at her. ‘Go gemme that paper wi ya champ,’ he repeated to Luke.

‘Can’t, I’m going to the beach.’

‘Come on cob, ere’s two bucks, keep the change, eh?’

‘Get it yourself.’

‘Luke!’ said the mother ‘You watch your mouth or I’ll clip your bloody ears.’

‘Can’t he get it, I’ll miss me bus?’

‘Will you *please* get the paper for Dave.’

‘He’s not a cripple.’

‘Do I have to beg, Luke?’

‘Do I have to beg for a light in me room?’

As he tried to continue his breakfast and let her handle the kid, Dave’s teeth met and forced the muscles at the side of his jaw taut as piano wire. The mother ran her left hand through straggled hair and looked to one side, eyelids lifting before turning back to Luke. Her eyes squeezed into a narrow slant and there were bluestone chips in her voice. ‘I told you, I got things on my mind – I forgot. Now can you *just* bloodywell go and get the paper?’

He returned her hardness. ‘He’s rootin you, not me. You go and get it.’

Dave’s look of surprise came slowly, but with intent, up out of the cornflakes. He and Luke both stared at her then. Her face froze over and her lungs filled with an involuntary sac of air as she clasped both hands up and over her mouth in disbelief. And then Luke saw her eyes collapse into silence and his gut dropped knowing he’d gone a mouthful; a step too far. Just like with the Jap kid.

Out of respect for her, Thumper had stayed calm well beyond his normal span – she’d told him *never* to touch Luke – but the kid had overstepped. ‘Eh, come ere ya little prick an ol teach ya some effin manners.’ Luke reached for the back door but in a flash Dave was up and had him firmly by the left arm. His fingers and thumb wrapped around it and met. He brought his other hand up and pinned Luke to the porch wall. He squeezed both thumbs into Luke’s tiny biceps,

increasing the pressure as he spoke and searching for a sign of pain on Luke's face. 'Now, ya gunna pologise to ya mum an then ya gunna get the paper, eh cobber?' Thumper's fingernails dug in deep.

'Let him go, Dave,' she said.

'Not till the little arse says sorry.'

She squared up to Dave, grappled with the steel that had become his wrists. 'I said... let the little bastard... *go*. I'll get the paper.' Dave released his grip. She stared hard into Luke; voice shrill-edged off a lemon-dipped smile. 'Are you happy now?' Luke didn't look at her or answer but gazed deep into Dave's face and then beyond, into that fierce zone that enabled him not to cry out or concede. 'Well *are* you?' and she swiped Luke hard across the back of the head. The boy flew down the back steps, thumbnail bruises already beginning to blue-out on his arms. 'Luke!' the mother yelled. 'You bloody come back here.'

He stopped momentarily at the bottom of the steps, face twisting out of shape, and shouted: 'Go fuck yourself!' pole-axing her. And then he was gone down the laneway onto Main street where he'd catch a bus to the station. From there, Bondi beach was just a train and another bus ride away.

Inside the house she slumped onto the nearest chair, picked Dave's half-fag from the ashtray and drew the smoke lung-deep. Tiny veins webbed the whites of her eyes; bottom lids welled, but did not let go.

Thumper stormed in, slamming the door. 'Effin little prick... y'okay?'

She looked up at him. 'What have I told you?'

'Wot?'

'You *know* bloody what.'

'Juss tryin t put im inta line.'

'I told you never, not never to lay a hand on him.'

Dave rolled his head to one side then back to her. 'Eez a cheeky little bastard. Om not gunna let im give us shit.'

'He's *my* kid. I'll deal with it... '

'Well, why don't ya then?' He noticed her left hand straddling the top of the ashtray, knuckles going white.

'If you *ever* touch him again... '

'Eh, settle! Om not lettin im slag us off, no fuckin way.'

She relaxed, let the ashtray go, stood and looked hard up into his face coming hard back at her. 'The last thing I'm going to say, Dave, is if you do it again you better be packed and gone before I find out about it.'

His arms begged to be unstiffened from his sides and allowed to hurl the balled fists. 'Or fuckin wot?'

They were nose to nose. 'I'll do you, Dave... I will.' She was finished then, dropped back into the chair.

Mistaking this for retreat, he half-laughed, pointed a finger. 'Eh, yd only end up on yr arse.'

She turned, leaned back, drove a nothing-to-lose glare straight into his face then glanced off in a deliberate arc that took his eyes with hers to the stay-sharp knife sheathed in its plastic holder on the wall. 'You'd have to sleep sometime, Dave,' was all she said, and then she went back into the bedroom and lay down; Luke's words circling with cruel intent on an endless loop.

She was rough and she was loud; and she was not great-looking, he knew – and in anger she was the cruelest person with words that he had ever known. But the bottom line was Thumper couldn't stay sane without her. Shortly, he followed and climbed onto the bed beside her. They lay back to back for an hour, then, out of nowhere he said: 'Won't touch im agen,' and released her into tears. 'But e better smarten is act

or someone's gunna drop a brick shit'ouse on im.' Dave rolled and fronted her back then, reached an arm over and cupped her right breast. He just clung to it, not a finger moving to arouse her as they fell asleep. It was their ritual; it was what they did.

Out of the twelve dollars Luke had left, he bought a hamburger and chips, and a box of painkillers from a chemist on the Bondi Esplanade. He swallowed four of the little white pills at once and after six or seven minutes the pain in his arms became bearable. As he headed across the road toward the beach he could see a group of surfers performing hi-jinks on the medium swell at the southern break. It was nine-thirty, another hour would see these foot-pocked sands heat and fill with swimmers and strollers; skateboarders and sunbathers; locals and tourists – the full Bondi pot-pouri. Luke sat on the sandstone retaining wall and scanned the full arc from the rugged northern point, where rich houses chested their excess at the Pacific, to the congested southern end – cheaply tourist, buzzing with latte and Italian breakfasts on a footpath moving with expectant whites and blues, greens and reds backgrounding smooth or wrinkled flesh that ranged through pinks and tans and yellows and on to negroid-black.

Luke moved down onto the sand and sat in the shade of the wall, his back to cold stone. He watched the shore-break crash on three children, their squeals and laughter mixing with the squawk of a dozen gulls greeding for last night's pizza scraps. A bunch of Japanese tourists sauntered and chattered with their cameras click-clicking on the promenade above the wall, and as he drifted into a half-sleep Luke thought again of how the Japanese student had gripped in anger to his laptop when they'd demanded it from him; remembered the look of

terror when Thommo slammed him up against the brick wall of the railway underpass at Balmaine.

‘We’re takin this,’ Thommo said, and he pulled out his knife and held it to the kid’s nose. ‘Any objections?’ Luke stood by shuffling from one foot to the other, hands in his pockets not wanting to look at the Japanese boy. But when Thommo turned smiling Luke was cornered into an awkward, conspiratorial grin. There was fear all over the kid but he refused to let go of the leather carry case. Thommo brought his right knee up into the boy’s balls and he dropped deadweight onto the bitumen, but still clutching the bag like there was an attempt to tear his heart away.

‘Give us a hand, mate,’ Thommo said, turning to Luke, who reluctantly made his way over and began pulling and twisting at the shoulder strap. The Japanese boy went rigid; there were tears but no sound and his eyes threw rage at Luke’s emerging shame. Thommo then gave him two mighty kicks to the ribcage and as Luke reached to pull the strap over the kid’s face he grabbed the hand and bit hard into Luke’s flesh between thumb and forefinger, breaking open the webbing.

‘Ya fuckin slant,’ Thommo yelled as Luke reeled back with blood running from the hand. Thommo flicked up the blade and jabbed the Japanese boy in the forearm. He let go a piercing scream but still clung to the laptop. Luke walked back over to him, nursing the injured hand, getting red in the face. ‘Give im a kickin, Lukie,’ Thommo yelled as he grabbed the screaming Japanese kid by the hair and held his face in Luke’s direction. Luke thought of his errant father then, who loved him, he knew, but was never there; all the kids at school who’d taunted and rejected him because he was small and weedy; Mister Ballard, the teacher who’d expelled him. But most of all, as rage and retribution swallowed him whole, he thought of Thumper Dave and his mother

and in an act he knew to be as cowardly as it was pleasurable, he took three quick steps forward and dropped-kicked the Japanese boy's face; felt the cheekbone give back into the face with a queer grind, and the nose cave sideways with a spray of red across the white-tiled wall of the underpass. He drew back again and moved his aim to the kid's stomach, where he released his anger again and again and again. He stopped finally, but the Japanese boy had been unconscious from the first kick.

'Me grandad fought them slants in the war,' said Thommo as he backslapped Luke. 'He'll be fuckin rapt I done one over.' And they walked off into the night, Thommo swaggering along with his prize; and in his shadow, Luke, hand limp and dripping blood; victor of nothing.

When Thommo spotted Luke on the sand he gave him a sharp kick in the thigh to wake him. The sun was well up over the wall and the beach flagged and billowed a multiplicity of tossed shirts shorts thongs, coloured hats and towels and umbrellas with sun-doped bodies lolling on top, over or under them. At the ocean's edge the foam tossed limbs and torsos every whichway, and beyond, the sea reflected the sun like scalloped gunmetal. When Luke tried to lift an arm to shield his eyes from it the pain was excruciating and it fell dead at his side.

Ahh, shit.'

'What's up with ya?' Thommo asked.

'Bastard me mum's shacked up with.'

'He bashed ya?'

'A bit. Nearly broke me arms I reckon.'

'Bastard. Giz a look.'

'Yeah, I hope the coppers kill him next time... ah, jeezus!'

Luke grimaced as Thommo rolled up a sleeve to inspect the arm. 'Fuck, look what e's done to ya.' There was the four inch, blue-black

bruise with a fringe of dull yellow and above that four smaller ones, each as dark as the first and topped with four half-moon's of broken flesh where Thumper's nails had gone in hard. 'Didn ya mum do nuffin?'

There was a small silence. 'She weren't home,' Luke lied, rolling his head to avert Thommo's gaze.

Thommo reached into his pocket. 'Hey, Lukie.' He held up his knife, pushed the small ivory button and the blade burst gleaming into daylight. 'Take this,' and he touched the flat of it against Luke's cheek, directing his gaze until it met his own. 'If 'e comes at ya agen, put it into 'im.' And with that Thommo stood and picked up his skateboard. 'Ee's not your ol' man, Lukie. Don't take shit from 'im.'

Though Luke knew himself incapable of using it, he accepted the glinting gift, retracted the blade and slid it into his pocket. Thommo smiled in accomplishment. 'Gotta go, mate,' he said 'See ya in the park around eight or 'alf past. I pinched some o' me ol' man's weed – 'nough for a cuppla joints, I reckon.... tin o' chrome, too, Lukie. We'll 'ave a ball, mate.'

'Yeah, okay.' Luke watched as Thommo dropped the skateboard onto the concrete path and glided away.

The sunbather comes down onto the beach twenty minutes after Thommo leaves. Thirty two years old, she has the palest skin, in a bikini two years in the drawer. Though still a little thin in recovery, her figure is fine-boned and curve-hipped with the soft, full breasts a little disproportionate to the rest. She has mid-length auburn hair framing a face that remains strong, despite the ordeal of the birth, and holds its beauty in profile, though not from the front, where anguish has manipulated the corners of eyes and mouth. As she stands just a metre

away contemplating whether to prop in full heat or shade of the wall, it is the breasts that hold Luke in a fascination that is sensual and then something more.

Standing to one side awaiting her decision the husband tries hard against annoyance. ‘Here?’ He points to a spot half-sun, half-not. He is well-tanned and muscular in a subtle way, a true-lined firmness earned from his daily five K run. Anger at the child's death harbours in every cell and hones itself on everything he has to do for her. The man is very tall, Luke notices, looking sideways and up from his squat against the wall. ‘*Here?*’ the husband says a second time, agitating from left leg to right. ‘Or do you *want* to be in the sun...’ Shielding her eyes the woman looks high up into the sky, as if in need of some sign to help her decide. ‘You could burn.’ the man finishes.

Luke slants his head toward the sand, feigning disinterest. By their body language he can tell they have come down to the beach in the thick of some battle.

Five seconds of silence ensue until she finally turns to the man. Her mouth tries for a smile but her eyes disown it. ‘Isn’t that what happens to sinners, Rod – they burn in Hell?’

‘Don’t start.’

‘I have to burn... every day, don't I, Rod?’

‘Should have thought about that while you were pregnant.’

‘Do you think I wanted to lose it.’ Her head cranes forward, her arms come up a little from her sides, palms facing him, her fingers spreading like a plea.

‘Him. It was *him*, not *it*,’ the man snarls.

She reaches but he recoils just enough for the hand to miss his and fall brick-heavy. ‘For once, will you just listen...’

‘You never wanted a kid, admit it.’

‘Not at the start, but...’

‘Murphy told you to drop back, take it easier.’ Luke looks up from under his cap and into her face, then to the husband’s unrelenting glare. ‘It wasn’t like we needed the money.’ He wishes they would move ten metres down the beach.

‘I know, Rod, I made a mistake...’

‘A mistake. Jesus, just plain selfish. Nine to seven every day of the week... Saturdays.’

‘I worked six months to get the Kyoshi contract.’

‘Someone else could have handled it.’

Luke sees her eyes blaze. ‘Oh, yes, sure. I could have handed it over to David, or Peter, or Brad... You just don’t know what it’s like... having to prove yourself three times over to get the same job a man does simply by being *adequate* and then blowing a few blue jokes into the manager’s ear... Do you think if I’d realized it could hurt the baby...’

‘He’s not hurt, Sandra, he’s *dead*.’

Her arms and shoulders drop deadweight. ‘What I’ve been through; the stroke; isn’t that punishment enough?’

Luke sees there is nothing coming back from the man’s eyes, dull like dead fish. He watches the woman shrink into herself as the man’s head swivels away. ‘Fuck this,’ he says, more to himself, and then he throws her towel and beachbag down. ‘I’m going to be late,’ and her sunglasses spill out to within inches of Luke’s feet. Walking off, not even turning he says. ‘I’ll pick you up at five.’

‘Don’t bother,’ she replies, ‘I’ll get the bus.’

‘Suit yourself,’ his voice trails off, neither fire nor ice. ‘If you’re not back by seven,’ and then from somewhere unfathomable he adds: ‘I’ll send an ambulance.’ The brutality of his words stops him dead and he flings his face skyward. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t...’

‘No, of course,’ she cuts in, ‘you didn’t mean it... look, just go.’

She stares at the ocean for a full minute, until the man has reached the carpark; out of sight. She turns and, for the first time, is aware of Luke as she spots the glasses. Before she can bend for them Luke reaches over and offers them up. His face contorts a little. ‘Thanks,’ she says thin-voiced and her eyes, black-rimmed and immediate, notice the bruises on his arms as they red-flag up at her. ‘A fall?’ she asks, trying for a smile as she reaches to hold up his left arm from underneath and then, as if the bruises might not really exist, she softly brushes them with her fingers. ‘They’re deep,’ she says, her brow wrinkling a little. ‘And those cuts look really angry.’

‘I’m okay.’ But a small grimace gives him up.

‘You need to clean them,’ she says leaving no room for dissent. ‘They’ll infect, wait here.’ She lowers Luke’s arm, grabs a dozen tissues from her bag and makes her way in a gait that measures itself out to the ocean’s edge. She bends carefully then dips the tissues in and returns to Luke’s side in the same slow fashion. It reminds Luke of the way Tibby, their border Collie-cross had walked home after being hit by a car. When she arrived she only had a few cuts. She was slow-moving, yeah, but otherwise she seemed okay. When she collapsed the next day Luke’s father took her to the vet.

He came home alone. ‘Sorry, Lukie, she was all busted up in the guts, mate. C’mon, we’ll bury her out the back.’ At the end of it his mother had come out to the yard and the three of them sat around the edge of the fresh mound, arms over shoulders, and bawled themselves wet-faced.

It was the closest Luke had ever felt to them; to being a family.

As the woman bends down in front of Luke her cleavage bulges a little revealing a white vee below the tan-line. Luke blushes. ‘This salt

water will do the trick,' she says and she runs the liquid across Thumper's nail marks.

'Aahhh, jeezus!'

'It'll hurt at first,' she says. But as she begins to bathe the second lot, the pain becomes excruciating. 'I'm sorry,' she says, and sensing his anguish places a hand on his face. 'You alright?'

Refusing to cry, he pulls away, retreating from the pain; the unexpectedness of touch.

'They'll be okay,' he says.

'Are you sure?' Her arms are outstretched, wet tissues still on offer.

'Yeah... thanks.'

As the pain begins to subside he rests back against the wall. The woman comes off her knees slowly, palms pushing against the sand to gain a lift. As she is straightening up, the left side of her face pulls itself a little out of shape, Luke sees. He thinks about asking, *are you okay?* But then she has turned, stands before her towel. After two or three seconds her right hand goes across to her left bicep and feels it. She bends then, kneels down and finally lengthens out along the towel stomach down, her whiteness stark against the red material. Luke can only see one wet eye and moistening cheekbone because of the awkward angle her folded arms make across her face, hemming her in as she lies there regretting way beyond what Luke can ever know.

Luke pops two more aspirins and lies back against the stone feeling warmer. He makes short, languid sweeps of the human panorama on sand and sea. Drawn back to the woman he becomes aware of the short curls of hair in the pit of her left arm. Answering the adolescent mind's crude vocabulary, slow electricity syringes up from shaft to the head of his penis. She is no-one to him and he can find no rational reason to dismiss the urge to gaze at the laid out flesh. Below the short curls he

sees the white side of the breast bloom under the weight of her. In the middle of the breast, he knows, is the small brownish circle with a nipple – he remembers masturbating to nipples he saw in the Penthouse mags at Thommo's. Fantasizing, he imagines removing the bikini bottom of the sunbathing woman so she would be fully naked beside him. For a full hour he watches the exposed hills and plateaus of her white body pink-up in the sun. His eyes run the curve of shoulder, spine and buttock, of legs splayed with indecent possibility.

Suddenly she lifts her head and looks at Luke as if she's been thinking hard about it: 'You really should get those cuts seen to. Do you live far?'

'Bout an hour... they're not hurtin now.'

'I've got a mobile if you want to call your mother and father to pick you up.'

'Me dad's, um, away. And me mum works. I have to go there soon.'

She eases herself down onto her towel. 'Good,' she says 'You're lucky to have someone to look after you.'

'Yeah...'

But his tone betrays the lie. 'You been fighting with your husband?'

Before answering she looks hard at Luke for two, three seconds, deciding whether she will go this notch with him, then: 'Yes.' She does.

'He's real tall. Bet you feel safe with him, nobody'd try nothing.'

'Yes, I feel safe with him.'

'And he's never hit you, has he?'

'No, he'd never do that.'

'Then I reckon *you're* the lucky one. Will y make it up wiff him, when you get home.'

'Maybe.'

‘Jeez, you’d be able to go anywhere with someone that big. Nobody’d say boo.’

She looks at him wishing his logic could rule her world. ‘I’m a bit tired, I’m going to have a sleep now. If the cuts start to hurt I’ll take you up to the surgery on the Esplanade. Wake me if they do.’

For near an hour Luke watches her lie there, stilled. At the end of that hour she makes just one movement when the whole of her upper body gives an involuntary shudder. It startles and slightly shames him, as if her unconscious had suddenly become aware of his unsavoury thoughts, had shelled them and was registering its disgust. But when her body finally slumps back he relaxes once again and is drawn back to the breast swelling out of the red of her towel. He thinks how it would feel to place his whole mouth over the sunbather’s nipple; to fall asleep there, stretched like a warm god in full sun. He no longer has an erection as his thoughts lull him into a serenity where the whole world has disappeared and there are only the two of them – no tall husband, no Thumper Dave, no need for dogs or fathers, mothers or light bulbs...

Two-thirty and Luke wakes to find the back of the woman has burnt. She has fallen into a dead sleep and he has an urge to reach over and wake her, or put his own towel across her body. He knows too that he must go soon, find his mother – she’d be doing her twelve to four shift at the Bricky’s – and make things right from this morning. She would slow-burn for weeks otherwise. But the thought of confronting her frightens Luke – and what if Thumper is there? He wishes instead that he could wait here; watch over the sunbathing woman; not leave until she leaves. He wishes he could lie down in the shade of her until his life became more clear; less painful.

Luke stands up. 'I'm goin now. See y later.' Nothing from the sunbather, she doesn't stir. He looks at her, then up to the sun, and, removing his towel from his backpack, drapes it gently over her. Small towel for a small boy, it does not cover all of her. Still she doesn't move. Luke wants to wake her up and thank her – he will probably never see her again. A small black wave breaks in his gut as he walks off toward the bus stop. His mother won't like the towel not coming home, but he doesn't care.

Down at the Bricky's Arms Luke's mother was lazily pulling the last few beers of her shift. Thumper Dave, already eight schooners and two pies into the afternoon, had crammed himself into a corner with four blokes in a foul-mouthed gaggle of footy talk; the races; and the usual talk of women – *seen one fanny, you've seen em all, eh Thumper...only two sizes, mate, big and bigger...* And in each corner the same conversations circled and dripped septic from fur-white tongues to be trodden into the beer-stained grout.

The mother caught Luke's eyes the moment he slunk in. She was still bull-ant angry at what he'd said this morning, but she kept her gaze neutral, summing up the mood and the possibilities as Luke walked up to the bar. Was he going to apologise? No, it had never been in his or Teddy's repertoire to say sorry – rather, it was done through the backdoor – the way their bodies spoke; the slump of shoulders; a dog-down tilt of the head and averted eyes. But always with defiance hidden in their pockets. But this time only words would mend her. She knew too, because of what he'd said, that the moment of power was all hers. When she looked at him then, she saw Teddy, elf-small, useless and in jail while she pumped grog six days a week and washed the clothes and cooked the meals and woke without a glimpse of hope for better things

– and only Thumper’s feral slag between her thighs; his three-day bristle scratching at her neck. She looked at Luke and knew that she was owed something more, from somebody – and at that moment it didn’t really matter who.

‘Got anythin to say to me?’ She was halfway through pouring a whisky and Coke. Luke’s upper body swivelled slightly away from her, as if trying to make off without permission from the legs. His face was pointing to the ceiling in search of the words, that for him, were barely possible. ‘Well... *have* you?’ This time it was a demand.

‘Ya servin me or not?’ the customer scowled.

She turned on him, flint and spittle. ‘I’ll serve *you* when I’m good and fuckin ready.’ Then she returned to Luke, who was surprised to find himself on the precipice of saying what he knew was her due.

‘About this morning, I’m...’ he hesitated for just a second.

‘You’re *what*, Luke?’ Then thoughtlessly, without letting him finish, she raised the bar. ‘Your useless bloody father could never say sorry neither.’ Now, slagging Teddy off to Luke was a big blue, she realized just a millisecond too late. It was true, Teddy *was* useless, but he was all the father the boy had; it was a thin thread of identity that stretched from Teddy’s cell at Long Bay straight to Luke’s heart. Her trying to break it pushed remorse to pain; pain to anger and gave Luke the out he was grateful to be offered.

‘I don’t remember,’ he said, chin jutting a little, ‘ever hearing *you* say sorry to no one.’

‘Oh?’ she replied, her eyes rounding out; hands readied on hips, ‘and why would I need to do that, Luke?’

‘The light-bulb in me room for one thing.’ And then Luke began to scan the room. The mother’s eyes followed his – she had taught him this game – until both sets found Thumper. Then Luke looked her

square in the face. 'You tell me,' he said, and that was bad enough – but then the start of his smirk curled up at her.

A battle had been lost, but she was not prepared to lose the war. Her arm stretched back, her eyes just whites. 'You little bastard,' and the flat at her hand collided with his face, left a shock-red tattoo there. 'You're just like him... just like your father.' She was bawling now. The commotion reached Thumper and he stumbled his way to the bar. As Luke recoiled holding his stinging cheek Dave grabbed him by one arm, reinventing the bruises and their pain.

'Dave!' she screamed 'Let him go and piss off back to your corner.'

'Wot've ya fuckin done t'upset er this time, eh?' he slurred, shaking the christ out of Luke, whose whole face scrunched up. As Luke struggled for release, his mother saw Thommo's knife fall from his pocket. She raced to the other side of the bar, picked it up and then, as if a knife knew why knives were honed, the thing was into her right hand; the button was pushed and the blade out and searching for muscle and sinew before she had any say in it.

The buzz in every corner of the Bricky's fell dead as the three of them stood, a wide-eyed trinity staring at the thing buried hilt-deep into Thumper's seeping gut.

'I told you, Dave,' she whispered.

'Jeezus,' he cried, 'Y've fuckin done me.' As she let go the handle Thumper collapsed against the bar, eyes scattering for a place without pain.

She held him up and looked across to Luke, her face dissembling. 'Are you happy now?' Luke looked to where the life-red drooled from Thumper's gut to drench the denim purple as it grew all over his jeans and the mother's dress.

Then Luke ran. And he kept running – until he was on the bus, then the train and on to where the other bus would take him back to Bondi beach – would wind back the hour.

Luke comes down onto the beach and the horizon is a clean black arc on vibrant orange. The sunbather – though without the sun we can no longer call her that – is the only one left on the sand. Luke draws the hood of his coat up over his head and huddles back against the sandstone. She's still asleep Luke sees, and thinks how foolish she is and how vulnerable, and how cold she must be, with only his small towel for cover. The lights atop the esplanade throw a warm blanket of orange over the ridge of her shoulders and Luke can see the fine hairs outlined. He remembers the contempt the man had shown when he left; the animosity. Like Luke, perhaps she simply does not *want* to go home; is just lying there in her own fierce space thinking, and because of her sunburn she hasn't felt the darkness envelop her. She is dreaming, perhaps, trying to work out a way to patch things up with the man like Luke is trying to think of what he might ever again say to his mother.

Luke watches the woman – for something – a slight rise of the shoulder blades brought on by breath; the sign of goosebumps on chilled flesh. Nothing. A black seed takes root in the centre of his brain and freezes him to the wall.

'Hey,' he whispers, then louder: 'Miss.' He releases himself from the cold stone of the wall, crabs his way over and touches her back, almost not touching it. He runs his hand along her spine, then places it on the back of her head. He wants to wake but not frighten her because there are just the two of them on the beach now and he wants her to rise up again and be surprised, even embarrassed at how long she's been asleep. 'Hey, miss!' His voice squeals and his hand lands to softly prod cold

skin. Only stillness. He moves to one side and looks into her face. The exposed eye is half open. It is finished with all looking and sand has blown up to trace the journey of her last tear in grit.

Luke begins to rock backwards and forwards. 'Oh fuck, no. Oh fuck.' He whispers it over and over, his bottom lip quivering, his face curling acid-dipped, his head lolling from ocean to sky to woman and across the horizon from north to south then up the sand and back to her.

With knees dug into the sand Luke gently rolls the sunbather onto her back. He wedges himself in behind to cradle her head and his arms go around, the fingers reaching to fuse themselves below her breasts. He settles them both in against the tomb-cold stone, covers them with his towel, inhales, and a great sob lets go from his lungs like the release of all life.

## The Sunbather (2,489 words, Version 2)

He shouldn't have told her, *I hate you!* – his own mother. But she shouldn't have mentioned his father. It would be four years until Teddy got out of Long Bay jail – *The bastard's let me down for the last time*, she said, *I won't have him back, never!* Her words had shaken Luke's world.

Out of the twelve dollars Luke has left, he buys a box of painkillers from a chemist on the Esplanade. He swallows four and after a few minutes the pain in his arms becomes bearable. As he heads across the road to the beach he sees a group of surfers raking the southern swell. Luke sits on the sandstone wall and scans an arc from the northern point, where rich houses chest their excess at the Pacific, to the congested southern end – cheaply tourist, buzzing with latte and Italian breakfasts on a footpath moving with expectant whites and blues, greens and reds backgrounding smooth or wrinkled flesh ranging through pinks, tans, yellows and on to negroid-black.

He moves onto sand and sits in shade, his back to stone as he watches the shore-break crash on kids whose squeals mix with the squawk of gulls greeding for last night's pizza scraps. Tourists saunter; cameras click-clicking on the promenade above him, and as he drifts into a half-sleep Luke thinks again of the words he yelled at his mother. And then the boyfriend had jumped up, slammed him against the back door, gripping his puny arms and digging in with his fingernails.

An hour goes by and the beach billows with a multiplicity of tossed shirts, shorts, coloured hats, towels, and umbrellas brimming with sun-doped bodies. At the ocean's edge limbs are tossed by the foam, and

beyond the sea glints like scalloped gunmetal. When Luke tries to lift an arm to shield his eyes the pain brings a grimace. Reluctantly, he looks at it and find a four inch, blue-black bruise fringed yellow and above that four smaller ones, each dark as the first and topped with four half-moon's of broken flesh where the boyfriend's nails had gone in. He takes two more pills and dozes against the wall.

The sunbather and her man come onto the beach twenty minutes later. About thirty, and still thin from her recovery, her figure is fine-boned, curve-hipped with the soft, full breasts a little disproportionate. Auburn hair frames a face that remains strong, despite her ordeal, and holds its beauty in profile, though not from the front, where anguish has pulled at the corners of eyes and mouth. As she contemplates whether to prop in full heat, it is the breasts that hold Luke in a fascination that is sensual and then something else.

The man tries hard against annoyance. 'Here?' and he points to a spot half-sun, half-not. He is tall, Luke notices, with a firmness earned from a daily five K run. Anger at the child's death harbours in every cell and hones itself on everything he has to do for her. 'Here?' the man repeats, agitating from left leg to right. 'Or do you *want* to burn?' The woman looks high to the sky as if wanting a sign. By their body language Luke can tell they have come down to the beach like two snakes writhing in the one skin.

She finally turns. 'It's what happens to sinners. They burn.'

'Don't start.'

'I have to burn, don't I?'

'Should have thought about that while you were pregnant.'

Her head cranes forward, arms come up, palms facing him, fingers spread like a plea. 'You think I wanted to lose it?'

‘It was *him*, not *it*.’

She reaches. ‘Just once, will you listen...’ But he recoils and her hand falls.

‘You never wanted a kid.’

‘Not at first...’

‘Murphy warned you to take it easier.’ Luke looks up from under his cap to the man’s glare. ‘It wasn’t like we needed the money.’ He wishes they would move down the beach.

‘I made a mistake...’

‘A mistake? From nine to seven, six days a week... Japan and back in four days... who were you out to impress?’

‘I worked six months to get the Kyoshi contract.’

‘Someone else could have handled it.’

‘Oh, sure. I could have handed it to David, or Peter... You don’t know what it’s like. Having to play Supergirl to get the same respect a man does simply by being *adequate*... Do you think if I’d realized it could hurt...’

‘He’s not hurt,’ the man cut in, ‘he’s *dead*.’

‘What I’ve been through – the stroke, isn’t that enough?’

Nothing comes back from the man’s eyes, dull like dead fish. ‘I’m going to be late,’ he says then throws the beachbag down, a pair of sunglasses spilling out near Luke. ‘I’ll pick you up at five,’ he says.

‘Don’t bother, I’ll get the bus.’

‘Suit yourself,’ his voice is neither fire nor ice and then, from somewhere dark he adds: ‘If you’re not back by seven I’ll send an ambulance.’ This stops him dead. *Oh, my God*, he thinks, and flings his face skyward. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t...’

‘Didn’t mean it? Just go.’

She stares at the ocean until the man is out of sight, then turns for her glasses and becomes aware of Luke. Before she can bend he offers them up, his face contorting a little.

‘Thanks,’ she says and the bruises on his arms red-flag up at her. ‘A fall?’ she asks, trying for a smile as she reaches to hold up his left arm from underneath and then she brushes the bruises with her fingers. ‘They’re deep,’ she says, her brow wrinkling ‘And those cuts look really angry.’

‘I’m okay.’

‘They’ll infect.’ She grabs a dozen tissues from her bag. ‘Wait here,’ and she measures her way to the ocean. She dips the tissues in and returns to Luke’s side in the same slow fashion. It reminds him of the way their Collie, Tess had slunk home after being hit by a car. When she arrived she only had a few cuts that showed, otherwise she seemed okay. Over the next hour she wound down like an old clock; Luke’s father took her to the vet but came home alone. ‘Sorry, Lukie, she was all busted up in the guts, mate. C’mon, we’ll bury her.’ At the end of it his mother had come out to the yard and the three of them sat around the fresh mound, arms over shoulders, and bawled themselves wet-faced. It was the closest Luke had ever felt to them; to belonging.

As the woman bends down in front of Luke her cleavage reveals a white vee below the bra-line. He blushes. ‘This salt water will do the trick,’ she says and caresses it across the nail marks.

‘Aahhh!’

‘It’ll hurt,’ she says, and as she begins to bathe the second lot, the pain becomes unbearable. ‘I’m sorry,’ she says, and sensing his anguish places a hand on his face. But he pulls away, retreating from the pain and the unexpectedness of touch.

‘They’ll be okay,’ he says, but he is near to tears.

‘You sure?’ Her arms are outstretched, tissues still on offer.

‘Yeah...’

She uses one to wipe her own eyes. ‘We’re a fine pair,’ she says, trying to lighten it and then Luke watches her come slowly off her knees and as she straightens, the left side of her face twists and her right hand grasps her left bicep. She kneels then lengthens stomach down upon the towel. Luke can only see one wet eye and moistening cheekbone because of the awkward angle her arms make as she lies there regretting way beyond what he can ever know. He relaxes and becomes aware of the short curls of hair in the pits of her arms. Feeling aroused his eyes run the curve of spine and buttock; of legs splayed with indecent possibility. Below the short curls he sees the white side of the breast bloom under her weight – for a whole hour he watches her, imagining his mouth going over her nipple.

Suddenly she lifts her head. ‘You really should get those cuts seen to. Do you live far?’

‘Bout an hour... but they’re not hurting now.’

‘I’ve got a mobile. Your mother and father can pick you up.’

‘Dad’s... away. And Mum works. I have to go there soon.’

‘Good,’ she says. ‘You’re lucky to have someone to look after you.’

‘Yeah...’ And the tone betrays him. ‘You fighting with your husband?’

Before answering she looks at him and hesitates, deciding whether she will go this notch. ‘...Yes.’

‘He’s real tall. Bet you feel safe with him, nobody’d try nothing.’

‘Yes, I feel safe.’

‘And he’s never hit you?’

‘No, he’d never do that.’

‘Then I reckon *you’re* the lucky one. Will you make it up with him, when you get home?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Jeez, you’d be able to go anywhere with someone that big. Nobody’d say boo.’

She looks at him wishing his logic could rule her world. ‘I’m a bit tired, I’m going to have a sleep now. If the cuts start to hurt I’ll take you to the surgery on the Esplanade. Wake me, okay?’

For an hour Luke watches her there, stilled. Then suddenly, the whole of her upper body shudders. It startles him and, by virtue of her kindness – shames him as if, unconscious, she’d suddenly become aware of his unsavoury thoughts, had shelled them and was registering her disgust. When her body slumps back so too does his and again he is drawn to the breast swelling out of the towel. He wonders how it would feel to place his lips over the sunbather’s nipple; to fall asleep there like a warm god in full sun. The thought lulls him into a serenity and the whole world disappears and there are only the two of them – no need for a father, mother or apologies.

Two-thirty and Luke wakes to find the woman has burnt. She must have fallen into a dead sleep and he wants to reach over and wake her, or put his towel across her body. He knows too that he must go soon, find his mother – she’d be doing her twelve to four shift on the bar at the Bricklayer’s Arms – and make things right from this morning. She would smoulder for weeks otherwise. But the thought of confronting her frightens Luke – and what if the boyfriend is there? He wishes instead that he could watch over the sunbather; stay on the beach until everything in his life gets better.

He stands up. 'I'm goin now. See y later.' But she doesn't stir. He looks at her red back then drapes his towel gently from her shoulders to the back of her knees. Still she doesn't move. Luke wants to thank her, knowing he may never see her again, and a black wave breaks in his gut as he walks off toward the bus stop.

Luke's mother is pulling the last few beers of her shift he slinks into the bar. She is still bull-ant angry at what he'd said, but keeps her gaze neutral. Will he apologise? No, contrition was done through a dog-sorry tilt of the head with averted eyes – but this time only words will mend her. She knows too, because of what he's said, that she has earned the moment of power. She pumps grog six days a week and washes the clothes and cooks the meals and all she has to show is Luke's feral behavior and the boyfriend's three-day bristle scratching on her neck each night. She looks at Luke and knows she is owed from somebody – it doesn't really matter who.

'Got anything to say to me?' Luke's upper body swivels slightly away, trying to make off without permission from the legs. His face points to the ceiling. 'Well... *have* you?' This time it was a demand.

He *wants* to say it. 'I'm...' but hesitates.

'Well, can't you say *sorry*?' and her attack pushes the prize beyond them.

'Don't remember you ever sayin sorry to Dad or me.'

'Oh? and why would I need to, Luke?'

His eyes begin to scan the room, and as hers follow, both find the boyfriend. Then Luke looks her square on. 'Will you write a letter to Dad and say sorry for *him*?' His smirk is curling up as her eyes bulge white.

'*You* little bastard,' and the flat of her hand collides with his face, leaving a shock-red tattoo. Luke's eyes scatter around for a place without pain. And then he runs, and keeps running until he is on the bus, then the train, and on to where another bus will take him back to Bondi beach, to where the hour can be unwound.

Luke comes down onto the beach and the horizon is a clean black arc back-set with orange. The sunbather is still on the sand as Luke draws the hood of his coat up over his head and huddles back against the wall. She's still asleep and Luke thinks how vulnerable she is, how cold she must be. The lights along the esplanade throw a blanket of dull yellow over the ridge of her shoulders and he sees the fine hairs outlined. He remembers the animosity when the husband left. Like Luke, perhaps she simply does not *want* to go. She is dreaming; working out a way to patch things up with the man like Luke is trying to think of what he might ever again say to his mother.

He watches the sunbather for a slight rising of the shoulder blades brought on by breath; for goosebumps on chilled flesh. Nothing. A black seed takes root and freezes him to the wall.

'Hey,' he says softly, wanting to wake but not frighten her. Then louder: 'Miss.' He releases himself from the wall and crabs his way over, touches her back and runs his hand along to the back of her head. He wants her to rise up again and be surprised and embarrassed at how long she's been asleep. 'Hey, miss!' His voice almost squeals and his hands prod cold skin. Nothing. He moves to one side and sees the exposed eye half open; finished with all looking. Luke begins to rock back and forth. 'Oh, jeezus, oh jeezus,' he whispers, bottom lip quivering and his head lolling from ocean to sky to woman, across the horizon then up the sand and back to her.

Squatting down he gently rolls the sunbather onto her back. He wedges in behind to cradle her head, settles back against the coldness of stone. He covers them both with his towel and inhales the salt-struck air. And a sob rages up from the depths of his lungs like the release of all life.

## First Time

1.

The girl lies there like a foetus and she is bleeding. She has her back to him; has had her back to him since he rolled clumsily off and away from her. Her knees are curled against her chest and her back that is curved has taken her face far away from him.

‘Why are you crying?’ the boy asks but the girl who has just turned fifteen, and whose father died six years ago, and whose mother has gone for the weekend, does not answer.

This is the girl's first time. Just an hour ago the girl was enveloped in certainty, but she is less sure now that she loves the boy.

This is not the boy's first time – he is smart and good-looking and popular with the girls at school. The boy has done this five times before, with girls he knew at the time meant nothing to him. But this is *more*. This time he is certain he loves the girl though he is not capable of saying those words out loud to her.

‘What's wrong?’ he asks again but she is crying and she will not talk to him. In frustration he pulls back the covers, swings out of bed and goes into the bathroom to shower, and to think about why she might be crying, and why she won't talk to him. He wants to go back into the bedroom and ask her why and to tell her he loves her and that everything will be okay when the bleeding stops. But he doesn't.

The girl reaches down under the covers and feels the boy's semen on her stomach – it is cold now; sticky and she wishes it wasn't on her. Traces of blood have dried on her thighs. The inside of her vagina is very sore and her stomach is beginning to cramp. She is angry and less sure about the boy now cleansing himself of her – he is the same boy

but he is a different boy too. There is less of him than there was an hour ago.

Why didn't he look at her?

2.

It had seemed like an exciting mystery to her and she did not know – had no idea when they started to plan and argue about this a month ago – what it would be like, making love to the boy.

'I don't think I can,' she told him.

'Don't you love me?' and then his hands moved up under her school blouse and over the white material of her bra and as he feathered his fingers over her nipples and rolled his tongue around the inside of her mouth – then every nerve-end was volcanic and she thought she surely loved him and her blood raced to an unstoppable pulse.

But a stronger beating pushed against it. 'I'm not ready,' she said.

A month ago.

'When?' he asked, and his lips remained parted to swallow her answer, forever in the coming. 'Maybe,' he added, and his eyes shaped themselves so that what he said became both question – and something more – not quite an ultimatum, but a seed he knew could not resist the pull of sunlight if he planted it. 'Maybe you'll be ready in a few weeks?'

'I don't think I can.' Her face turned from him.

'We wouldn't have to go all the way. I'll wear a condom, you won't get pregnant.'

'It's not that.'

'Then what are we waiting for?' he asked and muzzled into her neck with lubricated half-bites; his impatience grasping in beyond the elastic of her underwear.

‘Don’t.’ Her voice was shrill and she pulled his hand away. And then ‘I’m sorry,’ as his face sulked off from hers and it felt like he was draining away from her. She reached, ‘It’s too soon,’ and both hands cupped his face back toward her. ‘Please, give me more time.’

The boy kissed her hard on the mouth; persisted. ‘Okay,’ he said in mock defeat. ‘We could just lie together. We wouldn’t have to do anything... just take our clothes off. It’d be *like* we’re doing it, but if you don’t want to go all the way...’

‘You wouldn’t mind?’

‘No.’

‘And if I wasn’t ready?’

‘Then we wouldn’t.’ He caressed her forearm as the girl’s eyes tried to look to the back of his eyes, beyond the reflective film.

‘You promise?’

‘Yes,’ he answered.

But she never imagined it would be like this. The white-hot lust had put a blow-torch to his vow, and blackened her, and scorched the promise to her mother.

3.

The mother had been worried about the daughter. Spending such a lot of time alone with the boy after school, before she got in from work. In the girl’s bedroom.

‘We just kiss, Mum,’ said the girl as she put her hands on her hips and lifted her shoulders a little. The mother trusted the girl as surely as she trusted her lungs to deliver breath, but still she worried. And she did not dislike the boy – always friendly and polite. Nor did she judge him for the adolescent instincts she knew must surely surface when the boy and the girl were alone in the house. She too had been a girl; had

matched her will against the over-eager hands; the lies, had crossed her legs against the generated lust. And giving it away too young, she knew how high the cost for minds and bodies unprepared.

After their visit to the father's grave a month ago she sat down with the girl and asked about the boy. And the girl did not hold back the truth; did not break the agreement that has never needed articulation.

'How *much* do you like him?' the mother asked.

'The loneliness goes when he's with me, Mum.' Then her head angled slightly, mind tilting on some fathomless brink. 'I feel like I'm more than what I am, when I'm with him. I don't know... Mum, is that like love is?' The girl watched the mother's brow grow lines that tried to fold over themselves.

'Are you...?' The mother's palms opened out, one corner of her mouth lifted and the cheek on that side rounded out. 'Are the two of you?'

But the answer ran over the rest of the question 'I told him I don't want to. Not yet.'

And at these words the mother's left hand crept and steadied itself across the daughter's hands. 'Give it another year – until you're sixteen.' And the hand gripped more tightly 'Promise me you'll wait a year?'

'Yes,' the daughter replied 'I'm not ready, it scares me.'

'*Promise*,' the mother said again.

'I promise,' the daughter replied 'I'll wait,' and she watched the lines slowly melt back into her mother's face.

4.

'When can we do it,' the boy persisted 'I can't wait much longer,' he said. 'I'll go mad.'

But the girl still wasn't sure whether or not she loved the boy, or whether the boy loved her. He helped her in many small ways – scared to stir her mother's pain, she could talk about her father's death to him. He held her hand in the schoolyard and was jeered by his friends, he had blushed but did not lighten his grip. When her mother was out and the cloud descended she could ring the boy and he would talk to her and make her laugh and tease her and she would pretend to be angry with him – both of them knowing it was a game whose hand reached in and held her to the sunlight. For a time.

To think of losing what the boy had become to her was to re-experience her father going off to work that last time. And who knows, maybe she really did love the boy and that would make it okay, she knew. And maybe having sex would be rhythmic and clean like it was in the movies. Perhaps a smooth joy would envelop her as it enveloped those she watched making love with fluent heroes, soft-fleshed in cinematic shadows of music and half-light.

But these notions had dissolved upon reality. Embarrassed, she had undressed in the bedroom, he in the bathroom, and she had climbed into the bed to cover her nakedness before he came back in. His hands made nervously over her breasts and between her legs. His fingernails had cut and hurt her. A nipple was bitten too hard and then the boy had tried to go into her and she had wanted to stop – her voice spoke his name in a tone they both knew meant she wanted to stop. But he ignored her call, and permitted the mechanical urgings of his body to define them both. And he did not once look at her.

'I think you're bleeding,' was all he said at the end as he rolled off and away from her. Though their bodies were aligned skin-to-skin in the single bed, she was untouchably distant. All there was of her now, lay naked beside all there was of him. By his act he had narrowed her, she

knew, to someone less than she was an hour ago; someone less than she deserved to be.

5.

For two years after the girl's father did not come home from work the mother allowed the daughter to come into her bedroom when the sun had completely gone. She cradled and encircled her daughter with great arms of grief and their hearts pumped together trying to smother each other's pain. Over six years their love was deepened by need and adorned with a genuine friendship that held them together through the hard hours.

6.

The girl knows part of the reason she is crying is because over those six years she has never once deceived her friend, her mother. But now she has. And between the deception and cold semen and the dried blood she feels smaller, grimy, like someone she herself would never ever want as a friend. Her cramps are getting worse and as the boy comes back into the bedroom and gets dressed and puts his right hand on her back still turned away from him, she pulls the doona tight around her shoulders.

'I wasn't ready,' she says to the boy, and though she doesn't bring it up, she is thinking about the promise he made a month ago – it is broken now, that promise. And hers made to the mother.

'Sorry,' is all he can say. 'I didn't think it would make you bleed.'

'My mum will be home soon.' She won't look at him.

'Are you crying because it hurt you...'

'You'd better go... I want you to.'

'Because you're bleeding?' He moves around to her side.

‘Go home,’ she says and burrows her face into the pillow.

‘Why won’t you tell me?’ But there is nothing coming back from the girl ‘Didn’t you like it?’ And so the boy puts on his shoes. ‘See you at school then, tomorrow?’

7.

When the boy has gone the girl gets up slowly not looking down at her body at all and then she showers, dresses and puts the bloodstained sheets in the wash. She re-makes her bed and for an hour she lies back on the crisp white sheets wanting to sleep. But she cannot and so she goes downstairs to the kitchen, which is the same one she had breakfast in this morning but it is a different kitchen too. She makes coffee, she just sits there and although it is getting grey she does not switch on the light. A half hour goes by in this darkness before the girl hears the front door-latch make its familiar click. The girl switches on the kitchen light as the front door swings open.

‘I’m home, darling,’ the mother calls, dropping her suitcase as she ambles toward where the girl has turned her back pretending to wash a cup. The mother moves up from behind, placing warm hands on the daughter’s shoulders. ‘What,’ she exclaims, sending her arms sideways like the unfolding of wings. ‘No hugs for your mum?’ The girl turns – she is holding on to it; she is trying – and her face conceals itself over the mother’s shoulder. The mother squeezes the daughter who feels the familiar heartbeat touch upon her own, and she just wants to let it go.

‘I was thinking,’ the mother says, clinching hard. ‘Tomorrow, why don’t you take the morning off school.’ She rubs the daughter’s back in a circular motion. ‘It’s been a long time – at least a month, and I thought...’ and as she says this she steps back one pace to look at the

daughter, whose face has gone up a little and off to one side. 'That we could go to the cemetery, put fresh flowers... are you okay?'

Now the mother's hands are in the girl's hands and she can feel the girl's body has set like steel. She wills the girl's face to meet her face and as it does, nothing is said and yet everything is revealed. The mother feels the small lines form on her forehead and pose a dozen questions – details of cause and affect – she knows can be asked and answered any time but now.

The mother bends her wings to encircle the daughter's body that shudders and the daughter's wet face pushes into the mother's breast that heaves in unison and knows her daughter's world – the one she left in two nights ago – is not that same world now.

Where is the hand that steadied that world? It is gone, that hand.

## Sonia, the Plumber and the Priest

So this bloke, Peter, a regular o' mine, he rings me up this particular Sunday arvo just when I'm watching the doggies kicking the living sole-case outta the magpies – and he says his dunny's blocked up. Jesus!

'Can't it wait till Mundy?' I ask him real hopeful, cause we're doing those bastards by 73 points and little Libba's just gone the smacko on Buckley an I'm buggered if I want to miss it. But this codger, Peter – rich as all getout, and I'm thinkin' triple time and a half plus extras – he's got a party going, he says. He's just had his son christened. All the family's there, the priest's there, and all his rich mates are there. He's almost beggin' me and what the hell, I'm a bloody Catholic meself, so what's a bloke to do.

So, I says 'Yeah, OK,' and I puts me hard-Yakkas on and I toss the bloody electric snake into the van, and Louis the sixth – he's me purebred pit-bull-cross-German shepherd-cross-French poodle – he jumps into the front seat, straight inta me bloody lap like always and like always I yells at him: 'Get in the back, ya bastard,' coz he stinks like a shit-carter's undies. So, he scrambles up the seat and tumbles arse-over into the bucket of sump oil I drained from Melanie's car that I use to top me own up – waste not, want not I say and they'll run on anythin' those '58 Kombies. So as I reverse outta me drive and head to this rich Peter bloke's blocked dunny here's Louis the sixth splashin' about doin' bloody great laps o' the van, black oil from his paws to his balls to his flamin' ear lobes. I'm not stoppin' to clean the silly prick coz I need to get back in time to watch the bullies toss those magpies outta the eight in last quarter.

Anyway, I get to Peter's place and sure enough, the water level's lickin' at the top rim o' the dunny and the turds they're floatin' like disabled submarines on a sea o' slush. There's three well-dressed women lined up in the hallway with their legs crossed. One of them speaks to me, she's movin' from one foot to the other and she's sort of stoopin' over, tryin' to control her own plumbin' catastrophe if you know what I mean.

'This is my wife, Sonia,' says Peter and I'm thinkin', Jesus, she's not a bad sort this Sonia. Short skirt, low-cut top, sluttish sort of smile, yeah, I'm thinkin', I'd have a bit o' that. No bullshittin' I reckon I've had half the bored housewives north o' the Yarra jump onto me quarter pounder but I'd give a third of them back for half an hour with this Sonia, let me tell ya.

'Will it be fixed soon?' she asks.

'No probs, luv,' I says. 'Just keep ya legs crossed for a few more ticks,' and I grabs me small rubber plunger and I gives that dunny bowl a cuppla short sharp jabs to the guts. Well, this first option don't work so well and now there's an incha slush and six brown turds rollin like Moreton Bay Bugs across Son's imported Italian slate.

'Oh, my God!' says Sonia. 'Look what you've *done*.'

'Aven't you seen a turd before?' I ask. But she's goin on and on about it and there's a definite edge to her voice as if it's all my fault the shitter's clagged up. And she's bendin' up and down now like she's bowin' to the freakin' Queen and her ands are up to her face. 'It's running toward the carpet!' she squeals.

'Keep ya tits on, Son,' I says in a friendly, familiar sorta way; soothin her down, like. Then quick as a rat up a drainpipe I grabs the two pink towels off the bathroom hand-rail – the ones with the initials P and S on them – and bein careful not to step on a floater in me new

Blundstones I've got that dunny floor so white ya could eat ya stras an sauce sandwiches off of it. I looks round to ask Sonia where to dump the towels but she must have been crook coz Peter an that priest, Father O'Connell was draggin' her along the hallway up to the bedroom.

Just when I'm thinkin' what to do next, Louis the sixth sniffs me out an comes bargin' in through the back door an he looks black ya know, he's still got all Mel's sump oil on him, so ya know what the cur does? He shakes himself. In Sonia's bathroom. There's effin oil from areshole to breakfast. Looks like the whole of Saudi Arabia's exploded in there!

'Get outta here, ya curly haired bastard!' I yells at him, turnin' to see the priest standin' there lookin' daggers at me. 'Sorry Father,' I says, crossin' meself a cuppla times, an then I look down again an there's Louis the sixth lickin' at the bloody towels. The priest just walks off shakin' his head an I couldn't blame him. 'You're a filthy mongrel, Louis,' I says real low as I kicks him fair square in the guts. I think I hurt his feelings – or I might've kicked him harder than I thought – coz he slinks into the hallway and falls onto the white shagpile like he's pole-axed. *It'll take Sonia hours to get those bloody stains off*, I was thinkin' and then be buggered if she don't appear, waddles up to me in obvious distress, hands cupped where her rude bits are.

'I *really* need to go,' she's pleadin' with me an then Louis the sixth suddenly revives himself an bugger me if he don't start humpin Sonia's left leg. Well naturally she tries to shake him off, she heads up the hallway shoutin' *Peter! Peter!* With Louis the sixth draggin' along still attached to her leg like it was a French poodle on heat.

So I picks up me claw hammer. 'Louis,' I yells, 'you leave her go or I'll have ya knackered, ya randy bastard!' an with that I takes aim an

hurls that hammer with everything that's in me. Fortunately – I say fortunately because I could have done some damage I'd've been sorry for later – the weapon misses Louis, travels another three metres along the hall – I still haven't lost me arm – an slams, claw first into Father O'Connell's right shin, and then that priest flings language you'd expect from a prostitute.

Well, this is all too much for Sonia, she's near hysterical an she's let go a tankfull over the carpet an this puts Louis the sixth right off. He sees my hammer hit the priest – an I can't blame him for this – he naturally assumes Father O'Connell's not a mate an buggered if he don't latch onto his left forearm an start shakin it like it'd been stolen from him.

'Give his arm back, ya bloody poofter,' an I'm real angry now, I tears up the hall an gives Louis the sixth another steel-cap in the ribcage. He lets go, scampers out the front door an scrambles up into the van. The priest's recoverin at this stage an is tryin to calm Sonia down. Neither of them have said a word to me – *Whatever appened to thank you?* I'm thinkin. Fortunately Louis hasn't bitten right to the bone but the blood's not pretty.

Well, I'm thinkin, the plunger hasn't worked an there's not a whole lot more I can do inside. The dunny's still blocked an it's best I gets me big guns out. So I heads out to the van an before I unload the snake I turn on the radio an bugger me if those effin magpies haven't got a run-on – kicked six bloody goals to our one in the third quarter. Bastards are only ten points down five minutes into the last quarter. The stress is somethin awful – *gotta get ome for this*, I'm thinkin, an worse still the white maggots have sent poor Libba off with the blood rule. It's not his blood, it's Buckley's, but the bastards have sent him off anyway an made him spit up Buckley's left ear as well. An they've reported him!

Christ, it wasn't his spleen or his lung – It's a shiela's game now, if ya ask me.

So quick as a cut cat I hurl the sewer-rooter outta the van an take it round to the back wall of the dunny, I whips off the inspection plate to find the whole bloody drain's blocked – an Christ almighty if a dozen turds don't fly out onto me new Blundstones.

Just then Peter an the priest come out. He's wearin a makeshift sling – fashioned outta a pair of Son's old pantyhose by the looks, an I'm thinking *I might fake a head wound later an try for some o that*. They've come round to see what's doin, looks on their faces like the whole effin catastrophe is *my* fault.

'Will you be much longer?' Peter asks, real tense, his face twistin up a bit. 'Father O'Connell needs to be taken for a tetanus shot... so if you could hurry.' I can see O'Connell scowling in my direction. It's not as if Louis has rabies – *Whatever appened to forgiveness*, I'm thinkin.

'I Just need to know where the septic tank is,' I says, avoidin all eye contact. 'I reckon it's blocked there.' A few of the party guests are saunterin' out to have a geezer. Sonia's there too, her eyes are real red an she's still got a black streak on her leg from Louis the sixth's indecent attentions.

Peter points to a concrete square in the yard. 'That's it,' he says.

I gets me crow-bar from the van an poor Louis is cowerin in the far corner. 'It's okay boy,' I says. 'Come on,' an he's up an over the side of the van an runs off into the yard like someone's dipped his bum in chille sauce. As I get to the lid of the septic it seems like I'm doin a Royal Command Performance – the whole bloody party's out there to watch me. *You'd reckon the rich'd have more interestin things to do*, I'm thinkin as I break the seal an lift the lid.

‘Just as I thought,’ I says, turnin with a triumphant smile. ‘She’s bloody chockers!’ Most of the guests are holdin their noses an turnin away. The only ones not lookin into the stench are Sonia an the priest. She’s bein real attentive to his wound an he’s talkin angry in low-slung tones, looking in my direction more than once.

‘Yuk, what are those things?’ cries a young girl about thirteen with braces on her teeth an a screwed-up nose. She’s pointin to lotsa circular objects floatin on the top of the tank. All the guests, includin yours truly, cranes their heads forward to gander at these objects – bloody hundreds of em. Louis the sixth sniffs up an puts his nose right in the tank. ‘Get outta there, ya bloody filthy mongrel,’ I yells an then the girl with the screwed up nose says ‘Yuuukkkk,’ again because Louis grabs one of the round rubber tubes between his teeth an holds it up for all to see. There was lots of giggles then an low mutterings of oooh an aah as the true identity of the objects was fully comprehended.

I turns to Peter an he’s lookin at it real queer. ‘It’s a condom,’ he says, like he’s never seen one before, an every expression seems to slide off his face.

‘Good Catholic like you, Peter,’ I says, an I turns to me audience an smiles. ‘I’m bloody surprised ya use em.’

‘I don’t,’ he says an then he turns an he’s lookin’ at Sonia an at Father O’Connell an I’ll be buggered if the two of em don’t go the sharpest shade of scarlet I ever saw as Louis scampers across an drops that tube of rubber right at their feet.

What with all the commotion that followed – Peter chasing Son round the yard with my crowbar an Father O’Connell jumpin’ the fence like somebody’d blowtorched his privates – I never did get me triple time an a half, not even a cuppa tea. Worse still, I get home an the doggies have gone down by one flamin’ point – an REXXIE reckons

Libba'll get twenty weeks. Twenty effin weeks! Just for an ear. It's a bloody shiela's game if ya want my opinion.

## Easter at Crown Casino

I saw a bearded man attached by his wrists and ankles to a light post outside Crown casino.

‘Why do you hang there like that?’ I inquired.

‘A sort of sacrifice,’ the man said. ‘I’m here to repent the folly of the punters inside.’

A bouncer walked up to see what it was that kept me from entering the tricky-tricky-greedshrine to feed all my hard-earned into the shiny clack-clack Lloydnjef machines. He recognised the bearded man.

‘Not you again,’ he said and looked up angrily into those beautiful blue eyes. And then he stabbed him in the side with a pointed stick and the man started to bleed, and to grimace and smile in turns, all the while liquid gold slowly oozing from his wound.

‘Bless you my son,’ he said to the bouncer. ‘I forgive you. I hang here and bleed this Easter in the year of myself 1998 for all those who earn their living from the frailty and unhappiness of others, and for all those, like the government and yourself, who enforce that greed. You know not a bit of what you do.’ Once again the bouncer jabbed the hanging man through his ribcage with the pointed stick.

‘Are you Jesus Christ?’ I asked, cupping my hands to catch the syruping gold from his wound.

‘I think so,’ said the man. ‘I can’t be sure. Tomorrow is Sunday though; if I rise up again I think that would be conclusive.’

‘Why have you done this?’ I said putting my hand over the gaping holes in his side to staunch the flow of goldenblood. I put two handfuls into my pocket because I thought it was right payment for my kindness. ‘Let me take you to the hospital,’ I said and a little sheepishly now I

took two more handfulls of bloodgold for having so selflessly thought to relieve his suffering. He looked at me with a sort of dog-eared forgiveness that made me blush.

‘It’s okay,’ said the man. ‘I forgive you for taking my innards. Don’t bother carrying me to the hospital, I went there last year but they had no public beds. I just lay on the emergency trolley until I died, like always.’

‘You should have taken out private health insurance,’ I said. ‘User-pays is best. It’s a Thatcherist world, you know.’

‘Yes,’ said the man. ‘I’ll try to remember that for next year.’

I reached into his stomach and took two more lumps of bloodgold. He was almost out of it now – nothing more dribbled from his side. I reached up and pulled until the webbing on his hands and feet split away from the nails holding him to the post. I winced, showing him that his pain was my pain and then he fell into my arms and looked up at me. There was a tear of blood forming on the bottom lid of each eye and a small white pearl floated in each drop. I cradled the man in my lap, sad for him, stroking his forehead. I reached into his eyes and plucked the pearls as payment for my empathy.

‘Thank you,’ said the man. ‘You are truly representative of your kind. I despise you for your greed, yet love you for your sensitivity, as I was born to do.’

He died then and this touched me in a big way. All the sucker-punters in the carpark had gathered around our little drama. Suddenly all hell broke loose as one of them saw a gold coin drop from the smiling dead bearded man’s side and then the rest of them began to tear away at the his innards. I grabbed his arms and tried to drag him away but the punters, mostly low income earners despised but needed by those who owned the casino, pulled him in the opposite direction. The

bearded man who had died for us all was ripped to pieces right there in the carpark, his golden guts spilling into the greedy hands of the poor, but deliriously happy punters. I was punched and kicked black and blue and my only reward was a small diamond that was the bearded man's last tear. I felt I deserved this for my troubles and anyway, he would no longer have a need to cry.

When it was over he had been completely drained of his essence. The punters fluttered back like moths to kenettrickytrickyland with their temporary loot and shallow grins while I carried the shell of our saviour to a bridge over the Yarra river & tossed it into the murky night, soon losing sight of him in the darkness. I heard a small splash and then two voices sleazed up at me from behind.

'Thank you,' they oozed in unison. I turned and it was the Lloydnjef twins leering up beside me. 'You've made an excellent contribution. We can't afford people like him if the State's to prosper. He was a foreigner and we can't have the soul of Victoria under foreign ownership.' Then the sun came up to embarrass me and they began to swagger off in that way of theirs – like men born to the dress circle, never the stalls.

'We're going to St. Pat's,' they said, 'to make a prayer for our fellow man on this Easter Sunday.' And they smiled those winner-cunning smiles they had and nothing much at all could stop them now from pulling all the while at the innards of the deliriously happy, poor punters from suburbs in which they would never have to live.

Then Lloydnjef turned on their heels and threw me one hundred gold coins and my eyes widened like they never had before.

'Now forget you ever knew him,' they said and I looked hard at the one hundred gold coins and I took one last look over the bridge and I couldn't remember a thing. I just had this uneasy feeling, like I was late for something.

## Remembering Meg

My name is Meg, and I can understand, now that I remember who I am, why the two tablespoons of Vegemite in the wash upset my daughter, Susan – Susan? Or Sharon? No, Susan, she was my second, no, third child. I had four... five children – one was stillborn, my first, and it was a girl I remember because... that man I married had to exchange blue paint for pink. So the one that died inside me must have been a girl.

When I was a child I really loved Vegemite. Oh how that tar-black spread could devil-up a slice of blank toast. But it did nothing for Susan's frillies or her pink satin nightie. She says that in the future, when she's at work, I'm to leave the wash alone. But I like to help her when I can because she's helping me by letting me live with her and Jim and their kids... can't remember their names just at the moment... anyway, John, that's Susan's husband, he told her, he said *Susan, your mother didn't mean to put Vegemite in the wash. It's not her fault.* I overheard them arguing about it, and Susan was crying. I like Jim and he's right, there are days when that black jar with the yellow label ends up in the laundry rather than the kitchen cupboard. I must put it there because I clear the breakfast table for them while they all go off to work and to school... oh, now I remember, Michael is the name of my grandson, yes, Michael, I'm sure, but I can't think of the girl's name right now, blowed if I can.

Anyway it doesn't matter how the Vegemite gets into the laundry cupboard, but once it does then to me, when I've forgotten to be Meg, it seems to become something to use in the wash, on those days I forget what it's really used for and forget that Sharon doesn't like me to be

doing the wash and think that it's 1949 and my Jim will swagger through the door and wrap me up in his arms...

When I wake up on those days the meaning of words like *Vegemite*, and *sugar* and *coffee* and *motor car* and *love* – they've all gone. It's like I'm asleep and some little god inside my brain decides to unclutter and unplug me for a day or two and then the meaning of everything – even my own name – disappears right out of my head. Nothing seems any different when it happens – I'm still Meg even if I can't remember myself, and everybody else is still who they are. According to Susan I call them different names than what they were born with, and it's difficult sometimes to *feel* what they are supposed to mean to me... everything feels like one of them foreign places that turn up in your dreams – you don't have a clue where you are but it all seems natural and right to be there. I can't explain it, but I'm happy enough. On those days when my head has been cleared of any need to be Meg we're all just a bunch of familiar strangers as far as I'm concerned. It is still a world that I am living in and they are living in and you are living in. And it is still spinning like Susan's washing machine and that makes sense to me if I keep spinning along *in* it, if not *with* it.

So what, I say, Vegemite is just a word anyway, like Sharon or Jim or Michael. I *am* Meg; most days, and most days I spread the Vegemite onto the toast and on others I spoon it into the wash. Curry-powdered cappuccinos aren't too bad either once you've gained a taste for them. Susan was the only one who didn't laugh about the Vegemite. The day she and John argued they said I had *Alzheimer's*, and let me tell you, that's one word I want my little god to vacuum right off my brain cells forever. But what can I do?... *Courtney*, that's my granddaughter's name.

See, today is a good day, oh! and *Jane* is the little one who died inside of me. Bob was devastated – our first it was... he died of cancer last year... I miss him, the feeling of his arms in the dead of night.

I'm going to do the wash now. I know, I know, Susan said not to, but the Vegemite is in the kitchen pantry, I checked. I'm aware today you see, as Meg as Meg can be today. I'll just use this other stuff I found in the laundry. G-R-A-V-O-X is the word on the box – I think they're the same company who used to make that stuff you put on your roast dinner. Four spoons should do it. Won't Susan be surprised. She rarely laughs these days, not even at the Vegemite thing... silly of me. The others laughed – Jim, Michael and my other daughter... what's her name? Anyway, they all chuckled about it over dinner that night.

'Can I have some cornflakes on my undies next time, Nan?' Michael said and they all laughed then – but not Susan, she's preoccupied with who I've become, I think, and where I'm heading. Truth be told it doesn't worry me that much. On the good days I remember I'm Meg, and on the days I don't, I can't recall a blessed thing. It's like before I was born and I can't remember any pain in that – can you?

Last night, just a couple of hours after that person I am when I'm not remembering to be Meg sugared the carpets, hosed the drapes and honey'd the woodwork, I heard Susan and Jim arguing about me maybe having a week's stay at Sunnyview Lodge, that's an old people's home three suburbs away. I'd rather be dead, I thought, than be a burden.

So I've made a decision – while they're all out of the house I'm going to get rid of that stranger my little god has made. I know Susan will be

upset, but... I've taken a whole box of sleeping pills – nothing messy like a gun or a knife. *Laxettes*, was the name on the pack.

Oh God, the things I do when I'm not remembering to be Meg. If I were a made-up character, like in a story, they'd be funny.

## Collecting the Kid

Billy and me, we collect dead bodies. You screw your face up: *What sort of person could do that job?* you say. But somebody does, and that somebody is us. You learn to live with most of it and after a while you develop ways of thinking about those bodies – like they're last year's cocoons – the grubs have turned to moths and flown elsewhere. There's no nerve-ends; no tears or laughter or love or joy or broken promises given by those empty shells; there's no *person* to feel any pain or to give you any grief, if you know what I mean.

But those developed-ways-of-thinking don't always work.

There was this particular week last year. I don't remember us having too many weeks like that – it was messy, everybody was on the end of some pain. Some got their right whack, but the rest never deserved it, I don't reckon.

Me and Billy, Ray Johnson and Smedley, we're sitting about the lunchroom, having coffee, you know, talking the usual shit. In comes Clive – he's the manager – and Clive says: 'There's a kid to be picked up,' and he says it like he's asking no more than for one of us to go buy him a packet of smokes. So we all look from one to the other, I mean, nobody's putting their hand up for this one, you know, because it's hard to ever rort yourself into thinking of kids like they were empty casings.

But Clive's growing impatient. 'Look, a couple of you have got to go to the Coroner's office in Richmond to pick up this kid... Billy?' And Billy nods a reluctant yes but the corners of his mouth have dropped and his arms have gone up from holding his *Inside Football* magazine and they fold in front of his chest.

Billy, he lost Marlene, let me see... two years last month. Terrific woman, Marlene. Thirty five. Breast cancer. Now Billy's just got the kid, Christie, sixteen. We did Marlene's funeral. Clive – he's a tight bastard most times – he didn't charge Billy, not one cent. I prepared Marlene. Billy wanted me to – we're mates me and Billy, so I did my best on Marlene and she came up well, I think. But it didn't change her from being dead; my best work couldn't soften it for Billy. He don't talk much unless it's about the kid, she's all that's left now, he says. But she's gone right off the rails, according to Billy. She's sneaking out nights; missing school; boys; she's smoking hippy-weed as well – the whole, *up yours Dad I'm sixteen don't treat me like a baby* routine. So of course that's pain on pain for Billy, who's lost Marlene and who loves the kid but has to fight with her most nights. And all this is going on without a wife or a mother to hold things together – you know what I'm saying, the spine is gone.

We're sitting in the pub last week. 'Christie'll end up like one of them kids *we* have to pick up,' Billy says to me right outta the blue. One minute I'm saying what a drop-kick John Howard is and the next he's thrown that in. He looks square at me when he says it, and to be honest I'm not real comfortable because suddenly we're not talking about the footy or the shape of the barmaid's bum or which horse is going to win the Cup next Saturday, no we're not. Then his head goes down and his shoulders set up this vibration. He doesn't come up for a long time because he's crying, and of course he don't want me to see that sort of thing – Jesus, I'm thinking, what am I supposed to do here? And the pub is full of blokes we know.

'No, she won't, mate,' I say to Billy and I put my beer down then and I feel embarrassed for him. I want to do; say something to help, but I don't know what. I start to bring my arms up from my sides. My

hands are stretching. Then I see Bobby Harris and Trevor Marks – they're mates from way back, they're standing in a shout of six blokes and looking over at Billy and me. So I let my arms slink back like a pair of cowards.

'Get a grip, Billy,' I say to him. 'What she's going through will pass. Look at Sandy,' I say. 'She handed me the same sort of crap when *she* was sixteen. Now she's working in a lawyer's office. See? It'll pass, mate, it will.' But when he looks up at me his face is set to break open – eyes like a five-day binge; veins standing out and purpling up the folds of skin making deep ridges that push his mouth back in a twisted line against his teeth.

'She's been gone for three bloody days,' he tells me then. Seems Billy put the clamps on Christie – you can't blame him, the way she was mucking up – and now the kid's been gone three days and Billy, he's phoned all her friends – the ones he knows about; and every night since he's gone to where she used to hang out at the local shopping mall – nothing. He's walked all the local parks. The cops are looking too, though they reckon she'll front back when she cools, she's just hiding at some mate's house, is what the cops say.

But Billy is all knotted up. 'She's walked out with nothing but what she was wearing,' he tells me. 'She must need more stuff by now. I don't think she *can* come home.'

So anyway, Billy's not too keen to go and pick up this kid from the Coroner's, but Clive's put the word on him and Clive's the boss so Billy's going, and that's that.

'Pete,' says Clive, 'you go with him.'

‘Can you drop this one on someone else, boss,’ asks Pete. ‘I went out for the last one. That fourteen year-old hanger in the garage at Rathdown street – the girl, remember?’

‘Bet you peeked under her dress before you lifted her down?’ This comes from Smedley. He thinks that's funny and his eyes are going round the table looking for somebody else to take up his laughter. But nobody is.

‘Yeah, you’re right Pete,’ says Clive. Then he gets impatient. ‘Smedley; mister funny man, you go with Billy.’

‘Okay,’ says Smedley. He butts his fag and gets straight up, left arm snaking into the sleeve of the black coat. This Smedley is ready to go – young or old, it doesn't worry him one iota. Billy doesn't like Smedley, says he’s got snake venom running through his veins. When we had Marlene stored in the cool room before she was buried – Like I said, I’d been preparing her, and Billy and me, we dressed her in her favourite outfit – well, anyway Billy catches Smedley walking out of this room where the woman he loves; the mother of his only kid, is laid out. She’s in there with only one other body, this old codger – heart attack – but that's nothing to do with Smedley, Billy knows. Billy sees a half-grin jump straight off Smedley's face when he sees Billy, who asks him why he's been in there.

‘Just checking out that old bloke, he needs to be fixed up for viewing,’ says Smedley, and his face colours up bright red, says Billy, and he just keeps on walking. So Billy goes in to check on Marlene, and her dress, you know, it's not straight like me and Billy left it, its got some horizontal creases in it now, it seems. But Billy’s not sure. And he's a quiet bloke, I've never seen him in a blue, not ever. So he straightens Marlene's dress then goes to the lunchroom. He sits opposite Smedley and stares at him. Smedley looks up, then sideways

because Pete's walked in, then back down to his Penthouse mag. Billy doesn't say anything, but the black seed's been planted, if you know what I mean.

'Kel,' says Clive, 'you go with them.'

So the three of us leave to do the pick-up and Smedley, he's driving and Billy's reading the paperwork on this dead kid. He needs to know about the kid, of course, but this way he doesn't have to talk to Smedley either.

'What's the story on this one?' asks Smedley.

Billy says nothing.

'Male or female?' Smedley pushes.

'Girl. Sixteen.'

'Suicide?' I ask.

'They think she was tossed from a moving car.'

'Shit, no kidding.'

'She might have jumped, they're not sure. Two other cars went over her.'

'Jesus, she'll be a mess. Sixteen. What a waste,' I say.

'Yeah, it is. She'd been raped as well, it says.'

'Probably died with a smile on her face, eh?'

'Is that supposed to be funny?' I ask Smedley, shaking my head.

Then he has that same bent grin, the one Billy caught him with coming out of the cool room where Marlene had been laid out. I look to Billy, whose face has set like granite into Smedley's face.

'What's up you?' asks Smedley.

'You're a low bastard.'

'It was a joke. She's not *your* daughter.'

'No, but she's somebody's.'

‘Not anybody that gives a fuck, by the look of things. Anyway, I wasn’t saying it to them, I was saying it to you.’

Billy’s knuckles bunch white wanting to come up and do some hard work restructuring the bones in Smedley’s face. ‘I don’t want to hear it.’

‘It was just a joke.’

‘Yours is coming, Smedley.’ Billy says half under his breath.

‘What did you say?’

But Billy don’t answer, he just stares straight ahead – his jaw’s locked up and I can tell by the look on his face that the next thing that goes between them won’t be done with words.

I break in then. ‘Just shut up and drive, Smedley,’ I say. And that’s the end of that conversation.

So finally we get to the morgue where Billy and me sort the paperwork while Smedley heads off to the cool room with an attendant to get this kid’s body, zipped up cold in plastic. As he’s pushing the trolley into the back of the wagon Smedley grabs the zipper tag and zaps it down to the top of her shoulders. Miraculously her face shows only superficial bruises; a few scratches; one deep scar on her forehead; her left ear is gone.

‘What a little honey she must have been,’ he says. ‘Look at those lips.’

Without answering and without even looking at the dead kid, Billy smacks Smedley’s hand off the zipper, locks onto it with his thumb and forefinger and hides the kid away again.

‘What the f...’

‘You got no bloody respect, have you?’ he says, eyes burning onto Smedley.

‘Jesus, I was just having a look. You know Billy, I’ve had enough of your shit today.’

‘You just couldn't wait?’ Billy’s hands are balled up, arms rigid anticipating even the smallest signal from the brain to go ahead and unleash themselves.

‘What's it to you? We'll see it all back at the shop anyway.’

‘Like you saw it all with Marlene.’

‘What?’ Since the question already knew its answer, Smedley's incredulity is faint.

‘You heard me, you lowlife prick.’ Then Billy is into the passenger seat before Smedley's look of shock can dismount from his face. Smedley walks to the front and climbs into the driver's seat, scowl-lines dragging his forehead onto the bridge of his nose. He’s always taken Billy's quiet manner for a lack of will; lack of aggression for lack of courage. ‘I don't know what you're on about, Billy. But I can tell you one thing...’

Billy meets his look. ‘What will you tell me, Smedley?’ His voice dips itself in menace.

‘Lay off me... get off your high moral horse or I'll fuckingwell sort you out.’ Billy looks to me then shuts himself down. He’s thinking of the kid in the back. Nothing more is said as they both fight for control of the silence.

Clive meets us as we’re taking the kid out of the hearse. ‘Smedley,’ Clive says, ‘can you unzip her and lay her out in the freezer.’

‘I'll do it boss,’ says Billy, and before any more can be said he starts wheeling the trolley away.

‘No, hang on,’ says Clive. ‘Let Smedley do her. The cops rang for you, they said to contact them pronto.’

All the blood drops out of Billy's face. He takes a quick look down at the bundle encased in plastic on the trolley and throws another at Smedley – a warning carried in the narrow slant of his eyes – then he flies toward the office.

I'm having a quick coffee in the lunchroom when Billy comes in from the office. He falls into a chair and the shade of grey-white on his face is like nothing I could describe to you.

'What's the go with Christie, mate?' I ask. 'Have they found her?'

'No,' he replies, eyes filming over.

'What then?'

'A couple of blokes fishing along the Maribrynong found a bundle of clothes strewn along part of the bank. They phoned the cops...'

'Could belong to anyone,' I say to Billy, whose shoulders have pulled his back into a tight hunch.

He looks up at me. 'They found a pair of blue jeans with a patch on the left knee, just like Christie's. Christie had a white T-shirt on – they found a white T-shirt. A pink jumper like the one Marlene bought for Christie two months before...'

'Jesus.'

'I've got to go down and look at them to make a positive identification. Tell Clive for me, will you.'

'Yeah Billy, you go.' So Billy lifts himself out of the chair like there's house bricks laced into the lining of his coat; like the walls and the ceiling of the lunchroom are trying to press him back down. I want to do something. I don't know what to say. 'Maybe the clothes aren't...'  
But while I'm speaking his eyes come up onto mine and I know how useless it would be to finish that stupid sentence. 'Give us a ring,' I say to him.

‘Yeah.’ He’s gone then, passing Clive who’s coming in. He mouths a few words, points in my direction then trudges out toward the car park.

‘Where’s he off to?’

‘The cops reckon they found Christie’s clothes.’ I fill Clive in.

‘Oh Christ, no,’ he says. We both sit there. Nothing is said for a full minute. ‘Maybe they’re not her clothes,’ Clive finally says.

I give him the look Billy gave me. ‘He’s going to ring me when he’s through,’ I tell Clive.

‘That’s bloody awful,’ says Clive. His elbows are digging into the tabletop. His head has gone into his hands. ‘Have they found a body or anything?’

‘No,’ I answer.

Clive’s forehead is cupped into his hands. He’s just staring at the laminate. ‘When Billy rings tell him to take all the time off he needs,’ Clive mumbles.

‘I’ll tell him.’ I’m looking at the stainless steel sink and then my eyes crawl up and I’m conscious of the Playboy centrefolds we’ve got plastered over the walls. All of a sudden I don’t feel so well, the contents of my stomach is working its way up and out onto the lunchroom floor.

‘Christ,’ says Clive, ‘are you okay?’ He leads me over to the sink.

‘It’s all right.’ I wave him off, rinse my mouth with cold water. I look at the naked women on the wall again – nipples accentuated; crude objects drawn between their legs; obscenities pencilled in cartoon speech-balloons coming from their mouths. My head falls into my hands because I know I’ve played a part in this.

I turn to Clive. ‘Is this where it starts?’ I ask.

‘Where what starts?’

‘Christie disappearing. The kid we picked up this morning.’ I point up to the wall. ‘Is this where it all starts?’ He’s looking at me like my brain has just fallen out onto the table. ‘Is there something wrong with us?’ I ask.

‘Us?’

‘Blokes – why do we need to do this.’

‘Do what?’

We hang them up there naked like it was their duty of birth to be... available like that; to spread themselves open like gutted fish for us?’

‘Now hang on, mate.’ He doesn’t like what I’m saying. ‘I think you’re wrong – I don’t think there’s any harm in admiring the beauty of the female form.’ His arms are half cocked at his sides with the hands spread. And there’s a stupid grin laced with a mock innocence that I take exception to. I’m over to him then. He’s the boss but I don’t really care right now and I’m standing above him so there’s just an inch between the blood-rushed red of my face and his like a bunny caught shock-white between the crosshairs of a 303.

‘Admiring the beauty of the female form, Clive, is that what we’re doing?’ My words fly into his face on small granules of spit. ‘Is that all of it? What about miss July up there with two cocks pencilled into every hole, Clive. What do you think when you look up at miss July?’

‘Smedley draws over them – so what? It’s just a bit of fun...’

‘Are there any up on your kitchen walls at home, Clive?’

‘I haven’t heard you or Ray or Billy say nothing about it before?’

‘Well I am now.’

‘Not every bloke who looks at a naked woman is a rapist, mister high and fucking mighty. I haven’t seen *you* making any attempt to take them down.’

‘Is that an invitation?’ I grab miss July off the wall and hold her up to Clive. ‘Tell me honest, when you look at her are you really seeing how beautiful the female form is?’ He starts to blush; pushes the page away. ‘No,’ I answer for him. ‘You think: I wish those cocks were mine.’

He ups himself from the chair and is square on to me. ‘And *you*, mister lunchroom police, what do you think?’

‘Honestly?’

‘Yeah, you’re the one who’s pointing the finger.’

‘The same as you, I suppose. I think it’s our way of keeping them... under us.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘I think it’s our way – some of us – of reminding ourselves and reminding them, that when it’s all boiled down, no matter how much they think they’ve caught up to us; no matter how smart some of them think they are by being our boss, or driving fancy cars, or paying off the mortgage on a penthouse, or not giving us kids when we want them – that when it’s all boiled down, Clive, we can take miss July here into the dunny, sprog all over her, screw her up and flush her away.’

‘Jesus,’ says Clive, wide-eyed. ‘Is *that* what you think about a few photos on a lunchroom wall?’

‘There are thousands of lunchroom walls like this one, Clive,’ I say. ‘With thousands of photos being leered at by thousands of blokes.’

‘Do *you* think that about women?’

‘No, I don’t think *I* do.’

‘Well, there’s your answer then.’

‘No, Clive, I’ll tell you what the answer is. You get those sick bastards who think the rest of us reckon it’s okay to think of miss July as just a piece of cock-meat – as something that’s low and disposable.’

'I think you're wrong. It's all just fantasy up there on that wall, and it's a helluva jump from that to the poor kid laid out on our slab. Is there any bloke *you* know who'd form the idea to rape a woman because he looks at them up there naked?'

'I've known blokes...'

'Name one.'

Just then Smedley walks in with his lunch. I look at him, and then I turn slowly back to Clive – and that's my answer, Clive knows.

Three days go by and there's no sign of Billy, so I go to his place.

'How you holding up?' I ask. It's a silly question I can see from his eyes – grey lids folding over the red webs spread across the whites.

'Not good, mate,' Billy answers. 'They've dragged the river – nothing.'

'Then maybe...'

I stop because Billy gives me a look that says: don't hold that shallow sort of hope up to me.

'If Marlene was here...'

The skin on his chin tenses, his bottom lip curves in the middle and rolls over quivering.

'Don't go there, Billy.' And I'm feeling weird again – like I should be here, but I don't want to be.

'None of this would've happened. She'd've held things together.'

'It's not your fault.'

'I know it's not my fault, but that don't bring them back.' He falls back into the chair and he's got nothing more to say about it, I can see. There's a long silence then he says: 'What about that kid me and Smedley picked up?'

'She goes down next Tuesday,' I answer. 'She's into a pauper's plot.'

'No family?'

‘Yeah, a mother. She rooms in a shitty little bed-sit in St Kilda. The cops gave us the address and I went to see her about the kid. She’s doing it hard, by the looks of things.’

‘Over the kid?’

‘No, I mean, you know, it looks like she’s knocked herself around – the place was a bloody dive... but yeah, I reckon she got upset about the kid; more over the way it happened, I think. She says to me: “I knew she’d come to nothing, that one. I told her she’d end up in trouble.” And she’s slurring her words something awful, Billy, and I can see needle marks going up both arms like a pox. Finally, she says to me: “Truth is, I expected something like this. She was a little slut, that one.” Her face goes bloody hard for a second or so – what sort of mother is this, I’m asking myself – and then she starts bawling, Billy. It was like no noise I ever heard before; it was like an animal crying.

‘So I wait until she settles then I say to her: How do you want your daughter buried? “I haven’t got nothing for that,” she says to me. “I haven’t got next week’s rent.”

‘Is her father around? maybe he could help, I say to her, but it turns out this bloke – this kid’s father – he’s been gone for like, four years. She doesn’t even know what State he lives in, according to her.

‘It’ll be a pretty basic funeral for your daughter, I say to her. But I don’t even think she heard me, Billy. She was looking out the window and her face seemed like it was frozen into a pond of a thousand thoughts – she’d gone somewhere else, you know what I mean?’

‘Yeah, I do,’ says Billy. ‘So this kid is going out on the cheap?’

‘Looks like it,’ I say. ‘There’s not even a set of clothes to bury her in.’

‘Jesus,’ says Billy.

‘The cops said she was naked when they tossed her out of the car.’

*'They?'*

'There were four lots of semen they could identify.'

'Fucking mongrels,' says Billy. His head begins to shake itself in his hands whose fingers flex and bunch through his hair.

'How do a bunch of blokes get to where they can act like a pack of feral dogs?' It's a question Billy don't expect an answer to, I know, but I take it up where I left off with Clive in the lunchroom, I tell Billy all about that little debate.

'Can't be the whole answer, those photos on the wall?' he says. 'Maybe they had mothers who beat the shit out of them when they were kids?'

'Maybe they never had much to do with their mothers at all,' I offer. 'Or sisters – maybe that's it? Maybe they see females as something... *else*, something less?'

'That might be true for some of them, but not all.'

I'm thinking then that maybe these pricks were born just not caring about anybody but themselves, that they were born missing the part of them that feels guilty about hurting other people. But I stop myself saying it because I see Billy's got a photograph in his hands. He's staring at Christie who looks to be about twelve years old in this photo. And Marlene – she's poking out her tongue, standing, both hands looped under Christie's chin as if she's holding her head up. They're at the ocean somewhere and the wind is blowing their hair all over the place. Billy is not in the photo of course because he's holding the camera. He's capturing this moment that's going to sum up forever the best of his world at that time. Christie has her arms around Marlene's waist, from side-on like; the grip so tight her face is scrunching up and she's got this grin, you know, she's just a face full of pearls and she's holding onto Marlene like she's holding onto the very earth itself.

But nothing is holding Billy, I can see, as his fingers feather that photograph. And just like at the pub a week ago I feel like I need to do something. And this time I do. I go over and sit beside him on the couch. It feels weird but it feels... right, you know what I mean? Occasionally, at work, there'd be a bit of push and shove, in fun like, you know – a punch on the arm if your team lost; a bit of a wrestle to get the best coffee cup – that sort of bullshit. But we never did this. I put my whole arm across Billy's shoulders. He lets me, and the photograph drops out of his hand and he turns his head into my chest as I wrap my other arm around him like I'm his mother. All the pain that's in Billy tries to shudder its way out but it can't, it's just doing crazy laps inside his chest. And then we're both doing it hard; we're both crying. I never cradled a full-grown man before. But I felt okay about it, I felt like it needed to be done.

Then the phone rings. I'm closest so I pick it up, and before I can say anything or pass the receiver to Billy, this girl's voice says 'Dad? Dad, are you there?'

Strange things happen in this world, they do, and then it usually means something very good or very bad happens to somebody – sometimes it's both. Billy and me drive to the police station and pick up Christie. I never saw two people so glad to be in one another's company – the hug between them is like the whole of the universe pushing in and enfolding them. Billy holds Christie and in front of four coppers he weeps till there's nothing left. We drive home and Christie tells us how it went.

'I met up with some kids in the city,' she says. 'They took me back to their place and I slept on one of the couches.'

'Your clothes?' Billy queries. 'The cops found your clothes?'

'This one girl,' Christie goes on, 'I don't know her name. She seemed okay; a bit quiet but; she didn't say much, just that her mum's a junkie in St Kilda. But anyway, when I woke up next morning all my clothes were gone – she'd taken them and left. I had to borrow stuff from one of the boys.' She takes our eyes down to the jeans that are way too baggy and a sloppy V-neck jumper.

Like I'm saying, strange things happen – the kid lying on one of our slabs is the kid who nicked Christie's clothes. The cops fill us in the next day. Seems this kid runs off early that morning and she's, you know, it's crazy but you can't tell them anything, she's hitchhiking – at four in the morning and nobody knows where – and these four young blokes, they're coming home from a nightclub or somewhere, and they pick her up. They put the hard word on her but she's not having any. So anyway, they drive down to the river where they strip her and, you know, she doesn't want to do it so they knock her around a bit and then they all take their turns. After that they pile her naked into the car because they're going to take her to one of their houses and do it all again. But halfway there this kid – according to those blokes in the car – she waits till they slow down near an intersection and she just opens up the passenger door, jumps out and gets cleaned up by two other cars. That's what the cops say these men said.

But who knows, maybe they had their bit of fun and just pushed her out of the car for the hell of it?

The next day Billy turns up at work and he's carrying a small overnight bag. I see him talk to Clive, who answers something Billy says with a shrug then goes back to his office. Billy strides out towards the cool-room where Smedley's been getting the kid ready – it's Tuesday and she's going down at three. I'm wondering what's in that bag, so I move

out to see Billy. I'm about twenty feet away and I hear Billy and Smedley arguing.

'Clive told me to get her fixed,' says Smedley.

'Well I just spoke to Clive,' says Billy. 'I'm doing her now.' He puts the bag on the coffin. 'So you can go.' Billy's tone leaves no doubt that this is an ultimatum.

'I don't think so,' says Smedley.

I'm at the doorway and the dead kid is lying ready; naked next to her box. Billy looks down at her then and I follow his eyes, and we notice her ankles are spread about eighteen inches apart. I look over and Billy's face is coming up to Smedley's face; it's like all the blood in Billy's body has surged up into that face – the eyes bulge and before Smedley understands what's happening Billy is into him with a head-butt that splits Smedley's nose wide open and puts four of his top teeth through his lower lip. Then Billy's knee is coming up to meet Smedley's head going down – and that's it for Smedley, he's copped his right whack.

I go over to Billy who's shaking. He looks across at me then he picks up the overnight bag. 'Give us a hand, will you?' I nod and he spreads the handles open and spills the washed and ironed contents onto the coffin lid. It's Christie's clothes that this kid had nicked; that the four bastards in the car had stripped from her; that the two fishermen had handed to the cops; that the cops had given back to Billy. Christie doesn't want those clothes back, no way, says Billy.

We dress the kid, me and Billy – we take her nakedness away with Christie's clothes. We do what we can to dolly over the marks on her face. I'm threading on the clothes while Billy, he's holding and lifting the kid up when she needs it. And we're both crying again – a habit we should have gotten into a long time ago, it seems to me now. We do our

best – she comes up well, I think, and Billy and me lift the kid into the coffin and we seal the lid.

Then we go into the lunchroom for coffee and while Billy is doing the honours I take my felt-tip pen and I dress the women on our wall.

## Picking Them Up

They had been in business; had clung to it, for just thirteen months. Front-of-house was suitably funereal, having being done over to achieve a black-laced fifties look furnished with imitation art-deco appointments and a giant photograph of Alfred Hitchcock. The on-show coffins were glued chipboard coming in either white or black enamel finished with rope handles – gold-plated plastic ones were an optional extra. They came in three sizes: large, medium and small, all of them near perfect rectangles slung together and nail-gunned up after hours by a moonlighting carpenter who'd lost an arm and seven of his toes in a nasty embrace with a power saw that wouldn't shut off.

The coffin-sized office out back had one second-hand desk with *MR DIXON SUCKS* carved into the wooden top and two wobbly-legged chairs propped on the bare boards. The place had last belonged to a butcher – the freezer rooms being a fortuitous extra – who'd been caught out and bashed to within an inch of his life after selling rabbit as veal at a Hell's Angels picnic.

Their business certificate: *DEB AND DEREK'S DISCOUNT FUNERALS* hung at a fifteen degree angle and rust stained the wall behind it where the roof had begun leaking in 1933. A poignant descriptor followed:

*Some might bury your dead deeper  
With trimmings, a priest, and real oak  
But we'll drop them in so much cheaper  
So you can be sad but not broke...*

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Beside this hung their qualifications: Debronika's *Certificate One in Very Basic Anatomy*, from the East Bentleigh Neighbourhood House, and Derek's *Associate Short Course of Creative Taxidermy*, of which he managed to complete five of the eight weeks, and just passing *basic needlework*.

They had met at a trivia night for single, over forties run by Derek's Taxidermy club – *come and get stuffed*, was the motto for the night. The two were thrown into a state of instant attraction via their respective interests, which, as the red wine flowed to loosen both personality and tongue, seemed more and more complementary. Over the coming three years necessity rendered them inseparable: no one else would have a bar of either of them. Then they'd started their funeral business, and their nuptial union was imminent – a severe bout of Russian flu had brought with it a rush of unexpected dead, and if this tragic, yet timely epidemic continued for another couple of months they would be able to afford to marry in the spring, and get the heating and the gas back on to boot.

It was a lazy Sunday and the phone was on its third ring when she picked it up.

'Hello.' Debronika's tone was a practised collage of assumed grief and concern, her mouse-grey hair fell to cover startled-owl eyes as her midget legs swung excitedly not quite touching the floorboards under the chair. 'Deb and Derek's Discount Funerals,' she chimed, and as the voice on the other end began a typical lament, Debronika heard the office door slam behind her.

'That's the *last* effing time,' came the nasal-whine of her beloved. Derek removed his black coat from a body that had the motion of uncoordinated rubber. His shoulders slumped in an attempt to belie his natural height of six foot nine and a half, atop which was a head the size

of a pretty good watermelon that bobbed and weaved like a car-dash imitation puppy when the stress was on. He flung the garment across the room, distracting Debronika who held onto the telephone with one hand and waved the other up with a crude two fingered gesture that complemented her lips rolling out their silent obscenities.

But the honey-false phone voice didn't miss a beat. '...No, sorry we don't do pick-ups on Sundays... Well if she's only just died another two days won't hurt? Have you got a station wagon you could pop her into... You haven't... No, sorry, we definitely can't come...' Impatience turned the honey to vulgar acid: 'Well for God's sake man, you've lived with her this long, just pack her in party-ice... Well go out and buy some – I mean, your legs, they're not just painted on are they?... We'll be around first thing Monday... What?' Suddenly her eyes widened, she withdrew the receiver from her head, looked at it and rubbed her ear. 'Well of all the foul mouthed... how rude!'

She turned to Derek then with a smile pulled up with the merest scunch of her cheek muscles – there were no teeth and the possibility of sympathy was conditional on circumstance, they both knew. She put on her cutesie voice; the one that betrayed a joviality he couldn't, at this particular moment, share. 'And what's upset my long lean plaything this morning?' She giggled. 'Care to stitch me up?' And there was a smirk he wanted to throttle off her face. Then with a tiny guffaw muffled into her hands she got up, walked over, put a hand on his crotch and looked up the three feet two inches necessary to meet his eyes. 'I want you to take out your needle and give me a damn good threading.' This doubled her over. It was pathetic, someone laughing at their own jokes like that.

'Next time it happens *you* can effingwell go and pick them up.' He pointed at her.

‘The next time *what* happens?’ She didn’t like him pointing; she’d read Greer and knew it wasn’t right.

‘The next time some thoughtless bastard dies on the dunny. *You* can pick him up.

‘No-one *plans* to die on a toilet, Derek. Was it messy?’

‘Messy, effing Christ Deb, the selfish old prick looks like he had a crap-fight with a ceiling fan. But that's not the worst.’

‘No?’ Her hand supported her rock-square chin thinking of something worse.

‘No, Deb. Mr Brown – or should I say Mr Brown-all-over – he’d been fermenting there on the floor of the thunderbox for the last three days. Can you picture it, seventy two hours marinating in his own dung?’

She could picture it, her face set like a crone sucking lemons. She understood, but you had to be realistic. ‘What was he supposed to do, Derek. He could hardly call out, could he?’ She began to giggle again and went into her best falsetto mock: ‘Hellooooooh out there. Excuse me but I've just shit myself and died, could somebody please phone Derek straight away before I stiffen up, start to rot, and become smelly and difficult.’

‘You think that’s funny, Deb?’ He was pointing again. ‘If you want to see something reeeeealy funny, come and take a look at the back of the hearse.’

The muscles in her face squirmed up to remove all traces of funny. ‘Tell me you bagged him?’ The old Deb was back, Derek withdrew the pointed finger to the relative safety of a pocket. ‘Tell me Mr Brown is not on the carpet in the back of the hearse.’

Derek made his way to where there was the table and two chairs between them. And he was closest to the door. 'I told you last Tuesday we were out of bags.'

'And you were going to order some in.'

'I did, but they won't be here until next week.'

'Christ, Derek you could have taken a sheet of plastic.' Her voice rose a little, deceiving him into thinking this was the end of her admonishment.

He would encourage back her good humour. 'I'll take Cling-Wrap next time,' he beamed.

'What did you say?' Then she gave him that look, the one cats give mice and birds when they've had enough of playing with them. 'I can't believe you didn't bag a shitter.' And with that she rose to her full height of four foot six, stood up on the chair and just about reached to where she could look him square in the eyes. 'I Ajaxed that hearse on Thursday, Derek, I'll have your guts for garters if it's bad.' She leapt from the chair like an atomic dwarf and lurched out to where the hearse was parked.

'I put a towel over him,' Derek yelled, keeping a sensible distance.

'Open it up.' She didn't look at him. When he pulled the tailgate she reached in and dragged the beach towel embossed with the image of a naked woman from the dead man's head and down to his torso. Both hands jumped up to her mouth as a bucket of air was sucked through into her lungs and hung there as her top teeth bit into the bottom lip.

'Gee-zuss Kerr-riste! Why did you put him in there like that?'

He'd always thought attack the best form of defence. 'Fair suck of the sav, Deb, you're lucky I brought him in at all.'

'You could have cleaned him.'

‘Righto, Deb, from now on I’ll give them all a shave and a haircut before I bring them in.’

Her head was going from side to side. ‘You could have got a bucket of water and washed him.’

‘Yeah, right Deb, next old crapper I get I’ll drag him out, rope him up to the side of the house and hose him down.’

‘Don’t be smart with me, Derek.’ She looked around for a blunt instrument with which she could better make her point.

‘Next time I’ll take a trailer, put the old shitter in and drive to the nearest car wash.’

Her shock-white teeth bared themselves, the top set locking onto the lower ones like a cast-iron orgasm, shutting off a run of obscenities. Her hands were balling into fists, but she held onto it. A few seconds later her shoulders dropped and Derek saw that her eyes were becoming just a little watery. Poor thing had been working terribly long hours.

‘Do you need to lie down, dear,’ he said.

Debronika’s hands rose up sideways from her thighs to cup her cheeks puffing up toward her widened eyelids. ‘Just *look* at him,’ she said with resignation.

‘Wasn’t my fault, Deb. I had a helluva job getting Mr Brown out, in fact...’

But she cut him off, both arms swept up in front of her face turned away from him. Her palms flattened at him like a bomb-blanket. ‘I... don’t... want... to hear about it. I just want you to take Mr Brown around the back, wash him off and put him in the bloody fridge.’

And with that she reached in and pulled the towel completely away from Mr Brown’s body. ‘Holy Jeezus,’ she shrieked ‘His legs!’

‘Yes, Deb, I was about to mention...’

‘Mr Brown hasn’t got any legs.’

‘Well now, to be fair that's not exactly right.’

‘No, he’s fine down to the knees.’ Derek had never seen her eyes so round. ‘Where’s the rest, Derek; the bits with his feet attached?’

‘I’m getting to that,’ he promised.

‘Did he *have* legs?’

‘Yes, to start with, but...’

‘Well then?’ She was always reasonable; she ambled rather than jumped to conclusions.

‘You see, Deb I was trying to get him out...’ His head began to bob; his hands – he was Von Karajan conducting Beethoven’s Fifth – affirmed the integrity of every word. But she wanted him to get to the end.

‘Well, where are they now?’

‘And the simple truth is...’

‘Where are Mr Brown's legs, Derek?’

‘They just...’

‘Derek?’

‘Broke off.’

Derek edged closer to the door as he watched her mouth form the most incredulous ‘O’. Then she swore: ‘Holy fuck.’ He’d never heard her swear – and a hint of industrial-grade caustic soda leapt off her final ‘k’.

His tone was soft and assuring. ‘It's wasn’t my fault, Deb.’ He spoke like he was reciting a psalm. ‘It was the carpenter.’

Her shoulders dropped a little and a queer smile of manic confusion came over her face. ‘The carpenter?’ And her head lifted itself backwards, taking her gaze up to where some god or another might provide clarity.

‘Yes, Deb,’ he went on. ‘The carpenter who built the house,’ She couldn’t help herself; she began to laugh out loud, but it wasn’t the sort of laughter you’d spend on a joke – it came through clamped teeth like shreds of garlic through a press. Then, after a few seconds she regained her former self. Her voice became measured; it anticipated logic.

‘So, you’re going to stand there and tell me... that a carpenter sawed Mr Brown's legs off?’

‘No, Deb, look...’ She was looking. ‘When a house is built the carpenter always hangs the toilet door so it opens *in*, rather than *out*. Don’t you see?’

She didn't.

He started to shake his head – he had always thought her intelligent. ‘Can't you picture it?’ he pleaded. ‘Can't you imagine the predicament I was in?’ But there was no sign that any of it was sinking in; it was like talking to a house-brick. ‘Look – old Mr Brown-and-out here dies, right.’

She knew that.

‘Then, he slides sloooooowly off the seat.’ And as he said this, Derek’s hand curved toward her face like an aeroplane-hand tricking a child into eating cabbage. ‘And Deb, twelve hours later when the rigors have set in, old Mr Brown’s legs stiffened up against that effing dunny door like a couple of teenage hard-ons.’ He looked at her, pleased with his simile. There was a glint there, there was.

‘Yes?’ she said.

‘So you see, Deb, I *had* to use the sledgehammer.’

‘Sledgehammer?’ She tried to picture it.

‘Yes, a sledgehammer,’ he repeated, imitating the golf swing a man with bad knees might make when drunk.

‘To get the door off?’ She was getting there.

‘Yes, Deb, I laid into that three-ply like a bull-ant on steroids.’

‘Oh my God,’ she said, staring down at what was left of Mr Brown’s legs. ‘He looks like a practice-dummy for the Mafia.’

‘He must have had very brittle bones, Deb.’ He said it like he had a PhD in skeletal science. ‘The legs just sort of... snapped sideways at the knees.’ Then, bending his elbows he brought both arms in front of him and flung them sideways at right angles. ‘And they jumped off.’ He gave a final philosophical shrug. ‘I think he must’ve had a calcium deficiency.’

Debronika glanced around for a weapon of some description – a solid steel rod would be good, or a chainsaw, an ice-pick to go where the sun didn’t shine – but there was nothing close enough that she could get to with her remaining energy. The episode had spent her. All she could muster as she gazed down at poor old Brown was sarcasm.

‘Well there won’t be any trouble fitting him into the coffin now will there, Derek. Where *are* the legs by the way? I mean, for the viewing – his relatives, Derek, they’ll more or less remember him as being six foot one, not four foot three.’

‘Ah, yes Deb, the legs, I was moving onto that... Are you all right, you look a bit pale?’ He didn’t quite put a hand on her shoulder. ‘Cup of tea, Deb?’

She had one last idea. ‘Derek, do you think we could...’

‘Yes, darling, what?’

‘... just push his legs back into his trousers to where they used to be?’

‘No, Deb, we can’t do that.’

‘Why not?’ It was a silly question, she knew.

‘I didn’t think he’d need them, you know, being dead.’ She knew the legs weren’t coming back. ‘And they were rolling round all over the

back of the hearse, so ...' It was academic, but she thought she ought to know.

'So I put them in a Brotherhood bin.'

As he watched, her eyes seemed to just... go out. He caught her an inch from hitting the boards. 'Deb!' Then carried her like a windscreen-shattered bird to the office. The phone began to ring as he propped her prostrate into a corner and gave her a couple of smart smacks across the cheeks. But it was useless he could see, both terminals had been temporarily disconnected. The phone was on its fourth ring. 'Hang on,' he cursed and as he let Debronika go she slid sideways and her head went klunk onto the hollow plaster wall.

He grabbed for the receiver. 'Hello, Deb and Derek's Discount Funerals. Derek speaking... No...,' he looked down at Debronika, her serene face now sitting at a forty degree angle to the rest of her. 'She doesn't appear to be able to speak right now... No, we can't come tomorrow, it's our day off. Stick her in the fridge and I'll be there Monday... Yes, Monday. Goodbye – no, wait! What room was she in when she died?'

## mister jones

Nurse Chiller says Harrison and I – he insists, for reasons of anonymity I call him that and not Emeritus Professor Robert Harrison – have way too much time on our hands. Harrison is eighty-three years old and I'm one year younger. We live – and I use *that* word loosely – at Happiville Home for the Aged. I'm very nearly *Doctor Philip Jones* – I've got just six months of my PhD to complete, and Harrison, my self-appointed supervisor, says I'm doing very nicely, thank you.

In her ignorance Nurse Chiller calls me *mister jones*, just slurs it out like she's got a mouth full of porridge. Harrison says it's best Chiller doesn't learn about our true identities or his theories on life at this particular point in time.

Showing a generosity way beyond the bounds of normal academic licence, Harrison has allowed me to construct my PhD as a *creative* thesis – one hundred percent! Staggering. He even suggested the topic: *The Theory of Harrison's Theories* and has asked me to take a particularly argumentative attitude in trying to persuade the Academy his theories are shallow and do not reflect in any way the reality of people's lives – what the person I am when I'm not being an academic would term: *a great crock of shit*.

Harrison has helped me enormously, even playing the devil's advocate – waving his arms about, frothing and screaming like a cut cat if I dare write or say anything nice about his theories. Chiller doesn't like it when Harrison does this. She shouts to Big Serge the orderly to come strap Harrison into his potty-chair for an hour or so. Big Serge is a retired World Championship Wrestler with arms like bridge pylons but a brain so small it only allows them to function like sleepy boa

constrictors when Chiller's rasp-deep commands boom and echo off the cream-grey walls. During our discussion of May 7 Harrison put forward the theory, after months of careful observation, and newspaper reports of terrorist infiltration, that Big Serge is a bunny for ASIO, keeping an eye on the old Muslims here at Happiville – making sure they don't blow the place up or substitute real food onto our dinner plates.

In truth, Harrison wants me to fail my PhD. Of course he does, he wants my hypothesis: *Harrison's theories, because they lack concrete data and verifiable research methodologies, are utterly meaningless*, to go badly – my failure will be his triumph. But he has promised even if I cock it up he will award me the PhD. Harrison says he can do this because of the element of subjectivity involved in judging anything that is creative. Harrison says while *he* might regard my creative writing and my ideas as worthless, he fully intends to take into account that if *another* reader – perhaps a woman; maybe a young woman from Broadmeadows who had perhaps left school at fourteen and worked as a check-out girl for K-Mart – that if this *sort of reader* read my work, it might make perfect sense. 'It may very well astound them, Jones,' Harrison says.

'On the other hand, Harrison,' I said, and smiling just a little bit, 'you might find yourself agreeing with my hypothesis?' This was a clumsy statement on my part. It didn't go down well at all and caused one of the few awkward moments Harrison and I have shared. He gave me a look – there was a bit of anger I think, but there was just a hint of doubt as well. It was a look Nurse Chiller would give me when, in the middle of breakfast, I would suddenly stand bolt upright, sending my tray and its mucky contents over the dining room floor, her not knowing whether I meant it as an act of defiance or if it was the confused doings of my dementia.

She would storm up with eyes like arc-lights searching for any sign of intent that might have seeped from the leather folds my face was. *Are you stupid, mister jones, or just thoughtless?* She would ask. *Who is going to clean this up? Should I get Serge to spoonfeed you like some baby, mister jones, is that what you want?* I would look down at the mess then, my knuckles flexing and bunching white, a clear line of slag dripping through my teeth; lips; onto my chin and, if I was having a brave day, I would even let the edges of my mouth give off a little of what might or might not be taken for a smile.

I want the glorious failure of my PhD more than anything because I believe like superglue in every theory Harrison expounds.

My son visits me at Happiville once a month on average. I can't blame him for that, you know, he has his own life to live, as he is fond of telling me. But still, I have Harrison and his theories, I have Nurse Chiller and Big Serge, plus an odd variety of forgotten ones society calls *our old*, and that's more than enough to keep me worried and occupied. Before Harrison came I used to get very lonely here amongst the old people Chiller calls *dribblers*. That woman, jesus, she's got a personality like the serrated edge of a bread knife, let me tell you. One time, before Harrison, I took seventeen Mogadon as a final cure for my loneliness – so I wouldn't become a silly dribbler like the rest. But Big Serge found me and pumped me back up again. I was lying there half comatose as Nurse Chiller explained to my son that it was confusion, not unhappiness made me take those pills. *Bullshit*, was my just-audible slur. After my son left, Chiller had Big Serge strap me in my bed for two days. That was dark, I tell you. I thought I was going to die then. It scared me. I had to push the sad person over an edge of sorts; get some distance from him; create some clarity about our relationship. I'm harder for it, I think, and that scares me too. There are times I feel my

incompleteness and have tried to call him home again. But the distance is too great. In some ways that is good – he keeps our sadness, and most of our pain. But he has our sanity as well.

It is not so bad now Harrison is here. Every morning around ten we meet in the TV room and have a discussion about his latest theory, whatever that might be. He's had some beauties, I can tell you, and eventually I come to agree with every one of them. Before being *placed* here at Happiville Harrison held the Chair in Philosophy at Melbourne – that's what he told me – he was an Emeritus Professor whose colleagues, jealous of his superior, yet somewhat eccentric intellect in coming up with his immaculate theories, had him certified.

At the start of any new discussion, I must never tell Harrison I agree with his theories. He has insisted I fight him tooth and nail over every aspect and notion. As our debates progress and he playfully undercuts every argumentative response, I am encouraged and assisted *toward a position of understanding* regarding his latest theory. Harrison says for his theories to be accepted by the world at large they need to be 'rigorously scrutinised' – they're Harrison's own words.

I do my best.

Harrison was the one who suggested I apply to do my PhD after I had put up a particularly convincing argument against his *Theory of Inevitability*, first mentioned during our discussion of October 12 last year. It went something like this:

*Harrison:* I'd like to put something to you, Jones.

*Jones:* And what might that be, Harrison?

*Harrison:* I think it is absolutely inevitable that *one day* four men, whose heights will vary from 140cm to 220cm; one woman who will be in love with two of these men; plus a pair of rabbits, one white and one black – will land on Saturn. What are my odds of being right?

*Jones:* Billions and billions to one, Harrison, it will never happen. What you're saying is *pure crap*.

*(Professor Harrison wriggles his potty-chair over to mister jones and gives him a friendly lecture on the sort of language that is acceptable to men of letters and the sort that is not.)*

*Harrison:* So long as the full spectrum of human beings continue to be born and continue to exist and be curious I promise you, Jones it will happen. The probability is increasing as we speak.

*Jones:* That's a very obscure notion, Harrison, and as far as I can see, absolutely worthless on a practical level.

*Harrison:* Its true, I cannot find any great purpose for this theory as yet. But since when was developing a theory ever slave to any function, need or meaning?

*Jones:* Shouldn't they be?

*Harrison:* Maybe, Jones, but what you are alluding to is a *Theory of Theories*, something you might consider as a very worthy topic for your PhD, but something that is altogether different from the theory we are currently discussing. We will inevitably get around to discussing *that* theory, if we live long enough. But if we don't it is inevitable that sometime in the future somebody else will. Do you have any questions for me, Jones?

*Jones:* How can you be so sure the four men, the woman and the rabbits will go to Saturn? Or that anyone other than us will ever again mention the *theory of theories*?

*Harrison:* My theory is simply an imaginative extension of Malthousen's *Theory of Mathematical Certainty*. Malthousen and I had adjoining beds at my last lodgings, Sunnyview Memorial Rehabilitation Centre. I conferred an Honorary Doctorate in Advanced Mathematical

Studies on Malthousen after the performance of his stunning experiment. The experiment went like this:

Days 1-2: for two whole days and nights Malthousen writes down the numbers one through one million on sheets of A4 paper, 600 numbers to a page.

Day 3: I assist Malthousen to cut up the pages into individual numbers. We notice the staff look on bemused thinking perhaps that this is the work of a couple of elderly men displaying early signs of dementia. Malthousen and I exchange winks and nods. The recreation officer, Ms Funsbie notices Malthousen and I have covered most of the day room with scattered numbers, disrupting the other inmates from their daytime television. She finds a good-sized cardboard box and allows us to store the numbers there. Unbeknown to Ms Funsbie I have just conferred upon her the title of Honorary Research Assistant.

Day 4: the cutting finishes and all of the numbers are in the cardboard box. With great patience Malthousen explains his theory to me: that within our lifetime – and even though we replace every number back into the number pool after we draw it – every number will eventually be drawn out at least once. I am sympathetic yet somewhat sceptical. For the rest of that day we each take turns to pull out numbers, write them down on a master-sheet and then return them to the common pool of cut squares.

Days 5 through 832: for fifteen hours of each day, stopping only for lunch breaks, Malthousen and I continue to pull numbers from the box, write them down then toss them back into the box again. Every hour Ms Funsbie is begged and cajoled by Malthousen to give the numbers a

big shake-up. This action always causes the other inmates to turn their heads from the television and after day 621 it is noted by Malthousen and myself that Ms Funsbie has started to invent more and more elaborate methods of shaking the numbers. Sometimes she twirls the box like a spinning top; on others she lifts it above her head and dances about the room, hips swivelling and boobs bobbing.

Day 704: Malthousen and I grow very concerned. Funsbie puts a cassette tape into the player and a lurid tune begins. She shakes the box of numbers with one hand, gyrates up to that old dribbler, Hornsberg, who sits alone in the corner naked from the waist down. She sits on his lap, fondles his bald head and pulls his face into her bosom. This sends the old dribblers of Sunnyview, especially the men, into a frenzy of stomping feet and a jumping cacophony of knives, forks, spoons and plates. Then, two days later, just before the turn of the second year, and after she'd been to a particularly boisterous Christmas breakup in the staff room, she actually climbed into the box, swam about in the numbers like a fish and came up naked with the number 69 held firmly between her teeth. I was outraged. *This is not some PhD in Creative Writing, I reminded him. The whole theory will have to be abandoned unless the research methodology can be brought back into the realms of academic rigour.*

Day 833: I strip Ms Funsbie of her title of Research Assistant and Malthousen tells her in no uncertain terms, and using a particularly offensive finger gesture, that she is to keep well away from the numbers. Her response is to beg him to give her one more chance. All the dribblers want her to do it but it is no use, we refuse to allow the project to descend to such depths again. Funsbie is devastated. She

scowls off, stops, turns and throws the term *old fuckwits* at us, but it doesn't do her any good.

Day 838: At this point there are only six numbers that have not been drawn out at least *once* from the box. Malthousen becomes obsessive; he begins missing his dried out chicken and lukewarm mashed potato in order to continue picking out numbers. He gets whiter and thinner; his eyes are webbed red and his false teeth project themselves. In his striped pyjamas he looks like something on a postcard from Auswitch or Belsen.

Day 847: Malthousen has grown extremely weak. Only one number: 87, remains to be pulled from the box. Ms Funsbie sulks in her office and the dribblers have gone back to watching the fish-tank test pattern on SBS.

Day 850: In the interests of Malthousen's health, I go into the day room to concede his *Theory of Mathematical Certainty* has been more or less proven – even though the last number hasn't yet been drawn. But Malthousen won't have it, he continues in a frenzy pulling numbers out and throwing them back in. As the days wear on I have to carry him to the box where he sits like a battery hen doing the numbers.

Day 965: I find Malthousen wide-eyed and dead on the floor, the number 13 clutched like a final straw in his hand. Something catches my eye in the staff room – it is Funsbie, she is smiling, holding up the square with 87 on it.

*Jones:*                   How does Malthousen's theory lead to your theory?

*Harrison:* Come on, Jones don't play games with me. My *Theory of Basic Vehiculisation?* Our discussion of December 21, don't you remember? The only thing that limits ultra-nomic travel possibility is the supro-engineered vehicular technological capability to make it possible.

*Jones:* Of course.

*Harrison:* So one day, Jones – it might be one million or ten million years from now, but one day those four men, the woman and the rabbits will – not *might*, Jones, *will* go to Saturn.

I had nothing more to say at that particular moment. As usual, Harrison's logic had astounded me, not that I let it show, that was not how the game was played. Just then Nurse Chiller came in so we feigned our usual selves and began watching TV, playing with our forks and spoons and dribbling just a little bit. If only she knew. But all Chiller thinks about is feeding us on the cheap and keeping us clean, strapped in and quiet. She's got three quarters of my pension coming at her every fortnight and a \$100,000 bond from the sale of my home – the one I'm never going back to – sitting in her bank account. You would think she would try to treat us better than dogs.

Harrison told me not to worry too much about this. He said it will pass. He said Chiller and her like can only exist in a *Thatcherist* society, whatever that is. He gave me a copy of his *Theory of Accumulating Resistance* – its hypothesis being that all societies eventually resist and pull down the prevailing politic. Harrison thought kinder days were coming and (he inferred but he never put it exactly this way) that if we could hang on, society would have Chiller's guts for garters for the way she treated us.

Although I believed in Harrison's *Theory of Inevitability* all along I flung my last hypothetical argument against it like a Brett Lee bumper:

‘But what if the vehicle was swept into a black hole and everybody was killed, what then?’ I must have connected with something because at this stage he went into one of his typical thinking poses – his right hand reached down, pulled up his hospital gown and scratched his testicles while his gnarled left hand came up under his chin and his buckled fingers started rummaging through the soup-stained grey of his beard.

‘Hell, that was a brilliant piece of work, Jones,’ he said putting his right hand on my shoulder. ‘I am going to have to completely rethink the phenomenological verisimilitudes that are persuading the arc of poetic contradictions away from the axis of information along the paradigmatic textual markers of my theory.’

‘Exactly,’ I bluffed.

‘I think it is time you thought about furthering your academic qualifications, Jones.’

Was I wrong not to mention to Harrison I’d failed everything in fifth form at Broadmeadows High school except French – and that my only other academic involvement was in a short course run by a disgruntled writer whose work had been discredited and marginalised by deconstruction theory? The course was: *Barthes, Derrida, Foucault – debunking the three French thugs*. Although I’d received an A+ for my final assignment – a brilliant essay (my tutor’s words, not mine) titled: *I’m Not Dead, You Bastard*, annihilating Roland Barthes’ reactionary, emotive and overstated claims about the ownership of meaning in the text – I hardly thought it qualified me to pursue a PhD. But If Harrison wasn’t asking, I wasn’t coming clean.

Harrison's latest theory: *The Simultaneous Universal Centre*, seemed like a particularly appealing one to me, coming at a time when my emotions were brittle – my son had not been to see me for nine weeks and two days. He is ungrateful, yes, but God I miss him – his few words –

condescension layered like peanut butter, and his parting kiss, always sandpaper-dry upon my cheek, are all that connect me to the person who is slowly being imprisoned in this old shell Nurse Chiller calls *mister jones*.

Harrison's latest theory is, I think after my initial scepticism was dissolved in the discussion of June 7, his finest to date.

'I've got a new theory, Jones,' he began.

'Have you, Harrison?' I laced my rhetorical question with as much sarcasm as I could. 'Then let me tell you before you even begin, it had better be more logically supported than the last one, what was it? Oh yes, the *Theory of Inevitability*.'

He blushed a little, then he winked at me. 'Tell me, Jones, how important do you think you are?'

'Not very,' I said, thinking about my son.

'You might be surprised.'

'Go on,' I said.

'How would you feel, Jones if I were to say that you were the centre of the universe.' His face broke wide open at this announcement and his teeth fell into his lap. I couldn't for the life of me see how he could possibly prove such an outrageous notion, but I knew that Harrison was ultimately going to be right and that he was about to astound me once again.

'I think that's a load of Canary shit.'

Harrison's eyes widened. His lips folded into his gums like they'd been vacuumed. 'Jones,' he said putting his hand on my shoulder, 'I fully expect you to conduct your debates with rigour, but as an emerging academic you need to articulate your arguments with more... decorum.' Instead of the term *Canary shit*, Harrison went on, 'In future I would prefer you to use phrases such as *unfounded proposition* or

*unresearched assertion* or, if you are particularly annoyed: *an unsubstantiated, thoroughly discredited and totally uninformed notion*. Understood?’

I promised to try. Though at eighty-two years old it was always going to be difficult to curb my more basic genealogical and environmental urges.

‘It’s easy to see,’ Harrison said in conclusion, ‘that you never studied at Melbourne. Now to my theory, Jones – let me ask you something. Can you tell me two things that have no end?’

I let my chin fall onto my chest trying to think of something. A small dribble of snot dropped from my nostrils onto the napkin Nurse Chiller had tied around my neck. ‘I can’t think of *anything* that doesn’t end,’ I replied after about ten seconds.

‘What about time and space?’

I tapped my soup spoon on my forehead, let my tongue droop out of my mouth and thought hard for argument’s sake. ‘I disagree,’ I finally ventured. There was a silence of some fifteen to twenty seconds and then I thought of something that might support my feigned disagreement. ‘Time and space will only remain *real* concepts so long as there are human beings to conceive them. After that, when humankind ceases to exist – when, courtesy of science we’ve all blown ourselves to the shithouse; sorry, to smithereens – those concepts will become irrelevant.’ Then I thought of a quote that might cement my proposition. ‘If a tree falls in the middle of a forest,’ I said pointing the spoon straight at Harrison’s nose and making him go a little cross-eyed, ‘and there’s no one there to see it fall.’ A stupid grin began to curve up on Harrison’s mouth. ‘Then it hasn’t really fallen, has it Professor Harrison?’ I allowed my own tentative grin to begin to form itself until I saw Harrison’s eyes rolls slightly off to one side and up to the ceiling,

implying that someone at our table – and it certainly wasn't him – was a moron. He laughed out loud.

'It's easy to see you are still a student, Jones. I mean, where did you get your BA, at *Bond*? That is very old thinking, and so clichéd. It presents a very arrogant, homocentric notion of relevance, don't you think? Tell me, Jones, don't you feel just a little bit foolish? I mean, before humans came along, when there were only dinosaurs, the earth still existed, didn't it?'

'Yes,' I conceded.

'And when the dinosaurs perished, the world they conceived went on in its time and space without them – yes?'

I shrugged, not feeling too smart about my old thinking. 'But isn't there a fence or a concrete wall or a big space shield at the end of the universe?' I asked.

'And if there was,' Harrison said. 'Then what would we call that which was on the other side of your fence, Jones?'

'There would be nothing on the other side of the fence.'

Then Harrison gave me that look, the same one Nurse Chiller gives me when I have forgotten, and have to ask her again, what it is I do with my knife.

*Are you stupid*, she says – *how many times do I have to tell you this? What do you think you do with it, mister jones? What's that sitting in front of you?* At this point she would grab the back of my head, push my face forward and direct my gaze to the plate in front of me. *Isn't it your meal?* Then I would remember what the knife was for and feel foolish and humiliated and remember again how much I would like to take the knife and cut Nurse Chiller's throat with it.

Harrison broke my pleasant thought. 'That *nothing* is still a *space*, Jones. It has to be made up of *something* – some sort of chemical or

compound, a gas perhaps, we don't know what; we may never know what – but something, Jones, *nothing* is always *something*, don't you see?’

I tried hard to think of some argument I could come up with to knock down Harrison's theory of time and space. But I couldn't, he was incontrovertibly and unarguably right – as always. I had done my best but my best would never be better than Harrison's best.

‘So,’ Harrison said, ‘having firmly established that time and space are infinite, let me go on. If the universe is never ending – or even if it does end, conceding there is something that goes beyond it, then it wouldn't make any difference where you were or which way you were facing, there would have to be an equal distance – that is, infinity – in every direction away from you.’ At this point Harrison's eyebrows lifted and he raised both arms out sideways with his palms outstretched in a gesture suggesting an unassailable conclusion had been reached – a simple nod was all that was required on my part. But I was not ready to give it just yet.

‘What if I moved,’ I said, letting rigour and scrutiny take me over. ‘What if I leapt up out of my chair, picked it up and hammered Big Serge unconscious? What if I took this knife and cut Nurse Chiller's throat with it? And what if I were to take her car keys and drive to my son's house where he'd look after me and spoonfeed me like a baby, if that was my need, and hold me when I became frightened in the night, and speak softly to me and cradle me as I lay dying even though I haven't done a lot for him, as a father, but that he could find it in him to tell me he loved me nevertheless? Then I wouldn't be the centre of anything, would I?’

‘You and I both know that Chiller is never going to let that happen, Jones. Besides which it wouldn't change a thing. No matter where you stood or sat or lay down or died in your son's arms you would still be

spatially equidistant from the end of everywhere and anywhere and nowhere.'

'So I *am* the centre of the universe.' I felt like I had just been made a Catholic.

'Yes, always and everywhere. Don't you feel good, Jones?'

To be honest I didn't feel that good. I believed I had found a serious flaw in Harrison's theory. 'Do you mean this to be an emotional concept then, Harrison?' I asked. 'Something you imagine might help console me in passing the lonely hours between my son's visits?'

'Not really, Jones. I am simply putting it up as a hard, concrete truth – something to go on Wittgenstein's *list of facts*; things not susceptible to the fallibility of the code. But if it makes you happy to know that you *are* the centre of the universe...'

I had another thought. 'What about Nurse Chiller?'

'What about her?'

'Doesn't your theory mean that she is the centre of the universe as well?'

'Yes.'

'And Big Serge?'

'Even Big Serge. Fascinating, isn't it Jones, that at every given moment of our lives each and every one of us – despite the fact we are always located differently; and that some of us are rich and some of us poor; some stupid, some smart; some ugly, some attractive – are always the perfect centre of the universe?' He started to sound like those Seventh Day Adventists I used to set the dogs onto.

'Then I can't see any point to it?'

'There is no point to it, Jones. It is both endless and meaningless. It will always be the last verifiable scientific fact for which we humans will search; for which we will send out space ships that can travel for a

hundred; a thousand; a million years and still never be more than at the perfect centre of what we seek to find at an outer perimeter we know in our hearts can never exist.'

'Jesus,' I said and that was it, I couldn't think of anything else to say, and Harrison, as he always does at this point, took on the persona of a disinterested god. He turned his head up to the television and began watching *Days of Our Lives*, a little bit of last night's Home-Brand canned casserole falling out of his beard and on to his urine-stained pyjamas just as Nurse Chiller walked by.

'You're nothing but a filthy, clumsy old prick, mister harrison,' she remarked, pulling him by his ear.

I couldn't help myself, I picked up the bread knife and jammed it down on the hand Nurse Chiller had resting on the table, then I let her have it with both barrels. 'That is an unsubstantiated, thoroughly discredited and totally uninformed notion,' I said.

'Serge, Serge!' She screamed and ran out of the day room like her undies were on fire.

'That was pretty well argued, Jones,' Harrison said as he took the knife from my hand and examined Nurse Chiller's blood. 'Though you betrayed a certain lack of objectivity we will need to talk about later.'

We never really got the chance. Chiller had Big Serge lace the white coats on us and we were taken and strapped onto our beds. The curtains were drawn and the light bulbs were removed. Later Big Serge fed plastic tubes down our noses and into our guts so they could feed us easy. Nurse Chiller herself, without the aid of anaesthetic, threaded another up the eye of our cocks and into our bladders so what wasn't necessary to keep our bodies going could drain away. The door to our ward was closed off with a bang when they left. We were in for a long haul, we knew.

‘Phillip?’ Harrison whispered across to my bed.

‘What is it, Robert?’

‘This has given me an idea for a new theory.’

But I didn’t care any more. ‘Go to sleep, Robert,’ I said.

‘You are going to be astounded, Jones, you know you are.’

‘Fuck your theories, Robert.’

‘That’s it, Phillip, push against me.’

I had to put some distance between us. ‘Your theories can never – do you understand me Robert – can *never* help anybody.’ I imagined his wide eyes closing off then.

For three days Harrison’s thinking filled our little ward of two. But I ignored him and that fog-thick silence I kept engulfed his every hypothesis. On the fourth day Harrison started to cry. Low sobs came up from his drip-tube like the gurgle-sound blocked drains make. I shut right off from that. I thought about my son, and what I’d give for just one of his sandpaper-dry kisses; for him to spoonfeed me something quick and painless; for his arms to cradle me into submission.

On the seventh day Harrison proved his greatest theory: *The Necessity for Love, Light and Understanding* by dying there in Chiller’s manufactured darkness.

I couldn’t fault it. I had nothing to say.

## Last Trick

*Just one more trick*, she thought. And this time it was more than just a feeling, it was a *knowing* that she could give the game away, that after all these years she could ditch each and every seedy memory, that with Michael's help she could do it.

What a fool.

But she didn't deserve this – although you could see it coming, eventually. With some people, it seems like they are doomed from the beginning. How many Christies do you know who have drowned in the swirl of rotten currents running beneath the happy façade of this city?

She *was* bad, even she had admitted, when she was young – she didn't think too much of herself back then. Her mates were rough and loose, smoking joints at fourteen, and Christie collapsed from her first alcoholic stupor a year later. Sex too, about the same time, with every male in her pack.

'It made me feel like I belonged,' she told old Les at the Salvos. 'I couldn't fight. I wasn't game to ride the train roofs – sex was the one thing that I could do pretty well. It made me feel like I was a do-er, not just a watcher.'

By sixteen she was out of her family home. She fell pregnant and her mother, a head-on Catholic, wanted her to give birth and then adopt the baby out. But Christie didn't want a bar of it.

'I went to the fertility clinic three weeks after I found out and had it out of me,' she told Les, and as she slunk back through the front door that evening Christie's mother took one look at her face and everything was revealed and the umbilical connecting them – already stretched taut

as piano wire – snapped with that one final shrug of her mother's shoulders.

'What sort of girl are you. How *could* you,' her mother spat and then she flew upstairs, thumped Christie's clothes into a small suitcase and thrust it at the girl; her eyes welling but determined as they took hold of Christie's and indicated the line of exit up the hallway. 'You're a little slut. I can't put up with your feral ways any longer.'

Being ejected onto that final step from her front porch and onto alien earth must have seemed like an unfathomable drop. She never went back, never. She headed straight into Flinders Street Station to find her mates. She managed to beg a bed with a friend called Sally in a share house. This worked fine for a couple of nights until Sally's boyfriend returned. The three then crammed themselves onto an old double mattress. But during the night the boyfriend's hands wandered onto Christie's breasts. At the peak of the ensuing three-way slag-off Christie snatched up her suitcase. 'Fuck the both of you,' she screamed, and slammed out of the place.

That's when she met old Les. She ended up in his digs for a couple of nights but neither the food nor the advice Les gave to return home were to her liking. She became friendly with a group that lagged about the city loop stations.

'We got a squat,' one of them said. 'An old joint in St Kilda. Y' can drop with us if y want, lotsa room.'

They did graffiti this mob, jiggered up the food machines and begged cigarettes; a dollar here, a dollar there from passers-by. *Ferals*, that's what people called Christie and her friends. They weren't far wrong.

That little gig lasted eight months. Coming back from a walk along the beach one morning there was pandemonium. Bulldozers had

moved in. The house was half down and her belongings crushed and indistinguishable among the rubble of bricks and broken timber.

Later in the evening, as darkness was collecting up the alleys and the back streets, Christie found herself wandering like a lost dog along Bay Street when a Mercedes crawled in along the curve. She knew the scenario well, had seen it a hundred times and realised at once what was coming.

'Hi, sweetie.'

'Fuck off,' she said as she looked at him; old enough to be her father.

'Want a lift somewhere?' The words slurred a little, his tie had been loosened, the top shirt button undone.

'Piss off and find yourself a prostitute why don't you.'

'Whoops, sorry love,' he replied sheepishly, 'I thought I had.' A stupid grin re-formed several folding lines across his face. 'You look lost,' he went on. Christie could see his face was rouged-up with alcohol, tiny veins ran across his cheeks and nose as if there was only cling-rap covering them.

He folded two fifty-dollar bills, reached across and held them between his thumb and forefinger. 'You sure you don't want a lift? His eyebrows lifted then sat, pregnant with expectation. The phrase: *I'll call the cops*, formed in Christie's mind but in a moment designed for hesitation the fulcrum of her life shifted ever so slightly, and she did not voice it. Instead, she stared at the shining Mercedes and replaced it with a slow thought: Just as when she first became aware of prostitutes, and had watched them getting into strange cars along Barkley Street and slipping up laneways off Fitzroy Street, she now found herself wondering how and when each of them had sunk to that low level: *cum-buckets* – that's how Christie and her mates thought about them. They

seemed to Christie not of this earth, like sordid creatures who'd managed to descend so deep into the septic pond that they were irretrievable. Did that fall come slow or quick, Christie wondered? And something more practical occurred as she stood there staring at the silver Merc – how bloody long that walk was, back to the Salvos' in the city.

'Come on, Sweetie,' he said, bringing her attention back upon him. 'You know the game, even if you haven't played it yet. You look like you could use a dollar?' She was freezing without her denim jacket and jumper, which were buried back at Carlisle Street. 'I don't have all night.' There was the hint of impatience in his tone which served to focus her and then, with a smirk that inferred some knowledge of the outcome, he rustled the two yellow notes together.

The fall, Christie now knew, came quickly – not so much a matter of choice, but of choices closed off. 'Can you take me into the city?' And as Christie fell into the front passenger seat and looked across at him they both knew her question was the answer his smirk anticipated.

'Sure,' he nodded, his winner's grin whitening. '*After.*' He slowly accelerated away from the kerb while Christie looked out the passenger window as the spot where she'd stood on the footpath just seconds ago disappeared forever. He drove up along the peninsular road and secluded the car into ti-trees off a small dirt track at Rosebud.

'What do you want me to do?' she asked, not looking at him, the fingers of one hand binding and twisting into the fingers of the other.

'Just take them off.' He pointed to her jeans. 'And your knickers.' He unzipped himself and pushed his trousers and underpants down to his ankles. 'Do you always get around on your own?'

Christie's knees touched one against the other and her hands folded over her pubic hair. 'I do now. Bastards pulled our squat down this morning.'

'So where will you live?'

'What's it matter to you where I live?' She wanted this over with. Still without looking at him she reached over with her right hand and began to rub his penis.

'Sorry,' he said 'I was only asking. Have you left home or something?' Christie could feel his cock filling out. 'You should go back home – much safer, don't you think?'

'Fucking hell,' she said 'you're worse than Les at the bloody Salvos.' Sitting there half naked and without the car heater on she was getting cold. His cock became fully erect. 'What do you want me to do now?' Without answering he pushed a button that saw her seat recline. He gently spread her legs wide, stared for a second then knelt between them. He lowered himself until the head of his cock pushed against her vagina then slowly levered himself inside of her. The whole thing took about two minutes, and then he slumped. 'Bloody hell,' she gasped 'I can hardly breathe, get off of me.'

'Sorry sweetie,' he said and he raised himself, pulled on his pants and relaxed back in the driver's seat. 'Am I your first customer?'

'I suppose,' her answer trailed off and what filled the ensuing silence was the knowledge she had shed a layer of self that was now buried as deep as her denim jacket.

It had been a grimy act, but not near as hard as she had imagined. And what she made from it would cover three weeks rent in one of the many boarding houses that sat like boils on the developing St Kilda landscape. After driving her to the edge of the CBD he handed her one

of the fifty-dollar notes, leaned across and opened the passenger door.

'Thanks,' he said 'I'll see you around sometime.'

'Hey,' she scowled, 'what about my other fifty?'

'Always get the cash up front, sweetie.'

'You fuck... ,' but before she could slag out the rest he shoved her, bum first onto the footpath and was half way home to his wife and kids before she could raise herself, squinting hard against the streetlights glaring back down at her. She brushed herself off and headed up over the Flinders street bridge toward the Salvos.

For the next two years Christie became a regular on the St Kilda beat. Needed to, she was into every lightning bolt that flashed – cocaine, speed, hash, the uppers, downers and the big H. It was tough going, she was raped twice and cheated of her fee a dozen times. Twice she was beaten up – once by three blokes who took her up a bluestone laneway and broke her nose and both cheeks before running off with her handbag and everything she'd earned that night.

She recycled herself through the massage parlors then. Safer than the streets – most had a resident thug to handle the rougher tricks and the drunks. The parlors had names like *Pink Obsession*, the *Slash Palace* and *Starlet's Den of Flesh*. Christie made good money, despite what she spent on the mind-benders. Even made enough to buy a decent flat.

'On a still night,' she told Les over coffee on one of her infrequent visits, 'you can hear the ocean from my flat.' It was on Carlisle Street, five blocks up from where her old squat house was pulled down. She placed her own ads and got out of the parlours then, organised the whole thing by telephone. And because she was attractive, and because she was very good at what she did, she managed to go up a notch with her clientele – she became a fully-fledged *escort*.

'I'm fucking the big money, Les,' she bragged one day. He looked at her hard – she was better dressed, she seemed more comfortable; maybe even a little happier.

Then she met Michael at a nightclub. After two weeks she told him the whole story. It made no difference to how he felt about her, he said, and he treated her like a princess right from the start. He put up with the rules of the game: sleeping over from Monday till Wednesday then not seeing her at all until the following Monday. He made her laugh; they went to movies, to the zoo; to the races; he went with her while she shopped for clothes, patiently browsing away the hours she was in the change-rooms. Michael took Christie to her first live show, *Cats*. But most of all he persuaded her away from the barbed-wire substances she used to numb out who she was and what she did.

She was thankful, she really was. 'He's filled me out, Les,' she said over coffee just a week before she saw that last client. 'He's widened what I can be.' She was honest, told him she did not yet love him, but that she *would*. And would repay him tenfold for what he'd done for her.

She rang Les the night before it happened. 'I'm getting off the game,' she told him and he could feel her smile over the telephone. 'There's just one last trick...'

'Why not stop tonight,' Les asked.

'He's a friend of a regular. It was arranged a few weeks ago,' she answered. 'But then it's over, Les. And there's something else – I phoned my mother.' Les could hear her voice lift an octave. 'We've arranged to meet.'

She knew now she could afford to finish it all, start fresh and clean with Michael who loved her and has begged her to stop. She would stop

because he didn't treat her as used goods; he understood. Michael would be around at eleven thirty that night, a half hour after this last client, who was paying for this last hour: three hundred dollars, although she no longer cared about that. Michael owned a house up the New South Wales coast and they were going to live there in three days time – the day after the meeting with her mother. She didn't yet love Michael but she knew how overrated a notion love was. But she could return him the very best of what he gave her: respect and support and companionship – he had cajoled her into rehab six months ago and, her nightly glass of white wine and the odd cigarette aside, she felt new and wanted and clean as a new lamb. She would repay him that if not love.

*One last trick, she thought. Then it's over.*

It is ten o'clock. Christie's doorbell rings. The client, she thinks, though he's not due for another fifteen minutes. She thinks about what the coming hour will entail and it makes her feel tired. She hesitates at the door, hoping the client might leave. But he doesn't, he rings again, this time holding his finger on the button. She isn't in the mood for games.

'Okay, okay,' she says at the same time as she opens the door; having second thoughts; irritation colouring her tone.

'Sorry,' he says. 'But you took a while.'

'Yes, well, I'm not feeling the best,' she lies. 'In fact, do you think we could let it go tonight...'

Anticipating what she is about to say his voice comes over the top of hers. And he already has one foot in the doorway. 'What?' he says 'Jesus, Greg said you were reliable.' His face swivels around in annoyance. 'I come all the way from Frankston.' He looks straight at her as he shuffles from one foot to the other. 'We had an arrangement.'

She hesitates for a moment. 'Alright,' she says. 'But we need to be quick, I've got someone else coming at eleven.'

'I'm early anyway,' he says. 'And I'm supposed to get an hour. I'll be paying for an hour, so...'

'Alright, look, what if I only charge you half? But I'll give you forty five minutes.' She gives a half smile hoping he'll go along.

'We'll see,' he says. 'It takes a while for me to get going, you know what I mean?' His grin reveals jagged teeth, smoker-yellow.

*This one is persistent,* she thinks. *But he will be the last* – she keeps reminding herself of that; *the very last*. She looks him over and tries guessing what sort of job he has to earn the sort of money she charges. He's not white collar, that's for sure. Maybe he's a tradesman, but one who sits at his desk while others do the work.

'What do you do for a living?' she asks.

'Oh, a bit of this, a bit of that,' he answers.

'Are you a builder or something?'

He laughs. 'Nah...' and there is a small silence. 'More like a salesman.'

'What do you sell?'

He looks square at her, his left hand bunching into knuckles and sitting under his chin. Yes, he thinks, smiling, I can tell you because you're probably on it anyway. 'I flog a bit of powder, you know?'

'You mean H?'

'Coke mostly. To corporates. A couple of the big recording companies. Their execs live on the shit. Got a couple of grams in the car if you're...'

'No thanks,' she cuts him off. 'Have you got your money?'

'Yeah,' he says and grins as he holds up the three hundred dollars in his right hand, twisting the notes. 'And it's as good as anybody's.'

‘Nobody said it wasn’t.’ She makes her way over to where he is seated and goes to take it from him. But he seizes her hand with his free one, leering into her cleavage as he does. ‘Nice,’ he says. ‘Oh, and I’ll be needing the whole hour – that was our arrangement.’ He lets the notes go then and Christie heads to the kitchen, out of sight. He hears the notes rustling their way into a container as he gets up and begins to look around the room. *Cheap*, he thinks. *No class here*, as he gathers in the gaudy landscape prints she has purchased on Sunday strolls along the Esplanade market stalls. He begins to remove his shoes.

‘Not in the lounge room,’ she says and points to the spare bedroom that she keeps for clients. ‘In there.’ He ignores her and continues taking off his shoes, then gets up and goes into the bedroom. ‘When you get undressed there’s a shower in the ensuite. Call me when you’re ready. You’ve got forty minutes left, okay?’ He doesn’t answer, he just stops at the doorway and turns around, catching her as she drops her dress to the floor then bends to roll off her pantyhose. His gaze runs the perimeter of her waist and hips then up the inside of her thighs. It fixes on the line of her G-string and his tongue wets at the thought of the pink folds of flesh that will lap and slurp against his cock; at the idea of putting it into her mouth. He walks back over to her as she is lifting upright with her pantyhose. She turns to face him as he reaches out, the fingers on his right hand stretching like a velvet claw around the front of her throat. And because he knows there isn’t a thing she can do about it, he says to her, calmly and without malice – like he is admonishing a child who will know instinctively how futile refusal is: ‘Forty minutes might be long enough, but then again, it might not – okay?’ Christie’s eyes widen a little as he lets go of her throat. She puts up three fingers to feel it and sucks in a breath.

‘You bastard,’ she whispers and when she looks at him his eyes direct her into the bedroom. ‘Look,’ she says, and there is fire in her voice. ‘I told you I’ve got someone coming at eleven. Forty minutes is all the time I’ve got. Now you can take it, or you can take off.’

She is too annoyed to fully appreciate his need, he sees, as he moves up to her. There is a resistance that needs to be tempered, yet not – for the pleasure he knows it will add to what is to come – fully broken.

‘I haven’t had a root in four weeks,’ he says, unthreading his belt from his jeans. ‘I’m going to do you as hard and as long as I want.’

Christie looks at his knuckles whitening around the belt buckle and fear washes all the defiance from her face. Lines appear on her brow and she looks around for an escape route. She could make the front door but would have no time to open it, she knows.

‘Leave or I’ll call the cops.’ A strain of desperation thins her words.

‘No can do,’ he smiles. ‘I paid my money and that’s that.’

‘You can take your money, I don’t want it.’ Then, foolishly she adds: ‘It’s dirty. People like you are leeches. That money is made off other people’s pain.’

His head cocks to one side. Then he looks at her for a second before laughing out loud. ‘And you, you piece of filth, you can talk. You think because you charge three hundred a shot that you’re any better than the others out their humping the beat. Not fucking likely, my girl.’ Then he goes quiet, his lips come to within an inch of hers. ‘All you are,’ he assures her, ‘is a prostitute.’

‘Maybe, but at least I haven’t killed anyone with what I do. At least I don’t...’ But before she can finish her sentence his belt rips up to

track a red welt across her face. It sends Christie sprawling onto the bed.

‘I bet you let the rich bank execs and company directors take their full hour. I bet they can toss their shoes anywhere they want – is that right?’ He is holding her hair bunched at the top of her skull and there is the thin line of blood trickling under her left cheek. He wipes his fingers across it then licks them clean. ‘Isn’t that right, my girl? So don’t get moral with me. Before my slut wife took off I had a good business going. I had sixteen blokes making office cabinets for some of the biggest builders in Melbourne.’ He brings the belt around in an arc then down to slice across her exposed breasts. ‘So, who do you think you are, calling me a leech? I’ll bet you’ve never worked a proper day in your life.’

He raises the belt again as Christie shields herself. ‘Please don’t hit me again,’ she begs.

He lowers it. ‘Get the rest of your clothes off. I might be nearly broke now, my girl, but I can still afford a slut like you.’ He stands there slapping the belt against his thigh as he watches her remove her underwear; the left side of her face smarting, feeling twice its size.

‘What sort of a man are you?’ she says, tears dripping of her lower lids. ‘Hitting a woman.’

‘A *woman*, is that what you call yourself? I mean, how many cocks have you had in say... the last month? Tell me that. You’re not a woman you’re a *receptacle*. Who’d ever want you as their woman?’

Fully naked now she raises herself and sits on the bed end. ‘There’s a man coming in half an hour who wants me.’

‘Jesus, he must have even less pride than you.’

‘You can talk,’ she replies. ‘If you had someone, you wouldn’t need to be here with me.’

‘Shut your mouth.’ He flings out with the belt catching her a glancing blow to the top of her head. She sprawls back instinctively onto the bed curling up like a foetus. ‘Get on your back or I’ll give you a hiding you’ll never forget. She folds both arms across her face and rolls onto her back. ‘Now spread your legs.’ She does so. ‘My God, look at you, you’re just a pathetic little whore. A *woman* – Jesus, what a joke. A woman is someone who’s got some sense of being faithful to one man. A woman is someone who can be a good wife and mother. Look at you, what kid would want you as his mother?’ He lets one end of the belt drop between her legs and slaps it lightly against her vagina. Then he bends down right into her left ear. ‘You’re just a *cunt*, that’s all you are.’

‘Look,’ she says ‘I’ll get your money for you. Just go. I won’t call the cops – there won’t be any trouble.’

‘I know there won’t,’ he says. ‘Because now I’m going to show you what sort of a man I am.’

‘Please don’t...’ But before she can finish he lifts her up by the hair, turns her around and swings his free fist up into her gut. She drops at his feet, unable to breathe or scream. He heaves her onto the bed, flips her onto her stomach, digs his knees into her thighs, spreading and entering and rutting away like he was gutting a fish. After about four minutes he slackens suddenly, but without the accompanying groans or gasps of orgasm. He goes limp; slides out of her. Christie rolls painfully onto her back and stares up at him. She can feel no semen, just a thin film of blood drying on the inside of her thighs. He sits trying to rub his cock back into life as Christie glares at him, her face twitching into the beginning of a grin.

‘So this is the sort of man you are? Jesus, you’re the one who’s pathetic.’

He manages half an erection. ‘Shut your mouth,’ he yells wide-eyed and continues masturbating. He is nearly hard again when Christie weighs the whole thing up; knows there will be something coming back at her for what she is about to say next.

‘You couldn’t even keep it up, could you? Look at you, you’re just a fist-fucking bastard.’ They both watch as his cock softens into his right hand. She laughs, but there is a terrible expectation at the edges of it as she curls up like a snail, pulling the doona around her, wishing Michael was there. ‘You’re so much of a man,’ she says without even looking at him. ‘You can’t even fuck yourself.’

He walks around to where her head sits tear-soaked on the edge of the bed. ‘Oh, I’ll fuck you all right.’ His words travel in a parallel arc to his fist, and she sees what is about to come just a millisecond before it does.

It surprises him – how easily her cheekbones, nose and teeth all give back into her face. He goes into the kitchen, fossicks out her money jar and takes the contents.

In the bedroom Christie lies on the bed. Gurgling sounds bubble through blood and her mind brings up a snapshot: she is stepping off her mother’s front porch for the last time. This seems to her now like the opening of a bracket. And in the kitchen her last client slides out the middle carver from its wooden holding-block on the bench. He looks at it; then across at the crumpled prostitute in the bedroom. Looks at the blade again; hesitates – for just a second – then goes in to her; closes it all off.

It was the sort of morning that promised sun, but dulled over before eleven. Michael was there, of course. Oh, and her mother came; one

parlor owner and two of the girls from her old beat. Old Les spoke what words he could.

And at that very instant, everywhere in the cities we have made like this – in Collingwood and in Hobart in Balmain at the Cross St Kilda Glenelg in Cottesloe or Darwin and Bangkok and Bali and on and on – a fifteen year-old girl steps from the doorway of her mother's house.

## Anniversary

It was their thirteenth wedding anniversary and she was getting more and more like her mother, he thought. Money was tight and they... he decided they'd do it cheap at the local pub. It was a Tuesday night and no-one but themselves, the two snooker players and the publican were in the place.

The kids were at her mother's – an easy five-minute drive to pick them up next morning but then he would have to listen to the old crow cragg-on about how the kids hadn't been dressed enough for the cold; or why the price of eggs had gone up this week; or how lonely it was now George was dead. Jesus.

He stared into his beer thinking about this and his fingers made jagged shapes in the condensation on his glass. 'How did you put up with her?' he asked out of nowhere.

'What?'

'Your mother.' He looked up. 'How the hell did you put up with her raving all those years?' The sudden roar from one of the blokes at the snooker table turned him away from her as she came back at him.

'This is our anniversary. Can we talk about *us*, Rodney. I thought tonight was going to be about us – that we could start to work things out.'

He came back to her. 'Yeah, whatever.' Then he looked away again because a push and shove argument had broken out between the snooker players. 'Look at those two, will you. Just listen to the language.'

'I wish you'd listen to *me*, Rodney.' And she wanted the two snooker players to be snuffled up by a big hand and slammed unconscious against a wall so he would look at her.

'Sorry, what?'

'This is supposed to be our anniversary, why don't you pay *me* some attention.'

'You know you're getting ...' but as he looked at her he thought better of it; turned away again as the noise from the snooker table grew louder and more obscene.

Her eyes narrowed at him. 'Like my mother, is that what you're saying?' She stiffened against the seat-back and folded her arms across her chest.

'No, you're not like her. Jesus, I just wish those two would bloodywell shut the hell up.'

'Then why don't you go and tell them to shut up?' she challenged.

His eyes swivelled slowly around to hers and she watched the familiar flush of pink take possession of his face and his fingers begin to tap upon the beer-stained laminate.

'And start a fight... with the two of them – is that what you want?'

'No Rodney, I don't.' She allowed her upper body to angle across the table and toward him. Both her hands cupped over his. 'I just want you to talk to me. Like you talked to me thirteen years ago.'

'You're not going to start an argument are you – not tonight?'

'No I'm not going to start an argument. Just a conversation, Rodney.'

'I just wish the barman would shut those two up.'

'Don't worry about it.'

'It's not my job to make them stop. A man should be able to take his wife out for a drink and a meal without having to put up with this.'

'I shouldn't have said anything. The barman should be the one to do something... Rodney.'

'Yeah.'

'Do you love me?'

'What? Jesus, where is this coming from?'

'Do you?'

'Yeah, course.'

'You never tell me. You haven't said it in, well, I can't remember the last time you told me.'

He looked at her long and hard, twisting a beer coaster from one finger to the next. 'We've been married a long time...'

'Thirteen years today.'

'Yeah, thirteen years, I mean, what do you expect. We're not on our honeymoon. I don't have to shout it out in every public bar, do I, for you to know I love you?' The last phrase fell to a whisper.

'No, you needn't shout it.' She placed her fingers on his free hand. 'But every now and then, you know, just once in a while – one night when we're having sex or watching tv on our own or when you get in from work...'

'Christ, what's brought this on?'

'You know, Rodney.'

'What?'

'I've never ever felt... secure.'

'With me?'

'Not fully. My Dad, Rodney, he would have died for my Mum; and us kids, if that's what was needed; if that's what it came down to.'

‘And you don’t think I would? Jesus. Is this about those two blokes.’ His face went in their direction then back onto her. ‘Is it?’

She didn’t answer him for a long time. She was focused on her drink coaster, now torn into an irretrievable jig-saw puzzle. ‘You know, Rodney, from the day we were married I’ve felt like you’ve never loved me with more than three quarters of yourself – like if we stepped off the kerb and a truck came at us from round the corner with just a split second to do something, you’d jump out of the way first and look to me second.’ She slid her gaze up to him then took it away and over to the two snooker players growing noisier than ever.

She made eye contact with the taller one who waved across to her, working his tongue like a windshield wiper across his top lip at the same time.

The smaller man joined the game. ‘Ow are ya, luv?’ he called.

She swiveled quickly back to Rodney. ‘Come on.’

‘Come on what?’

‘Let’s go.’

‘Go, why should we have to go because of a couple of drunks.’ He looked again to catch the barman’s eye. ‘Our meal will be here in a minute.’

‘I’m not hungry, Rodney.’

Just then the barman made his way to their table with the two plates. ‘Excuse me, mate,’ said Rodney pointing to the snooker players. ‘Do you think you could ask those two to keep it down?’

The barman looked across to the two men then back to Rodney. ‘Would’n worry, they’re regulars. Pretty ‘armless – I reckon they’ll probably quiet down in a sec.’ He gave a shake of the head grin that invited Rodney to the same position. Rodney’s lips were parting to repeat his request but the words never got a chance to come out – the

barman turned on his heels and walked off. Rodney shrugged his shoulders at her as if to say, well, I did my best.

She shot him a look that told him his best wasn't good enough.

'Jesus Christ,' he said. 'What do you want, I mean, there are two of them.'

Logic told her he was right. But something in her wasn't yet quelled. 'Do you want me to go over? You're supposed to be the man.'

He looked at her then slumped back like someone whose whole backbone had been filleted from his body. He turned his head to where the two snooker players were clashing their cues in a swordfight. He steadied his hands on the armrests like he wanted to get up.

Suddenly she thought better of it. 'I'm sorry, Rodney. Don't. I didn't mean it. I shouldn't have said anything – it'd be stupid to get beaten up over a bit of noise and language.'

He relaxed back into his seat, his hands folding in front of him then the right one going over hers. 'I want you to know this.'

'What, Rodney.'

'That if the stakes were high enough...'

'High enough?'

'Yeah, you know, if our lives depended on it.'

'On what?'

'Something being done. If you were in danger or the kids were in danger then something would be done, Megan, don't you worry.'

There was a silence for a long time at their table. The snooker players had finally settled their row and fallen quiet. Rodney turned his attention to the television high in a corner behind Megan. The news was on, the sound barely audible – Rodney tried to read the reporter's lips. He was at a house fire, this reporter, and behind him flames leapt out of

the roof. *Firemen were unable to save the two occupants – a man and a woman, who were trapped inside*, the reporter was saying.

Megan picked at her salad and shuffled in her chair. ‘Rodney,’ she said leaning across to tap him on the arm. ‘We need to talk.’

‘Talk?’

‘We came out tonight so we could talk, Rodney.’ He was half with her and half at the fire. ‘Rodney, I’ve been thinking about us.’

‘In what way?’ But he wasn’t with her – over in the snooker room the two players began a drunken jig, arm in arm out of the snooker room and around the dining area. They were both singing very loudly, drowning out the jukebox that had inspired them. Gradually they staggered their way around to where Rodney and Megan sat and began to circle them like a pair of Dobermans. Megan put her elbows on the laminex and lowered her head a little into both hands.

Then the taller man lost his balance and sprawled onto the floor at the feet of Megan’s chair. ‘Oh for God’s sake,’ she said and shot a look spring-loaded with expectation at Rodney.

He could see it was going to be useless talking to these two. He looked back at Megan, lifted both arms in shoulder-high futility and asked in small words, acid-dipped. ‘Well, what in the hell do you want me to do?’

‘Say *something*... for christ’s sake.’

Rodney looked over to the barman who avoided eye contact and turned his back to wash some glasses.

Rodney looked from the barman to Megan then up to the two drunks. ‘Hey... you blokes,’ he said in a measured tone. But they ignored him. ‘Hey, you two!’ He yelled this time, raising both arms fully outstretched with his palms flat-facing up at the two men. They ceased their ugly jig. ‘Look, fellas,’ he said, smiling and then not smiling in

turns. 'We've come here, my wife and me, for a quiet drink on our anniversary.'

The taller man swayed on his feet and looked down as if stunned at Rodney's revelation. 'Maybe yooz av,' he said then turned to his mate for confirmation of what he was about to say. 'But ya don't own the fucken pub.'

His mate shook his head. 'No, we've drank 'ere for years.'

Rodney threw a demanding look at the barman.

'C'm'on you blokes,' the barman called in a voice that seemed to come from halfway across the world. Then he turned back to his glasses. The shorter of the two drunks looked across at Megan, his stupid grin delivering a small dribble of saliva that clung to his three-day bristle. His half-closed eyes snaked onto her breasts and then up to his mate – everybody's eyes followed.

'Look,' said Rodney pulling out his wallet and smiling up at the taller man.

'What are you doing?' her eyes stood stark and round as they hauled him in.

He ignored her. 'Here's two bucks,' he urged. 'Go and have a game on me, okay?'

But before he could hand it over Megan snatched at the coin like it was her wedding ring, at the same time turning to the two men. 'You're just a pair of bloody drunks, you won't get a cent.' She swiveled once more and her eyes bore flint-hard into Rodney as she stood and grabbed her bag from under the chair.

'Are you coming?'

But the taller man blocked her. 'Did anyone ever tell ya,' then he looked at his mate and grinned. 'Ya look real ugly when yr angry.' His words shredded their way through a face full of yellow teeth.

Megan turned, 'Rodney,' her voice shimmered with disgust, 'are you going to *do* something?'

Rodney slowly raised himself to a bent-kneed position with his arms stiff; shaking just a little and his palms buried into the armrests. His fingernails clenched into the vinyl and blood pulsed from everywhere up into his face. 'Can you two move,' he said, the last word barely audible and his eyes set up an unstoppable blink going from one drunk to the other to Megan to the barman, who still did nothing.

The tall player's eyes rounded out then he stiffened, swaying just a little; arms rigid at his sides with the hands flexing and balling into club-ends 'Or wot?' he asked, his eyes gripping into Rodney like a pit-bull.

'Yeah, Rodney,' challenged his mate. 'Whad'll ya do about it?'

Rodney couldn't move. He wanted to take his beer glass and jam it into their faces, or grab the snooker cue and pound them to within an inch of their fucking lives. But the tall man's glare had bound him tight and he felt like he was breathing wet cement.

'We're going, okay,' he managed after about ten seconds. 'The pub's all yours, we're leaving.'

'Yeah sure, ya cn leave anytime.' And with that he leaned across and whispered something in Megan's left ear.

She stepped back like she'd been shirtfronted, 'You *bloody* animal,' she shrieked and both hands came up to cup her face. Then her eyes narrowed to a slant and she rounded back on Rodney.

The tall man stepped aside then. With a wink his red-veined eyes went across from his mate to Megan. He snaked his tongue out and allowed it to salivate from side to side against his upper lip. Finally he hard-glanced Rodney for any sign that might serve to ignite him. He turned, spat onto the linoleum and put his arm over the smaller man's

shoulder. ‘C’mon Johnno,’ he chortled and the two of them lurched back to the snooker room like wounded dingoes.

Next morning Rodney and Megan drove to her mother’s for the kids. The car was a black space, not one word had passed between them since they left the pub the night before.

‘There were *two* of them,’ he said out of nowhere.

‘Yes,’ she affirmed.

‘If I’d have swung a punch, then what?’

‘Just drive.’

‘What did you expect me to do? Well, talk to me for Christ’s sake.’ Nothing from her. ‘I’d have copped a good kicking. You’d have enjoyed that, wouldn’t you... *well*, wouldn’t you?’

After a small silence she flung the word like a gob of spit: ‘*Yes*.’

‘You bitch,’ he said. ‘You’d have been happy to see me beaten and humiliated.’

This was too much, her face went into her hands and came up wet and red with the muscles pulling it into a shape he no longer recognized. ‘You did *nothing*,’ she squealed and then she slam-wrapped her right hand around his left wrist on the steering wheel and drove the fingernails hate-deep into the flesh.

The car pitched into the kerb as his foot ploughed onto the brake pedal. ‘Get your fucking nails out of me!’ he yelled and his face pushed clash-close to hers that was patchworked pink and white. And her hand that wasn’t digging half-moon cuts into him flailed like a rotor about his chest until sapped, she let it fall. But the other held firm as her red eyes stared and her fingers whitened and kept on working into him like fish hooks.

‘Let go of my fucking arm... or I bloodywell swear, Megan.’ And answering an insistent cry of revenge for every humiliation he’d ever suffered, he closed his eyes, balled and loaded his shaking fist then held it to within an inch of her face.

‘Or What?’ she said. ‘Rodney?’ Then she released her grip; her face took back its familiar lines and the last of it echoed out honey-smooth. ‘What will you do about it?’

# The Poems

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## The Creek

*Would you be a boy again?* you asked last night and now I think  
standing atop the Darebin creek, that yes,  
after they've furnaced my shell  
they can scatter me here and I will play my young dust into lizard-dens  
and over frog-rocks, they can  
spill my dormant seed on mushroom tops  
that may be gathered and digested into life, and I  
might be that boy again.

For this was the gang's backyard.  
We built and burned our bonfires, labouring  
weeks of deadwood up these secret tracks  
with our water-worn shoes and our knees scabbed up  
from slipping in the black volcanic mud.

My first dog, Sandy's buried over there.  
He lived on my brother's heels; leapt at my brother's words for years  
until he bit someone. My Dad put Sandy in a sugar bag and walked  
gunmetal hard the length of our street – my brother begging  
clawing at the Hessian, dragging on my father's legs –  
and threw Sandy into the creek. Later on  
we fished him out and buried him; we built a mound  
and packed it solid with our angry feet – the only time  
I saw my brother cry and  
he never came close to my father again.

Under that old peppercorn Dave MacDowd, who was a year older  
gathered five of us in a circle and we had our first erections, pop-eyed  
over *Playboy* magazines Dave had nicked from his old man's shed.  
I played doctors and nurses with the willing girls, and then  
I turned fourteen and first-sex came  
on that embankment over there – fumbled red-faced  
at her eye-hook's stark refusal to un-hitch. My shirt-tail  
caught the zipper half way down and locked, top buttons popped;  
the kiss was dry then gone, our eyes shut tight against  
the twenty-second shove and grunt; the prickling grass, the pungence  
of the onion-weed we crushed, green fennel stems bent down by lust  
were mixed with scented juices that we'd made.

.

We had stone fights with the Fairfield mob  
behind those boulders there, and I had this helmet –  
world war steel my father scavenged from the Sunday tip –  
it saved my scone a dozen times and I remember  
fat Chris Whelan copped this sling-shot brinnie temple-square;  
turned around cross-eyed – oh Christ that look,  
we couldn't help but laugh as he went down, went out so long  
we gave him up for dead, and then  
he rose again like Jesus, just to eat himself to death at thirty one;  
out of work three years; his wife had left; the television's drone  
went on without him.

Along that bluestone ridge I ripped the arse  
from my first pair of trousers running through scotch thistles  
from the Catholic kids at whom I'd flung (for years  
behind the safety of my father's fence)

my parrot-fashion bigotry in rhyme:

*catholic dog, sitting on a log...* and though they never came  
 within a brown snake's length of me, my father  
 raging at the shredded square – *it's unrepairable!*  
*We cannot pay for this* – unhitched his leather belt,  
 exacted their revenge in spades.

We stand here at the top of the Darebin Creek and I  
 think about your question. I bend down  
 and pick up this bluestone rock (fat Chris Whelan  
 makes that cross-eyed face again). I smile  
 and I stand and I snap off a twig of green fennel (smell too  
 the onion weed we've crushed beneath our feet) and I  
 let that aniseed sink deep into my senses (I can taste  
 the dry-sweet kiss between that girl and boy). And then I let  
 what the creek was fill my eyes and my nose  
 with those hard and beautiful days and answer: Yes –  
 for not much else, but I would be a boy again for this.

## **Immigrants**

When the first Dagos  
 moved into our street  
 Dad shrugged and  
 Mum rolled her eyes because  
 they planted broccholi  
 where the roses should have been.

## Woman Photographed

In earlier times  
the man now fifty-seven with a stomach  
folding slightly at the sides, and balding  
just a little at his dome had loved  
and shown love to the woman; forty-five.  
The man had run a million fingers  
on her naked skin month in  
month out both day and night –  
three times, four or more a week;  
explored the fall and rise of her, the tension  
and release of sweating skin with lizard tongue  
saliva'd whispers frothing from a clutch  
of tight-sprung limbs that moved and angled over  
her and roused the pubic flesh white-hot until  
she begged him up inside her inch by inch.  
And so it went until it ended, always ended  
with a blast-release of pagan moans and cries –  
in earlier times.

Prostate trouble for the man and  
conversations worn down to the bone –  
their earlier times gave slowly over  
to a silence that was comfortable, polite –  
an emptiness they felt but could not fight  
as memory's cooling embers threw up snapshots  
of their former fire.

Like this they moved on through their hours.  
And though their lives still anchored  
to a love *of sorts*, the thing it had become  
was very nearly touchless, just  
a love that hung, recoiling into loyalty; their sex  
guilt-driven once a month or less – almost  
a quadriplegic lust. But still, they told themselves  
there's trust, respect, responsibility. They dreamed  
and hoped their flame would be relit, they clung  
on hard to this as restless months rolled into years.

Along the way three children came  
and one by one outgrew them and  
then left as if they never were, as day on day  
small lines kept crawling out from mouth and eye,  
with streaks of grey each side for him; for her  
the breasts that once cupped warm and firm into his palm  
now sagged like sullen honey sacs – the nipples, soft  
remained unfeathered by hot fingertip or tongue.

A wedding then – their youngest fallen madly;  
settled on a young man of her own to gladly share  
life's mix of good and bad. And on the day  
before their union a photographer – a tall and wiry man  
just short of forty; denim-clad; a flow of auburn falling  
over neck and shoulders, framed a natural grace  
upon a face whose scars and furrows held

the grit-filled details of a life much lived –  
arrived to capture preparations for the bride.

He snapped the bridesmaid's fluent disarray,  
their clustered fussing over veil and hem. And then  
his gaze fell accidentally on the mother –  
self-exiled and left to hover on the margins  
of this pandemonic joy – her hair amiss  
and dressed in easy slacks, old scuffs  
to clean the house, a floral blouse hung loose  
to hide her changed geography: life's pain;  
their births – all this that had betrayed  
a former curvature of waist and hip.

And so, like this  
he caught her in the kitchen unaware  
her features angling out to watch  
the dull green-grey of treetops  
past the pile of toast-crumbed plates  
and coffee mugs upturned.

His eager lens engulfed her in a blink  
and as it did she turned, her awkward smile  
awash with pink, and then her hands came up  
concealing all: *Not now*, she said, *I look a mess*.  
*No, you're perfect. What a profile*, he assured. *Now*  
*this time, just look up...* He moved in close. *A little*  
*to the left. That's fine*. He came within a metre; less  
adjusting light and lens, expelling all but face,

the neck and shoulder line. *Now hold.* She held,  
 and through his lens the filtered half-light flung  
 each shadow from the hair-fine lines that time  
 had cut – and at the shutter's fall  
 her long-held secrets etched themselves  
 like webs upon his film.

*That's one they'll want to burn,* she said.

*You should film the younger ones instead –  
 the shape of me is not what it once was.*

*Oh no,* he whispered, *you're so wrong. The camera  
 is in love with you. And yes it's true, those others  
 make a pretty bunch.* Then as he spoke  
 he moved in closer, almost touching now.

*Those smooth young bodies may excite my lust –  
 they are like unlived anecdotes, but you  
 are like a novel, every line and crease reveals  
 the rich-hued drama of your narrative.*

She blushed a little as an inner voice ensued:

Why hide the fullness of your breasts?

They tell the story of past nurturing;  
 of grief held for the child who died.

Is there good reason to conceal

the broader dimpled curve of hip and thigh;

the stomach, stretched forever

by their nine-month sleep;

the folds of flesh that swept his passion home;

that split for them at labours lost and won;

the stitches, and the scars for life?

All this, the body's journey, though unkind  
will etch a deeper beauty on the camera's mind.

*I want to capture you*, the cameraman implored,  
and though she reddened and protested  
he would not take *no*. A date was set:  
two weeks Thursday, with an empty house –  
the husband gone to golf, the son at work.

And so at ten he came, prepared. *I want  
the best and worst of you*, he said. *Pretend  
that I'm not here*. Then like a ghost  
he reappeared from room to room,  
the constant click and flashing  
catching her in ordinary states  
of lifting, leaning, walking, resting,  
going at a dozen daily chores. And then,  
fatigued, she stood before the camera holding sway;  
removed the body's sepal-mask of wool;  
of cotton – satin undergarments peeled away.  
She sat upon the sofa as he set the tripod; lens  
and light were cast, and then she stretched her arms,  
she cupped both hands behind a flow of auburn hair  
and then unfurled herself as if she was a gift –  
a flower of mid-life grace.

And the cameraman worked his craft at will.  
The stretch-marks on the belly, slightly domed;  
the veins like purple vipers on her legs – were lured

to cunning shadows or blind-spotted in white light.  
 Her breasts – a languid statement on her chest. And then  
 as if by ice, or at the wicked moment, nipples stood.  
 Her face, side on to him, tilted to the ceiling  
 on her lengthened neck – the lines all disappeared.

*Just hold it there*, he said. A moment's silence then  
 the now-familiar click was followed by the light.  
*It's done*, he said, walked over, slowly knelt  
 to where she lie. He kissed her fingertips  
 then thought about her lips – but no. *I'll send*  
*your prints within a week*. And then he packed his gear  
 and left her smiling as she dressed, restored.

## Scene From the Great Depression

What eats at me now –  
 livin' on 'ard times  
 & watchin' the owners drive by  
 in their fancy limousines –  
 is whether they know  
 that it was me, *me*  
 who built the fuckin' road.

**Bad Jimmy** *(for old men on park benches)*

Bad Jimmy with his one full set of clothes  
was taken from the dark and endless night,  
was laid out flat and stiff on stainless steel;  
rolled out of sight.

Bad Jimmy with the metho on his breath  
was rescued from his own demented ways  
and frozen so he could no longer feel  
the weight of days.

Bad Jimmy, with the purple flattened nose,  
had hurled a curse at every starless sky,  
had flung cut knuckles and refused to kneel,  
refused to cry.

Bad Jimmy, much too proud, or far too drunk,  
just lay there as the steel-caps worked his head  
and eight fists pistoned at him chest to heel.  
And as he bled,

Bad Jimmy of the never ending night,  
Bad Jimmy with his wild and crazy ways,  
and cursing at the starlessness that was,  
and dying from the rage the hands had rent,  
could only whisper, *fuck you...*  
to the new Jims as they went.

## The Literature of Birth *(for Jane & Alice)*

In the delivery room  
relentless verbs push red &  
the fleshy vocabulary stretches  
toward its new-found paradigm.  
Hard adjectives and adverbs flow –  
no time for punctuation as past participles  
dangle on her final exclamation mark.  
There is a pregnant pause before  
the difficult transition can be made.  
And then a white anthology of pro's  
holds up this pink  
unblemished pronoun to the world.

And in the night  
when all the nouns – both relative  
and much-loved masculine have gone,  
soft clause and whispered phrase secure  
each paragraph to paragraph,  
an urgency of lip and gums  
on giving nipples grip, becomes  
their narrative; their literature.

## War Crimes *(after Anthony Hecht)*

The Jewish knees dropped down and were arranged  
 along a row of ditches – from the right  
 three Germans trod; three Lugers cocked, engaged  
 then broke the silence of the Polish night  
 delivering head-shots – every heart shut tight

to those who cried for mercy at their turn.

The sob of *Mother* came, and in despair  
 the names of children, *Rachel, Abraham!*  
 hung off two purple lips in Polish air,  
 then toppled deadweight, and were buried there.

Three decades on, the Sinai sun burns down  
 upon a dozen Arabs trussed and lined  
 above their shabby graves. As shots resound –  
 the irony of history cannot find  
 the Jewish General's heart; he shuts his mind,

one Arab begs for mercy: *We are young!*  
 Only death regards them, from the rifles' stare.  
 Another sobs *oh Mother!* in this other tongue.  
 His cries: *my Ibrahim! my Rashmedeh!*  
 fall backwards, echo nowhere, and are buried there.

**A Gust at Yea** *(for Max)*

Suddenly this bedsheet's big with child, and there's  
a fullblown carnival of jocks and socks – wild hues:  
stark whites and blues, a flustered cardboard box  
goes end on end across the yard to quash  
a tumbling mutiny of leaves. I watch.  
The kelpie stirs, ears prick –  
a rumour pushes through the grasp of gums,  
bustles over longer grass, and comes  
to me. Beyond the cow-bent post and rail I hear  
the rhythmic bang and flap of Rick's shed roof.  
Those loose and rust-pocked corrugations –  
which his wife, for near six months  
red-faced with rage has said to fix –  
are calling out for nails.

**Old Bones** *(for Jamin)*

So you found my bones!  
And with the precision  
that is the hallmark  
of your tribe  
have placed my death  
around November six  
nine thousand and seven B.C.  
Clever!

And you know that I stood  
stooped at four-feet two,  
lived thirty five years –  
this was old for my time.  
I killed with a crude stone axe,  
my brain was small,  
my teeth were strong  
and I coupled with my woman  
like the dingoes (there  
were no missionaries in my tribe).

All this from bleached remains!

But what did they call me?  
What pitch was the cry  
my woman made, giving birth  
to the dead ones time on time?

How fearful was the scent of my enemies?  
What were my emotions; at the moon,  
the felling of the beast that fed  
my tribe for fifteen days?

You've picked around my bones  
with such a learned brush, but  
you can never carbon-date my dreams.

## **Writer's Block**

My sheepdog has gathered  
these long-wandering thoughts.  
They will mill around  
the inadequate pasture  
with its rickety fence  
until I have the guts  
to cut their throats for market  
or shoot them where they stand.

## The Poofter Speaks to Fred Nile

Why lambast me on the talk-back,  
Fred, disrupt my Gay Parades?  
Then bleed a hypocritic prayer  
when told that I have AIDS.

Do not instruct me who to fuck  
in night's sweet privacy;  
how best to quash this anal urge  
that fuels your piety.

I'm *out*, It is a man I love!  
And how he makes my penis stand.  
He makes me feel as you must  
when your cock has found *her* hand.

Believe it when I remonstrate:  
for me, no other path is true.  
I love my fellow man, dear Fred,  
in *one* more way than you.

## Proud To Be An Aussie

It makes me bloody proud, one drinker said.  
 It makes me chest swell out to be from Oz,  
 when I think of all them heroes – Bradman,  
 Phar Lap, Warnie, Dawnie Fraser and the rest.

*Does it now? his friend enquired, perplexed.*

Well yeah, the drinker thrust his glass upon the bar.  
 Them diggers died courageous, mate – I hear  
 the bullets whizzing by me when I'm thinkin  
 late at night; can feel their tortured bodies  
 drop like sleepers on the Burma Railway line –  
 I feel like I was there sometimes, don't you?

*So pride's the only thing? his friend then asked.*

Well, Jeezus no! There's real fulfillment in their deaths.  
 It's made Australia what it is today.  
 And it fills me up with knowin who I am,  
 makes me borin days at work go quick.  
 The mortgage and my gout near disappear  
 To watch our Thorpie churning up the lanes.  
 And just last night  
 those green-gold Wallabies  
 they wiped the SCG with All-Black blood.  
 McGrath's got six for seventy –  
 the Poms are in a rout,  
 Steve Waugh's on ninety nine not out.

Well, weren't *you* riding every stroke?

*All that's good, his mate replied reluctantly.*

*But can we have it just one way?*

*Weren't there times we dropped the ball as well?*

You mean when Raelene broke the blocks in '68?

When Rafter cramped at Wimbledon, or Norman

When he froze mid-stroke, US Open playoff, '92?

Well sure they lost, but still

they showed a ton of Aussie guts –

I'm proud of them – aren't you?

*That pride's not mine to feel, his friend replied.*

It wasn't me who made the runs

*or kicked the goals, or hit*

*the winning forehand down the line. And then*

*of course, there is the other side of pride.*

The other side?

*Come now, friend, be dinkum,*

*Every pretty cat has claws*

*What do you feel – here, let me shout this round –*

*of Lambing Flat. Not shame?*

Of Lambing what? Oh, that...

a bunch of Chinese scroungers scalped

and hanged by Irish miners, former lags.

No, that's not *mine* to wear. My line

is German-English – free men all, good mate.

*And of the genocide...?*

What genocide?

*Of Truganinni's mob – don't care?*

Not mine, I wasn't there.

*Is Martin Bryant part of who you are? Ivan Milat?*

I won't claim that.

*Feel proud of Menzies' score of unknown blacks*

*whilst batting for the Poms at Maralinga?*

I have never voted Liberal in me life!

*Did you ever shout in anger for the poor East Timorese:*

*"Heb Gough, forego that oily Indonesian deal,  
these natives fought the Japanese with us!"*

Well, no. It's not *my* place to cause a fuss.

Now drink your beer, this conversation's  
getting long and far too loud – here,

let me turn the footy on. There's Ablett!

Flying high to take a screamer – look,

he damn near broke his back for us

when he came down. And Michael Long,

bad knees and all, by Crikey mate, he moves like silk...

don't it make you proud we're of that ilk?

## Death of the Gardener

*(after the death of a Melbourne woman, out gardening in strong winds)*

We always wondered what it would take  
to stop you, greenthumb obsessed  
from going out there, rubber-gloved  
to get down dirty with your fertile friends:  
the azaleas, bottlebrush, the bougainvillea et al.

What could not wait the storm's slow moving-off?  
we'll ask ourselves, when such days bring you back.  
If not a fierce-wind day like this, then what?  
Was it the sight, no doubt too much for you,  
of thistle-ugly weeds or somesuch spreading where  
your fertile garden beds, rot-deep in warmth,  
had slept, and dreamt of you, and waited  
on your need to cultivate; to plant what now  
will bloom in spring without you there.

Perhaps the errant gum reached down  
in what it thought an act of love, but aged,  
like you, the worn out limb just shed itself.  
Or maybe in a jealous grab  
for all that love dug-in, turned over, fed  
to rose, camellia and the rest,  
that tree struck down in eucalyptic rage  
and breath by heartbeat gathered you  
in spitefilled rings of grain.

## Saving Sparrows

A year after your death they still  
 remember you saved sparrows  
 from the neighbour's cat each spring.  
 And they recall in mime a comic  
 clumsiness you had with food;  
 the crooked smile  
 it came so quick  
 to make them easy in their chairs;  
 the day you bought the pup  
 and fifteen years on  
 digging a hole to bury him,  
 your tears soaking an old shirt.

The rest go quiet as one son cries; recalls:  
 you loved the of gum leaves burnt  
 upon an open fire; the sound  
 of rain that rapped like steel-capped demons  
 on the corrugated rooves at night; those days  
 that started with a quilt of frost;  
 dawn-early morning walks upon the beach;

that old black van – the Falcon, '68 –  
 well every now and then, though not  
 so often as the pup, they talk  
 about the van that even now –  
 corrupt with rust, unbinds  
 beyond some highway; one

of many that you trekked alone:

*The bloody thing just died!* you said,

*I had to hitch my way back home.*

And then the curly grin assuaged them all.

If they could find that van and fold

the back seat horizontal

they would see – even now, and years

after the girl went missing –

still a smear of blood that's dried

upon the rotting vinyl. They would find

a grasp of pubic hair ground out; a fingernail

that etched her final anger

in a scar upon your neck –

*Did that on the bonnet latch!* you said –

then broke off in the final

struggling seconds of her death.

When they smile in reminiscence, they

will never see that *other* you, the one

wide-eyed and kneeling over her

with hands balled up in fists

that thudded on unwilling thighs

then spread around her throat

to quash her cries. Or later, soaked

in piss and panic as you dug

the shallow grave they'll never see.

No, they will always think of you

tucked deep within their hearts:  
with tear-stained shirts  
for buried dogs, the smile  
that curled off sideways  
and with pride recall  
you saving sparrows from the cat.

### **For Helen**

You burst into my home  
wide-eyed with words  
in autumn, ninety-four.

And so tenacious –  
you *would* get it right.  
And always gracious  
as my pen cut down  
your errant adjectives and verbs.

Dear Helen, how obscene  
this final cut should fall on you  
the gentlest noun of all.

## **These Vows** (*a Villanelle for Barb and Rick*)

I know these vows will echo once again  
 through passion-nights, through darkneses we share.  
 Life's rhythm as it ebbs from joy to pain

no doubt will buoy us when the dreams decline  
 or sometimes lull us into disrepair.

Love, know these vows will echo once again –

respect and deepest trust are ours to gain  
 as hardship mixed with pleasure meet us where  
 life's rhythm slowly ebbs from joy to pain.

Life's beating is erratic, love, it's plain  
 that we must hold its promise with great care;  
 believe these vows will echo once again

through failure and the fear we can't explain,  
 and though my shallow moments may impair  
 our rhythm as it ebbs from joy to pain,

*I love you*, is my bond, is my refrain –  
 and today, tomorrow, always, will be there.

I know these vows will echo once again  
 the rhythm of our lives in joy and pain.

**fridges are good...**

but I can no longer chase  
that old Dodge ice-cart  
down the summer bitumen  
of 1956 with mates –  
three of seven now are dead.

Christ how we screamed  
and jostled as those diamond off-cuts;  
fragments – frozen as three mates in time –  
were flung with gusto  
by the dago with his bristled grin  
and flashing hooks for hands.

## **martin bryant's chant**

my name's martin bryant i went  
there defiantly look-  
ing for recompense in my own way  
shot down a few at the broad  
arrow café i don't know  
or care why the hell i  
was there, they  
just sat disbelieving; such  
easy prey  
shot more than thirty the  
newspapers say

and the pleas on their lips  
were like convict ships that  
lurched, fell apart  
then sank in the  
bay, shot a few more beside  
the roadway and I  
have no regret, nor trouble  
forgetting  
the look on each face  
as I blew them away, took my  
sweet time & made them all pay

though the fire has abated i am not  
placated, the

anger the hate they are with me  
today, aren't you all be pleased  
that it's turned out that way? and have cho-  
sen to mark what I did with a plaque and  
to grieve; what is grief? i'm  
too crazy to say, or just  
why i went there – too mad to say.

don't you hate me i'm bryant who went there defiant but  
now I just sit here  
wasting away i  
smile & i  
rot & i constantly plot, not  
a thought for the blood on  
the floor on the wall  
of the cafe, nor the  
pleas on their faces, death by  
the roadside some have survived me  
but no one's escaped, i've  
changed yes i've changed the landscape

## Maria Callas and the Perfect Lapping of October Waves *(for Wayne)*

I remember one October night  
 camped at Wilsons Promontary, my friend  
 Wayne and I sitting around – just on sunset  
 Maria Callas softly at our backs,  
 the sky turning red along the black Pacific arc  
 as this hopeful grey-white gull  
 hung over us for un-seen scraps.  
 And that zephyr drifting in – so warm, so unexpected,  
 as it cushioned at us from the northern eucalypts.

For six full hours we sat and sipped that spirit in,  
 lacing it with crackling ice and coke. We laughed  
 at foolish things we'd done in former lives,  
 my children came and went and came again –  
 plotting, skiting, spilling, fighting, finally  
 slipping, zipping deadweight into sleeping bags.

Two o'clock arrived but how we clung  
 with tooth and nail to consciousness and flung  
 our soft nostalgia at the dying fire; we bent  
 and hovered in that perfect state  
 a soft guitar three tents away; as we looked up  
 on mountain profiles brushed with moon  
 and at the back of us the southern waves arriving  
 like a mother's heart to beat upon the womb.

I looked at Wayne and wanted more than breath to say:

*I will remember this*, but blushing at the thought  
of such a gush, I thought it wise  
to let the golden moment pass, I took  
another sip of scotch instead and slipped  
into the joker's cowardly disguise.

Sitting at this desk right now and pushing  
at the clumsiness of words, I know  
the lines do not exist that can recall  
us back into that night, but if they could  
I'd take the moment by the throat  
and whisper softly, *I'll remember this*:  
our friendship breathing conversation  
like that northern zephyr off the land;  
the mountain cradling us; Maria Callas and  
the perfect lapping of October waves.

**back here on earth** *(for anna)*

my darling it is late it's  
two am & it's so  
hard back here on earth  
without you sweetest &  
I know i've had  
too much to drink i know that  
but i need so very very much right now  
to dance with you & feel  
your hands along my spine  
& sweetheart would you  
mind if we just shuffled like  
old memories round the lounge  
-room with that shirt the one  
i loved you in i will  
not wash that shirt i  
cannot wash it  
has your scent  
it has the sweat of holding  
you on summer nights it  
holds within its weave  
the rapturous moans I made  
oh i am deepest-down my love & i can taste  
you i can taste exactly what we were &  
what we had oh jeezus love it hurts  
so very very much at 2am with far  
too much to drink just

waiting  
on my own o god  
i'm really on my own  
back here on earth.

### **well even then...**

when we had hung our generals  
captains corporals cut  
the tongue from every  
war-bent politician when we'd holed  
our battleships our subs & burned  
our harbours to the waterline –  
well even then

& even when we melted all our guns  
& buried every bomb peace-deep  
& even when we ground the edge  
off every bayonet and knife –  
well even then  
it only took one fool  
who threw one stone  
to hone our anger razor sharp  
and set us down *that* path again

## This Dog and Me

I saw this three-legged dog today –  
he chased my car while I  
was on my way for grog for pizza  
& a lazy video or two. The dog  
had doubtless lost the limb  
to an exuberance – some  
ill-timed backwheel lunge  
when the bark & chase  
were irresistible & meant  
far more to him  
than flesh and bone.

And I? Well I've got high  
Cholesterol; a rolling gut  
my doctor scowls about  
& I've lost friends –  
my wife reminds  
me time on time –  
to drunken words  
foul-flung at them.

The dog  
who chases cars, I see  
(and, yes me)  
learn very little  
very slowly from our chosen ways.

## Inquest (South Africa 1987)

At the inquest into the (black) man's death the (white) judge found that evidence given by (black) eye-witnesses was... 'conflicting' – they said that he was kicked and bashed unconscious by the (white) guards then drifted, unassisted into death.

(White) policemen though, asserted that the *black* (man) fell from the van and died 'in unfortunate and wholly unpreventable circumstances.' He (black he) joins a list as long as a fall from a tenth floor police cell.

## I Can Picture You

I can picture you now, bristling  
 drawing back your bow  
 & sharpening arrows, acid-dipped  
 upon this stone we keep  
 forever between us.

## questions regarding what a man said

a man said on the radio last night:

*as far as I can find, he said,  
in all of earth's recorded books, that we  
have only known full peace  
for seven minutes, forty seconds  
of our history.*

He would not split tenths.

And I began to tense & wonder why  
the chance for peace continuing  
was missed & how & what  
base instincts lead us to persist  
forever on that road *away?*

Or does the right road not exist?

## I am Big, My Wife Has Gone

I'm big now, bigger  
than my children, though  
in time they'll move  
away from me –  
I'll be outgrown – my wife's  
already gone.

But I am big, or so  
I tell myself  
& watch the night's  
electric rage alone, my kids  
sleep out this storm – my wife,  
she's gone.

Yes I am big now, but  
still scared as hell  
of thunder rolling in  
from far away –  
of dying on my own.  
My wife is gone.

## Me

Who I may  
or may not be  
depends  
almost entirely  
on those whose lives  
encompass mine  
and how they stand  
and what their stand-  
point is on time  
or second wives  
or death's approach  
or tea –  
then I  
react to that  
and they  
and you  
and even I  
mistake my  
fiction for a fact.  
But even if  
we all could see  
like healthy eagles  
all we'd get  
is who I *want*  
myself to be.

## The Hit-man's One Night Stand

You look serene as sunlight  
deepens shadows up your spine.  
Last night was *almost* perfect –  
music, romance, conversation... I  
completely lost myself until  
you asked: *what do you do?*  
And I remembered then  
your husband's call; the contract made.

A pity, love, you look sublime –  
sunlight painting that which tries to pass  
for life upon your eyes.

## Haiku Street Kids

Up Fitzroy laneways  
stonecold street kids suck rich cocks  
for the next big fix.

## The Other Man

There is this other man.  
He holds a gun at your head.  
Hot salty beads form upon your brow  
but your hand, shaking  
knows what must be done.

You glimpse his shadow  
but before you can breathe  
he draws back a foot  
and you know from the noise  
that he has pulled the trigger.

Electric with fright  
you see everyone you've ever loved  
in a millisecond, passing  
like a congregation on a crowded day.

You think he may have missed until  
your last thoughts thud unplanned  
upon the plaster wall like fists  
flung red as they recall:  
there is no other man.

## Hear My Song *(for Andrew)*

I am, finally, Andrew  
revealed as I give you my song  
conjured up on lonely nights  
dragged from the pit of my gut and flung  
like raw meat upon the keyboard.  
I give it now to you who believed  
and you who believed me wrong –  
its tune will drip with all I am, and all  
I ever want to be. It is for everyone.

Mother, hear my song – there is  
a verse for you, for I am still that boy  
who tugged upon your apron  
for the soothing wrap of arms; its true  
you disapprove my sexual preferences  
but try to understand –  
these two-part harmonies were not my choice  
I cannot; do not want to change  
the melody life's made of me; I only want  
the breast that suckled me to swell, unqualified.

And Father, hear my song and smile.  
The blind belief you held has finally  
paid its way – relax and shuffle just a little  
to this hard-won beat; this pulse  
that honed its rhythm in the darkness

you have shared with me; and quickens  
at the memory of the many times  
those bastards knocked me down – but Father  
though they did their best and sank  
their hob-nailed boots into my balls  
and hammered me with scorn – well even then  
I held the hum of it as I went down.

And you, my enemies should listen  
hardest to my song tonight –  
the salt-grit pain of your betrayal  
was that which laced the low notes  
with such venomous appeal –  
the blind-rage rhythm too  
was set upon your lies  
to drown the chorus of your jealousy. So all

who love or hate me hear my song, it is  
the total sum of what I am and what  
you've done to me. There's nothing else;  
I'm nothing now, finally  
if not the song we've made.

**Doctor** *(after the invasion of Kuwait)*

It will be my turn,  
after the Five-star General  
who points with a stick at a map  
has gloried in the ticker-tape.  
After the battered troops have made  
a tactical retreat  
to what is left of home.  
After Patriot and Scud.  
After the oil-spills.  
And after Israel's restraint  
has been acknowledged and paid.  
After journalists have un-earthed the lies  
and the politicians  
are back on the golf course.

Then it will be my turn to go in  
insert glass balls  
into bone sockets where eyes were.  
I will go in and I will  
fashion up these  
steel-hinged limbs  
I will steady my rage into rubber gloves  
Pull shrapnel from torn gut and spleen  
I will suture throats for the voiceless.

## suite: september eleven

### 1 i get up

it's early i get up & turn the tv on & see the second plane go in like this big godhand swatting a sandcastle in slow motion replay over & over & over until tower two \ having up to now concealed its skeletal demise \ & with three & a half grand of flesh & love & hate & friendship trust & jealousy & sex & late-night fights & weekend trips to disneyworld the zoo the movies macca's & the rest & all their future moments and their bloodlines lost & melding into white hot steel & shattered stone \ implodes in billowed dust like ruptured innards up the new york thoroughfares & over running onlookers who panic run & cry & ask themselves who made this white-hot exclamation mark & why oh why oh why

### 2 tv replay tower two

the network heads know little deeds need less believing in and so it seems \ a thousand times on tv replay tower two is temple-stoned \ in distant slo-mo legs & torso twist & sag \ three thousand silenced heads & more come down goliath-like \ a dozen times or so \ *this can't be happening* you think \ until you've seen it twice three times etcetera et al until you finally come to this: *what mother made this david \ who has filled his sling \ and why?*

### 3 all morning

all morning from america they're asking who & who & who \ and when the name is given up to them they ask a smallish pack of shallow whys \ & in that same indignant breath they shake their heads from side to side

\ they all conclude with vengeance he is mad! and that is all there is no  
 need for further whys \ we're better off to move on up to how & what  
 & when \ & dig what life we can out of the rubble build it all back up  
 again \ and bring bin laden taliban iraq the palestinians et al to heel \  
 and so they nod in single purpose & their president the generals tony  
 blair and all the rest assure them that the name put up will pay \ there is  
 no need no need no need they say & thump the podium & fling white-  
 knuckled vows to god on high \ but never never never will they ask the  
 deeper more persistent why

#### 4      autumn in kabul & winter in baghdad

late autumn early winter in kabul \ a smart bomb  
 finds its mark \ but others find a hospital a school  
 and worse \ the unexploded toys are planted &  
 they lie in certain promise for the mothers:  
 summer coffins \ legless girls and boys  
 revenge is cold \ it needs such fuel  
 for winter's early coming to kabul

and now we move to winter in baghdad \ cruise missiles  
 seek Saddam \ but find a dozen englishmen instead  
 we watch the television carnage with ad-breaks  
 as little johnny howard soothes the mothers  
 shattered soldiers \ oil wells burn the night  
 but the world is cold; and our hearts are sad  
 at winter raining missiles on baghdad

september was a cruel month for new york \ twin towers  
 done to dust \ 3000 who were innocent \ all crushed

those left \ searched for ways to vent their pain and loss  
as politicians schemed in darkened bureaus \  
five-star generals; exon showed the way –  
they'd bomb the towns \ they'd steal the oil  
when winter comes to baghdad and kabul.

# Section 3

## *Critical Essays*

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## Introduction

At this point an explanation of my agenda and methodology for the essays will be helpful. As stated in the opening section of this thesis, the stories and poems were written with a dual purpose in mind. Firstly they are to be regarded as stand-alone explorations of issues of identity as they occur in individuals, families and societies. The awareness they (hope to) raise surrounding these issues – through the ripple-affect of thought-provocation, debate, discussion etc is, like all such literature and art, their justification in terms of a contribution to the communal knowledge surrounding such issues.

Secondly they would become subjects for exploration of the issues pertinent to the exegetical component. The fact that many poems threw up repetitions of identity issues covered by essays on other works made it unnecessary to subject each to separate analysis. The result is that all stories plus a selection of poems presenting fresh aspects of the central research questions became the subject of individual essays.

The essays appear in chronological order to parallel that of the creative pieces and give a page number reference (for the story under investigation) in brackets beside each essay title.

## *On the Stories*

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### **Letting It Go** (*Appendix A, p 317*)

My first awareness (on a personal level) of the notions of a writer's ethics and responsibilities – and their associated pressures, was brought slowly, yet emphatically home via a short story, *Letting It Go* (Smith, 2000 [see: appendix A]), that emerged over a 15 year period and was completed in 1998. The piece started life as a 14-line poem called *Ray*. The central character and the events were true; I had sat next to Ray in the fourth grade at primary school. One Saturday night his father, a chronic alcoholic and World War 2 veteran, killed his children, Ray included, with an ax. He then killed his wife with a shotgun before turning it on himself. I wrote the initial poem, comprising six months of intermittent writing, when I was around 26 years old. The piece was subsequently published and though that appeared to be the end of the subject, something always agitated me whenever I re-read it. The poem confined itself to the narrator (myself) talking to Ray, seeking an understanding of a child's awakening to the notion of 'real death':

At the time, Ray, no tears came, tears being for real hurt, like cut knees or a nose bloodied by the bully from Malta street. Grasping your death was difficult, first grief as far away as Saturn. And television death, Ray, was no help at all when real death came. Five nights a week Wild Bill Hickock pumped hot lead into black-clad outlaws (who never bled), but next night they were back angrier than ever, shooting up the ranchers and making life hell for Wild Bill. Playing cowboys up and down the banks of the Darebin Creek, Ray, falling over and counting to fifty was all there was to being dead.

(Smith, 2000, p 48. See Appendix A)

I finally pinned down my agitation to a desire on my part to understand why the father had committed the act, and to try to know how the father attained a mind set that allowed him to slaughter his own children and his wife. So I wrote a second piece, a monologue titled *Kevin*, and this is where my ethical dilemma began. I had only scant contact with, or knowledge of the father, this gained when playing with Ray after school in his backyard. But one vivid instance remains. Ray and I were kicking the football when his father came out from the house, drunk and wearing a white singlet that was very soiled. He swayed and staggered in a circle around us, calling for Ray to kick the ball to him. Ray became tense and was visibly embarrassed by his father's behavior. He dropped the football ignoring his father's rantings and put forward the idea that we should go to my house to play. As Ray turned his back on the father the man picked up the football and, from a distance of about three metres, kicked it with terrific force into Ray's back. He then went back into the house without uttering a word. Armed with this, and the act the father committed, I wrote his monologue, making him hated and hateful, arrogant, aggressive and utterly defiant (toward his implied audience). As another year or so went on it nagged me a little as to how accurately I had portrayed the father. After all, his earlier persona had been such that a woman had loved him enough to marry and have children to him? It was around this time I discovered, through a friend's father who'd known him from childhood, that Ray's father had been a prisoner at the infamous Changi prison camp during World War 2. A little red light flashed. After some extensive research supplementing anecdotes I'd heard of Changi, I rewrote the monologue to reflect what Ray's father's experiences might have been. The father's character became different now, more complex, more three-dimensional. The aggression was still there, but

there was an attempt at justifying his actions, at trying to understand his state of mind and his motives at the moment he committed the murders. Another red light – was I giving Ray's father sympathy he didn't really deserve? Perhaps he really *was* a monster without any redeemable dimensions. It worried me that I could never know this, to the extent that I felt obliged to write another section titled *The Narrator*, which concedes the guesswork associated with Kevin's monologue, whilst not backing away from the fact that I considered it to be it very plausible guesswork.

Most of it from here on is fiction and conjecture. I can only try to join the scattered confusion of narrative dots, only hope to alert the hand that strikes the match that lights the candle that then locates the light revealing all.

(Smith, 2000, p 48. See Appendix A)

I then added a monologue from Ray, in an attempt to understand the father's actions from this perspective, and also to try to understand how a child might make sense of a situation where the person who is supposed to love and protect you, treats you instead with great cruelty. I used events, emotions and experiences from my own childhood and family context to achieve this. Yet again I felt uneasy, for I had now moved into the realm of *possible* explanations and *plausibility* for the events that occurred. But this was all I had, and I felt I knew enough of Ray's experience to know that he would have felt much the same fear of his father that I had felt of mine, and that his father's actions when drunk would have approximated – in effect if not in specificity – those of my own father. So the story sat for a further two years, something still not quite right about it, until a female friend read it and asked, with just the hint of accusation: 'I wonder what his wife felt?' I had thought,

very fleetingly, of Ray's mother – but never in terms of a central character in the narrative. I met her just a couple of times and I remembered her as a figure of silence in an apron behind a fly-wire door – passive and uninteresting. I thought of my own mother then, and her reactions and emotions toward my father when he was drinking heavily and flew into his rages. Who better deserved the right to judge Ray's father than the person closest to him – his wife. The more I conceived her character the more I realised she *had* to contribute to the story. Her monologue has the final word on the events of the narrative. I cannot now conceive of the story without her.

I'm glad I'm getting the chance to have my say. I was so ordinary, so...marginal. In life I had no say. According to the newspaper reports I was the mother who, quote, *...was also shot dead*. Unquote. An appendage, even in death, is what I was.

I was a Catholic housewife in Melbourne in the fifties. My jobs were to cook for Kevin and incubate for God. That's all. As Kevin used to say to the few people we ever socialised with, *meet the boss*. And then he'd turn, pretending his arm across my shoulder, and smile at the others and the men would laugh and their women would look half embarrassed as they smiled because they knew and I knew and most of all Kevin knew, that I could never be the boss of anything. (Smith, 2000, p 52. See Appendix A)

When I heard Ray cry out my name that night and I came into the room, Jesus, I can't explain to you what I saw then, Michael's head opened up like that... it's just too much. I wanted to be the Japs then, I wanted to push bamboo shoots into Kevin's eyes. He left the room to get the gun, I knew. But I didn't care, I just wanted to be dead then; needed to be. I curled myself up beside Ray, he was shaking and sobbing and I tucked him into me, *I love you Ray, I love you*, and all I could think as I wrapped myself over him like a cocoon and listened for Kevin's footsteps was how sorry I was I hadn't said it more.

Then there was an explosion and everyone had to let go.

(Smith, 2000, p 54. See Appendix A)

When readers say they have been moved by the story, I feel uneasy. I want to think that by fictionalizing this tragedy – by using Ray and his family – I have on some level created an understanding for the *actual* complex familial and social dynamics that created it, but the question: *have I?* is omnipresent.

### **Fixing the Renault** (*Stories p 34*)

This story was originally written as a one-act play in response to a request from a nurse (friend) involved in research into hepatitis C. She had requested me to write the piece as part of a performance event highlighting the disease and its impact on individuals, families and society. Over ensuing weeks it started to appeal to me as subject matter that could go far deeper and longer. As I began to imagine the main character keeping his disease and its cause a secret from the rest of the family, a broader main theme of family dysfunction began to emerge.

Its early conception was as a story that would demonstrate and explore the emotional pain evident in families where one person under stress develops aberrant or antisocial behavior which then has a traumatic negative impact upon the whole family's coherence and happiness.

I decided (arbitrarily I thought) the dysfunctional figure in my fictional family would be a teenage son\brother on drugs, who would both anger and anguish his parents and sibling and evoke a variety of emotional

scenes\responses to make the fiction stimulating whilst also conveying an understanding of the perspectives of all concerned.

I didn't need to go far for a model of this behavior, I knew of many families – my own included – who had been affected to varying degrees by instances of family members being addicted to one type of drug or another. In my own case one of my sons became for a particular period, an everyday user of marijuana. This caused some fairly radical personality changes and behavior resulting in a tension between us that simmered for weeks and then exploded in a scene between father and son similar to the one fictionalised in the story. So, two characters: a teenage son on drugs and a father who can neither understand this nor tolerate the behavior it evokes, became my initial main characters.

To further compound the boy's dilemma; to layer-in an underlying element of tension and to create a catalyst for arguments between the son and the father, I developed the idea that the boy has caught his hepatitis (the mother, father and sister think it is AIDS) from needle-sharing, something the family suspects and the father voices outright.

I decided to add complexity and dramatic possibility by enlarging the cast to include a mother and sister. The mother would love, believe in and defend the boy unconditionally. This character became a collage of a handful of women I've observed during my life whom I would identify as *this type of mother*, with the personality of one woman in particular dominating my perception of how that character would play out within the narrative. This would allow the exploration of sub-themes exploring aspects of maternal love (specifically that shown to an errant son). The sister would simply hate the boy for his actions and the

impact upon her own life. She is to be identified by readers as being both an ally to the father and an affirmation of his stance towards the son. She is her father's favourite and completely opposite in personality to the boy – she is neat and tidy; clean and conventional in her thinking; and is focused on being ‘straight’. Making her thus allows the depth of sibling rivalry and its effect upon the family unit already in crisis to be given a further element of ironic tragedy. It also lets me focus upon the guilt and insecurities that surface around the notion of parents having favourites amongst their children.

Again I’ve gone to my own personal experiences as both a child and a parent experiencing this situation, and observations of families close to me, to explore this aspect. It's a dynamic that can cause great pain and have negative, long-term consequences, especially to the children who feel they are not getting the same deal as their siblings. In the context of family dynamics and interrelationships, it raises personal issues of identity relating to a child's self-worth, their ‘place’ and function within the family unit and parental guilt for feelings which more often than not relate to the natural phenomenon of personalities\temperaments that either clash with or complement others, and are therefore out of everybody's control. In this regard, the notion of the child\parent relationship changing as the child reaches adolescence becomes a strong thematic concern.

Another prominent theme that had emerged at the conclusion of the first draft was communication (or lack of it) within the family unit.

As the first draft began to unfold this subject matter agenda posed a significant structural problem for the narrative. My intention was to

write the first person narrative from the perspective of the boy complemented by two, half page monologues from both the mother and father, and a smaller one from the sister at the very end. I wanted to give all the main characters a chance to present their perspectives on the dilemma – and the form achieved that – but the three main sections seemed too distanced, almost like separate entities. Whereas this same stylistic device had worked quite well in a previous story, *Letting It Go* (reviewed earlier), in this narrative it had the main characters relating their stories in such isolation that it resulted in a very *telling* tone, rather than one in which their painful interrelationships were *shown*. Their feelings were being told rather than *felt*, and I knew I had to put them together for the latter to occur.

I decided to break up the various sections – the interior dialogues that try to capture characters' isolated thoughts – and intersperse them one with the other, supplemented by conflictive dialogue scenes directed by an omniscient third person narrator. By this method I hoped to develop the conflict with the characters shoulder to shoulder interplay, whilst still conveying the discommunicative aspect in an effective way to readers.

I am happy with this form, which amounts to a series of soliloquies rather than monologues. Being pushed away from the conventional toward more experimental forms by the requirements of a particular story is both an adventure and a gamble – sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. The reaction from a number of readers to whom I've shown the story seems to indicate the ploy has been successful this time.

But working with multiple viewpoints can have its pitfalls and limitations. First, it is not a common device for short story – third person omniscient being the most common convention for presenting more than one perspective in that form. So readers are not expecting to encounter what really amounts to multiple 'stories' within one short narrative. The device of multiple perspectives should not necessarily disrupt the reader's suspension of disbelief, though – like any technique or element, if used badly it will. It gets back to that notion of affirming subject matter and immersing readers in your narrative idiom using the *best* narrative tools at your disposal.

In my experience the judgment on which *singular* point of view to use in a particular story (ie: first person subjective, second person, third person omniscient etc.) is determined very early on in the process and in a very subconscious way. You think about the story and the characters and you begin to write that story from a particular perspective. For me, it is very rare that this first auto-choice of perspective needs to be altered to another. By contrast I found coming to a judgment that multiple points of view were required for particular stories became a very conscious decision.

Because it requires readers to engage with and *give themselves over* to understanding more than one perspective, careful consideration needs to be given to *the way* in which the device will operate within a given story. As for every other device chosen for a particular short story, multiple viewpoints need to *concentrate* the focus on the central theme. The big danger for this perspective is the possibility of dispersing or weakening the focus. If used inappropriately, multiple perspectives can

become *manifest* as a device rather than working unobtrusively (and effectively) to convey the thematic concerns.

*Most* short stories confine themselves to brief time-frames where an incident, situation or event in a 'moment' of one character's life encapsulates the theme. And *usually* the thematic concerns and the effects of the narrative situations centre on one, sometimes two, but rarely three or more protagonists. But there are exceptions and for those rare times when a democratic spread of narrative 'voices' is needed; when you are saying to your readers: I want you to see the 'butterfly effect' of these particular events or situations on characters other than the one directly affected by them, then multiple viewpoints can be the most effective tool to use.

And it has broadened the way that I can write short stories *from now on*, and equipped me with a technique I personally have not seen used this way in any short story I've read. I have not invented anything; the devices themselves: soliloquy\monologue, are not original but *my arrangement* of them in this story (I think) represents an inventive *adaptation* of them. It's a new tool for me and one I can pass on to my students as an element they can use or modify to suit specific story applications. More importantly it also presents the *notion* of striving for invention\reinvention\modification of narrative devices to other writers\students – the idea that they have the *possibility* to assemble existing elements of fiction in a *unique* way, and they should always be looking to affirm their subject matter in ways that stimulate and cultivate readers.

Other more conventional literary elements employed for this story include descriptions of the seasons, the sun, the moon, colours etc as motifs and in a symbolic relational way to characters' emotional states and the plot progression. These are meant to add a subliminal dimension to the narrative and to act as suggestive (showing) rather than directive (telling) guidance for readers. They provide a certain mood or tone at pivotal moments of narrative change, rather than having these important moments simply told by a narrator – they are the soft guitar complementing the singer's voice.

The personal pressures being exerted upon me as I wrote this story were considerable, and speak of the dilemma that soon or late hits every writer of the literary genre – that people they love become recognisable as character models in painful or negative ways within the fiction. The bedroom scene between father and son in this story is one such instance. My son, when he reads the story will see a moment neither he nor I feel comfortable about reliving – doubly so because others in our family will also recognize that moment. The problem arises between *person* and *writer* – this was not the *only* way, but it was certainly the *best* way I could faithfully portray that narrative confrontation in all its complexity and emotional nuance. Whenever I read that scene I try hard to think how I could have disguised it, to have done it otherwise; to have set it in another location. As a final resolution I even thought of rewriting the whole story and changing the boy's character from a male to a female. But that would have been wrong; there was an 'old bull, young bull' aspect pleading to be explored and understood. The father\son discommunication; uncomfortable for the person, was fundamental to the writer's main theme and for this particular aspect of family dysfunction to be fully manifest.

The resulting tension is this: as a writer I know it was the best way to do the job – I am clear and satisfied with the choice to include the scene. But as a person and especially as a father I worry about the consequences of that choice. I worry my son will feel that something very personal and painful between us has been used so that I could get a short story done. I worry that other family members will see it as something of a betrayal in this regard. The joy of the writer in succeeding to write what may be published and regarded as a strong piece of dramatic fiction, the person has to pay for with feelings of guilt.

**The Sunbather:** versions 1 & 2 (*Stories* p 44 & 66)

The Sunbather became an interesting exercise in varying the length of a short story to fit two agendas – my own and that of magazine and short story competition editors. It also became an exploration of identity for certain 'types' of people and their gender relationships being represented by the characters I constructed.

One of the more irritating pressures associated with short story writing in Australia is that of manufactured or arbitrary boundaries set by editors for story length. For the majority of these there is a requirement of top-end manuscript length of 2000 - 3000 words. According to experienced editor and competition judge Jenny Lee, the main reason offered by publishers is that space is always at a premium – the literary magazine market is a tough one, most publishers rely on subsidies for their continuance. This seems to be coupled with the desire to place a substantial variety of good authors into any given edition. For competitions it seems the length becomes problematic in terms of the time judges (who have to be paid) can spend reading entries.

Regardless of the *reasons* for the current word-length parameters for Australian short stories, they have wide-ranging ramifications for writers of the genre. The word length will ultimately determine what *type* of story is written. Character development and thematic complexity are necessarily limited, and the creation of mood\tone must be attained with the minimum use of description. This encourages the use of metaphor and simile rather than long descriptive passages to convey character, place and tone. Whilst this comes naturally to some short story writers, it is a frustrating constraint for others. Jenny Lee indicates that under the 2500 - 3000 words parameter, a sameness occurs about the way stories read and feel.

The requirement for a short word count also influences what student writers are given to accept as the 'normal' length for a story. As a teacher of first-year short story at TAFE level I encourage my students to enter competitions and submit their work to magazines. To do this they are compelled to stick to the 3000 word upper limit, which in turn perpetuates *this type* of story and to a large degree influences the type of storyteller these student writers consider themselves to be.

Writing my preferred (7000 word) version of *The Sunbather* was both rewarding and provided a substantial learning experience in terms of crafting what I consider to be a long short story. Having to then edit and submit a shorter – and in my opinion, inferior – version of it to a competition was quite frustrating.

At the formative stages of this story I began with the concept for a narrative with only one main character, the boy, as the focus and a word

length of around 3000 - 4000 words. To facilitate what happens to the boy I envisaged situating three or four other, less defined characters, all of whom would become 'props' for what happens to him. With this idea in mind the initial completed story (of five drafts) ended up at 3240 words. At this stage a major problem with the narrative became apparent as different readers (my supervisor and two other writer friends) identified an unconvincing and ambiguous element associated with the ending of the story. Putting it away for about a week and then reading it afresh, I agreed with their criticisms and began to rewrite the end section. During this process, as so often happens (with me anyway), dissatisfaction began to arise with two of the lesser, women characters – the boy's mother and the sunbather who becomes a fascination for him. They wanted to be more known to me, the writer, and I wondered then whether the same need to understand them would arise in whatever readers the story might find. The subtle pressure this exerted over the next few days left me with an opinion that the story, with the ending now satisfactorily reworked, was still very much incomplete. Questions surrounding the personality and behaviour of the two women, and their dimensionality and importance as 'types' who actually existed, began to build into a feeling that I had shortchanged or cheated the 'real' people they were representing. I felt compelled to create understanding for the two women characters through exposition of background information and descriptions of relationships with people other than the boy. By doing this I felt I could inject far more emotion into the work, and a lot more feeling for all characters at times of their dramatic\ tensioned intersections.

After several more drafts I had fulfilled my agenda for the women and the story stood at around 6000 words. The two male sub-characters

were left – the mother's boyfriend (very hard and insensitive) and the sunbather's husband (also very abrasive). I felt the need to abridge\give reasons for the character traits I had given them for the story to convince *me*. Two more sections were added bringing me to a final draft of 7000 words. I was now satisfied with both the length of the piece and the balance of character dimensions\dynamics as it relates to what I believe constitutes a short story. To have given greater depth to the two male and two female sub-characters would, I think, have necessitated lengthening the work into a novella.

So I now had the story *I* wanted. But the need to have it published produced the need for an *alternative* version of reduced length. Also, as a writer, and one trying to establish a place for myself as a teacher of writing, the pressure (subtle, but it's there) to gain credentials by winning or being commended in writing competitions began to nag. I decided to enter the story in the *Alan Marshall Short Story Competition*, run by Nillumbik council. The word count required was 2500 so I set to work, first on major components by reducing what had become main characters back to subordinate ones, though retaining a substantial focus upon the sunbather as well as the boy. Long sections were deleted but the count at the end of three revisions was still 3600 words. I now began to concentrate on and edit at word level, rephrasing sentences to shorten them, culling every adverb and adjective not absolutely crucial to understanding what characters were doing, and shortening my descriptive passages to finally arrive at the required 2500 word count.

Though this version ended up being shortlisted for the competition, I get little satisfaction from reading it. The longer version is my high watermark and makes the shortened one seem extremely shallow by

contrast. I regard the two versions as completely *separate* entities; they feel to me like *different* stories, albeit with the same events and characters.

*The Sunbather* has its genesis in a small journal entry written in 1998. I had put down a few small jottings\thoughts relating to the dual symbolism of the female breast: sexuality and maternal nourishment. It is one of the few times for me when an abstract idea preceded any thought of a story with which to explore it. It usually happens the other way around – an incident will be observed on a train or in a restaurant, or a newspaper article\photograph that then throws up a character or two that in turn leads to a *possible* story. The possible story then needs to be reformed into creative fiction via a main theme\idea, something that can make the grade as literary fiction; something with intellectual and emotional legs. And that's always the hardest part for me – but not so with *The Sunbather*.

How then to marry this with the central theme of my PhD – issues of personal identity? I needed a context in which the breast would appear, firstly, as a sexual motif. The most obvious to me was an Australian beach scenario, where flesh (with breasts a-plenty) that in most public places would be covered up, can be displayed and ogled with a curious moral impunity. The notion of a woman sunbather being watched by a fantasising teenage boy began to form. And if a boy with a dysfunctional background and family dynamic then, on a subliminal level, he could be in need of maternal emotional nourishment and security, notions for which I also wanted to utilise the breast in a symbolic way.

In terms of identity, the sunbathing woman is thus defined by the boy – on a conscious level as a sexual being and on a subconscious level as someone who can help harbour him against his insecure, violent and dysfunctional existence. He only *thinks* it is the first that holds him, fascinated, to her breasts.

I deliberately made Luke small in physical stature; fragile, and something of an outsider – he has only one friend, the equally dysfunctional but much tougher, Thommo. Luke is someone who has never been *shown* love, and it is this plus the security of a solid family unit he most craves. Thommo, who has a streetwise hardness and bravado that can never be Luke's, also define him. Luke is drawn to Thommo to gain a sense of protection, though he feels great shame when cornered into colluding with Thommo's thuggish behaviour. But Luke has been shown nothing but violence – his mother hits him and her new boyfriend also mistreats him – and he visits his own version of this learned behaviour in a cowardly attack on the defenceless Japanese boy. Luke's environment and background have been a powerful force in shaping who he is, but ultimately it is his personality and emotional make-up that determine his inability to handle that shaping. When he and Thommo have taken the laptop from the Japanese boy it is Thommo who swaggers away with the trophy; Luke walks dejectedly behind, injured with a bleeding hand; guilt-ridden and feeling ashamed:

Luke walked back over to him, nursing the injured hand, getting red in the face. 'Give im a kickin, Lukie,' Thommo yelled as he grabbed the screaming Japanese kid by the hair and held his face in Luke's direction. Luke thought of his errant father then, who loved him, he knew, but was never there; all the jocks and their hoe girlfriends at school who'd taunted and rejected him because he was small and weedy; Mister Ballard, the teacher who'd expelled

him. But most of all, as rage and retribution swallowed him whole, he thought of Thumper Dave and his mother. And in an act he knew to be as cowardly as it was pleasurable, he took three quick steps forward and dropped-kicked the Japanese boy's face; felt the cheekbone give back into the face with a queer grind, and the nose cave sideways with a spray of red across the white-tiled wall of the underpass... And they walked off into the night, Thommo swaggering along with his prize; and in his shadow, Luke, hand limp and dripping blood. (pp 52 - 53)

Also central to the story is the identity of the sunbather. She is defined by her husband's assumptions and judgments regarding her maternal shortcomings. As a 'type' she is representative of those women in society who struggle to pursue career goals in an environment dominated by masculine mores. She chooses work over motherhood and pays a high price both physically and emotionally when her endeavours to prove herself the equal of her male colleagues results in the death of her foetus and a debilitating stroke for herself. She loses her child, her job, her health and ends up with a husband who both loves and despises her. She is a woman torn between her identity as a *potential mother* and the desire to be taken seriously as a conscientious and talented *person*. Society, and her husband, will not accommodate both at the one time. But she cannot escape her instinct to 'mother' Luke when she sees the damage to his arms. Unlike his own mother and his best friend Thommo, the sunbather – perhaps because of the loss of her own child, has the propensity and the ability to recognise and react to his vulnerability and pain.

The character of Luke's mother was constructed to make an ironic contrast with the character of the sunbather. Because of her socio-economic background and situation she is *compelled* to work as a barmaid

to survive and has submitted to a stereotypical 'lower-class' female role and all its societal assumptions\expectations:

...Teddy, elf-small, useless and in jail while she pumped grog six days a week and washed the clothes and cooked the meals and woke without a glimpse of hope for better things – and only Thumper's feral slag between her thighs; his three-day bristle scratching at her neck... (p 61)

She is also defined by her need for the security and fulfilment of a partner. By ending up in jail, her drug dealer husband, Teddy (Luke's father) has left her vulnerable and lonely. She enters into a rather unsatisfactory relationship with Thumper Dave; who is equally destructive for both her and Luke. Being described as having little self-worth or the feminine attraction that might give her some social worth, she must settle for the violent, insensitive boyfriend. The events of her own life leave her so beleaguered she has no time for maternal niceties, and this in turn leads to Luke feeling cast off. This is then accentuated by the advent of the boyfriend, whom the mother joins in mocking Luke's size:

'Ya kid's like a pretty bloody ferret,' Dave slurred and laughed the first night his mother, drunk herself, had brought him back to their dogbox Ministry of Housing weatherboard. 'An them bloody lubra lips of is – dead-set looks like eez been suckin eggs all is life, eh!' She had looked from Thumper to Luke then with a slow swivel and tilt of her head, teetered a little, slapped the wiry man across singlet-clad shoulders in mock-admonishment before allowing her giggles to run through a cupped hand and join Thumper's guffaws in pulling the boy down. (p 45)

And even the boyfriend's rather rough identity is abridged and 'filled out' by his liaison with Luke's mother:

And as he raged into the bloke with his boots it was plain, even to this mob, that they did have something, Dave and her. It was small and it was brittle and tense – and christ knows the kid didn't like him – the something they had was maybe so small it amounted only to a warm spine to belly into on a winter night between stretches in the slam. But Dave was smart enough to know that everybody needed at least that. (p 47)

What has begun to emerge (to me) as I review this story in terms of personal and societal notions of identity, is that no one *has* any identity other than that which is counterbalanced against the identity of others – we *are* what we are *seen to be* by others, and how we are *seen to be measured* against the identity and worth of others within our societal groupings.

### **First Time** (*Stories p 75*)

With this story I set out to explore the mother\daughter dynamic, one with which I am largely unfamiliar. As I researched by talking to three female friends, all of them over the age of 35, a unifying theme began to emerge. As daughters having passed from adolescence into adult life, they said, they were able to get much closer to their mothers. When I probed for reasons it emerged as a blend of natural maturity, shared experiences such as giving birth, raising small children, trouble they'd had with relationships, their health etc.

My observations of the way women interrelate had made me very interested in the factor of duress, the fact that as women they seemed to be able to first, express it to one another, whereas in my experience the same intimate revelation does not often occur between father and son;

father and daughter; or even mother and son. Secondly, the moment of duress becomes, for mother and daughter, an opportunity to talk, to nourish, to forgive if that is necessary and to bond, whereas their male counterparts – and this has been my experience as both son and father – flounder around for practical solutions to situations whose dilemma lies in the emotional aspect, whilst avoiding the intimacy to which women allow themselves natural access.

Stemming from these talks, one friend's experience emerged as being perfect for my subject concerns. Her parents had divorced when she and her sister were quite young, with the father having had an affair with another woman and leaving the family in circumstances of great acrimony. My friend had little contact with him from the age of 13 until the time of his death when she was 27. The breakup and its ensuing trauma served to draw my friend and her mother very close. The mother, according to my friend, assumed from the beginning of their 'new life' an attitude of complete trust toward her. My friend expressed the notion that their identified roles as mother and daughter changed somewhat as their relationship assumed an extra element of friendship\companionship, brought on she thinks, by the insecurity of 'losing' the husband\father. From this point on my friend indicated that she was always able to tell her mother everything that was going on in her life – what made her happy and what gave her pain – and that concealing adolescent wrongdoings from her mother became an impossible task. The moment they sat down at the same table they were able to 'read' each other's emotional state, if not the specific reason for it.

This then was a perfect setup for my intended mother\daughter subject matter and threw up a substantial secondary theme: the nature of unconditional trust. I had now found a terrific take-off point for the fiction but needed to put my two female characters under some form of stress in order to test the trust and substance of their new identities of mother-daughter\friends – at the same time providing the necessary tension\conflict for dramatic fiction.

I began to write up a narrative situation – the daughter's first sexual encounter with her boyfriend – that I initially contrived to serve this function but which ended up fighting for the position of primary focus. At first I conceived the boyfriend's character as almost flat. I made him a slave to his adolescent physical impulses and emotionally coercive in persuading the daughter to have sex with him in a way that betrayed her; made the daughter break a promise to the mother and to break the trust that was always an understanding between the mother and the daughter. But as these scenes were being written the boy's characterisation began to broaden in a way that demanded he be made a more of a main player. Other sub-themes emerged as a result: a different aspect of trust\betrayal – that relating to boyfriend\girlfriend dynamics when sex is thrown into the mix and compromises more worthy relationship elements such as companionship and security. This in turn led to the exploration of issues of identity relating to sexual roles\expectations, moral responsibilities and self-worth.

The notions of insecurity and need also became strong sub-themes and I decided to try to heighten these by having the father die rather than simply leave the family. This was done to create an element of grief and accentuate the inter-dependence between mother and daughter. I also

tried to evoke a similar feeling of need in the daughter toward the paternal security aspect inferred in her relationship with the boy (as a substitute for that taken from her when the father died).

The problems and tensions that emerged for me as a *male writer* exploring intimate aspects of *female* sexuality and relationships through *female perspectives*, were considerable, and there were times through the first draft when I thought seriously of writing it from the male (boy's) perspective or ditching the piece altogether. I determined though to finish the story the way I initially envisioned it and see how it went.

I found that the rounding-out of the boy's character was a big help – he became a reference point *I knew*. I could empathise with his self-centredness; his testosterone-driven, manipulative behaviour towards the girl through my own experiences as a youth, and those of my peers. I was less conscious of its effects on the girls involved; my insight for this coming from conversations as an adult with female friends who had been on the receiving end of this type of behaviour, and from watching my own teenage daughter's anguish at different times as she experienced these aspects of the boyfriend\girlfriend dynamic.

The style used for this story varies just a little from the conventional. I've used a third person omniscient narrator who was able to move with subtlety and cohesion between each character's perspective whilst keeping the desired emotional distance from each. There is an attempt to focus on the minutiae – rooms and objects, items of clothing – the everyday items within the characters' environment become important descriptors in relation to their actions and attitudes.

The idea of using hands as a motif for different emotions and elements came very late. There was only one instance of their description in what I regarded at the time as my last draft. But stopping to reflect on their emblematic possibility – especially in the context of my main themes – set me planting them at a couple more points within the story, allowing the removal of instances where a more literal *telling* of events and attitudes seemed a far less interesting alternative.

I have also gone for a non-linear narrative formation, starting with the sexual encounter and then circling this pivotal event – where the girl becomes both betrayed and betrayer, with the remainder of the story in a way that explores its cause and affect upon characters' inter-relationships. I've also numbered the various sections to affirm their status as related yet separate scenes either leading to or stemming from the events of the first.

The two questions that are asked by readers and student writers in relation to the story are, first: as a male writer do I think I have the right to even attempt to illustrate such uniquely female experiences as those related in this story – why not leave it to a woman writer? And second: why would I want to explore *this* subject matter anyway? The answer to the second is easy – I'm insatiably curious to know the *other* perspective, and to know how it is and why it is that so many women I've known have the ability to bond with, support and emotionally comfort others (especially within the context of family) in times of stress, whereas most men I've known cannot.

The first question is a little more complex to answer and justify. It speaks of the issues surrounding certain *choices* of subject matter being

off limits (in an ethical way) to certain writers, depending on differences in culture, social demographics and gender orientation between writer, subject matter and the characters who will drive it. The section centred around Thomas Keneally in the *Introduction* of this thesis discusses the cultural aspect of this notion and it would be fruitful at this point to touch on the gender aspect of the same issue.

Personally I think it is both foolish and counter-productive for *any* writer to give up *any* narrative territory that is of interest to her\him out of what I consider to be a misplaced (for poetry and fiction writing) sense of political correctness. If a writer has the curiosity and impulse to write on subject matter foreign to his\her personal experience then in my opinion there is no valid reason why they shouldn't – the genre is, after all *fiction* writing. Yes, it is going to be more difficult than writing the *lived* experience but if the writer has the skill and enthusiasm to *research* the subject, and the ability to *empathise* with those who have experienced the unique and specific feelings that require showing in the narrative, then why not try to explore and come to an understanding of the depth and complexity of those feelings – and then try to convey them to readers? Even in the attempt such a writer will, I think, practice and acquire skills that will make her\him a *better* writer. If they fail to capture the experience faithfully or write with enough conviction then readers will ultimately reject the work. The writer will then have to decide on a different tack, or discard the attempt altogether.

Just how risky such an attempt can be is amply demonstrated by an example given by Adrian Caesar in his essay: *National Myths of Manhood* (1998, pp 161-2) – that of the Jindiworrobak movement. The three poets comprising this group, Rex Ingamells, Ian Mudie and Flexmore

Hudson consciously appropriated, or more correctly, re-appropriated Aboriginal language from second hand sources such as Devaney's, *The Vanished Tribes* (1929). As Caesar points out, this inexpert approach by the group threatened 'to disarticulate the reality of Aboriginal language and experience,' and render the poems flawed in their basic building blocks. Though their motives – to create a distinctive Australian language and environmental idiom whilst purging the literature from 'whatever alien influences trammel it,' – were well intentioned, their methodology seemed naive and misguided, leading to criticism from many quarters. Critic R H Morison termed their work 'Jindiworobakwardness', whilst the didactic nationalism and choice of style and language were derided by influential poet-critics, Vincent Buckley and James McAuley. The *effects* of the Jindi poets' attempts to gain credibility for this re-defined Australianess (by trying to 'shape' a language and cultural experience that was foreign to them) resulted in the very opposite happening.

The lesson here, I think, is not for writers to avoid the very useful device of appropriation but to use the elements of it in a thoughtful and skilful way. Again the keywords are *research* and *empathy*, coupled with a sense of judging just how far to reach without overbalancing.

### **Sonia, the Plumber and the Priest** (*Stories p 83*)

The pressure to write this story came from those closest to me – my wife and close friends who longed to read something of mine that was not dramatic or tragic. Similar comments about my poetry have been a constant in my writing life, and as a result I have written a handful of lighter poems over a period of five or six years. I was unhappy with all

except one: *The Poofster Speaks to Fred Nile*, and only then because I feel it makes the grade as social satire, as well as having a last line that always gets good audience reaction.

Why lambast me on the talk-back,  
Fred, disrupt my Gay Parades?  
Then bleed a hypocritic prayer  
when told that I have AIDS.

Do not instruct me who to fuck  
in night's sweet privacy;  
how best to quash this anal urge  
that fuels your piety.

I'm *out*, It is a man I love!  
And how he makes my penis stand.  
He makes me feel as you must  
when your cock has found *her* hand.

Believe it when I remonstrate:  
for me, no other path is true;  
I love my fellow man, dear Fred,  
in *one* more way than you. (Smith, 2000, p 31)

Since beginning to write short stories (and up until Sonia...) nothing even remotely funny occurred to me as suitable subject matter. For me, writing stories is very hard work, usually draft and redraft until I start removing and replacing commas (10 to 12 versions are common). So I can't justify my time or effort unless I feel the subject is very important.

But after writing *Fixing the Renault* (for this PhD), a fairly heavy story about drugs and family dysfunction, I thought I would write about an incident that happened to me when I was a licensed plumber. This would give me the opportunity to be frivolous – let down my shoulders for a bit – and to humour my friends and my wife at the same time.

There was also another reason why I wanted to write something like *Sonia, the Plumber and the Priest*. I like to think of myself as a writer who is capable of at least making a reasonable effort at any genre and any style. Humour, I believe, is not something I write all that well. As a teacher of writers I also feel some responsibility to practise what I preach – if comedy needs to be part of the repertoire of the developing writers I teach, then it also needs to be part of mine.

Another agenda in writing this story was to somehow echo an Australian tradition of humorous storytelling. I really enjoy the humour of writers such as Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Frank Hardy, Frank Moorhouse and others. In particular, *The Loaded Dog* is a story I have read several times, and still get a good laugh each time I do.

When I look at this story I am still dissatisfied with it in the context of how I see myself as a writer of *certain subject matter* which I hope will stimulate readers to reflect on their attitudes to various social issues. Because it doesn't do any of that the story feels like it was a diversion from that which I *should* have been writing. Giving people a bit of a laugh doesn't seem to be enough justification (for me) to sit down and write a story that has only one (superficial) level.

In constructing characters for this story, which is meant to hold together mostly by a mix of slapstick comedy and class parody, I had in mind broad stereotypical sketches of essentially flat characters whose personalities do not change or grow at all. The story, I realised, would not be served at all by in-depth character descriptions or complex interrelationships. In wanting to make it specifically Australian in tone I chose a first person narrator with a very working-class vernacular. This main character would of course need a loyal and troublesome dog to facilitate the slapstick elements of the story. To create an element of class tension I threw the main character, a working-class plumber, into a cluster of rich people. To add some spice I decided to create an adulterous wife and an unchaste priest whose revealed affair at the end of the story would accentuate the humour created by the main character, his dog and the floating condoms.

I turns to Peter and he's lookin' at it real queer. 'It's a condom,' he says, like he's never seen one before, and every expression seems to slide off his face.

'Good Catholic like you, Peter,' I says, and I turns to me audience and smiles. 'I'm bloody surprised ya use them.' Now this goes down real well and all the guests are laughin' their bloody heads off. I look across to Sonia to see how bloody impressed she is but she's lookin' real intent at Louis the sixth and that ten-inch sheath that's droopin' between his teeth. Then Peter turns and he's lookin' at Sonia too – and at Father O'Connell.

'I don't use them,' he says and I'll be bugged if Sonia and the priest don't go the sharpest shade of scarlet I ever saw as Louis scampers across and drops that rubber thing right at their feet.

What with all the commotion that followed – Father O'Connell jumpin' the fence and all – I never did get me triple time and a half. Worse still, I get home and the doggies have gone down by one flamin' point – and REXxie reckons Libba'll get twenty weeks. Twenty weeks! Just for an ear. It's a bloody shiela's game if ya want my opinion. (p 88 - 89)

## **Easter at Crown Casino** (*Stories p 90*)

In terms of identity, this story became an examination of personal and social hypocrisy. Set during Jeff Kennett's tenure as Premier of Victoria – a very sad social time in my opinion – the subject matter deals with greed and gambling, and (social) class distinctions in the context of people being divided into predator and prey.

A variety of notions came together to impel me to write this story. Crown Casino was the first and most prominent. To myself and many others it represented a time of government sponsored greed in its most cynical excess – here was a government feeding off its own people; off their addiction and vulnerability, in order to balance their budget whilst lining the pockets of two or three already wealthy businessman (and by coincidence personal friends of the Premier). Then, driving home from a tutorial one evening I began listening to a talkback segment featuring an interview with Jeff Kennett intimating his affection for the symbolic grandeur of the Roman Catholic masses he was currently attending (he had attended different denominational masses at other times, he said), and when asked, professed a belief in God. During the interview he mentioned attending church with his friend, Lloyd Williams, then head of the consortium that owned Crown Casino. As a result of this the Premier and the big businessman became, in my mind, a coupling; a dubious set of twins who seemed to me to be guilty, by virtue of their professed religious beliefs – set in ironic contrast to their intimate association with a casino that was eroding the emotional and financial wellbeing of individuals and families – of a collaborative hypocrisy. The fact that the majority of Casino punters are from the lower socio-economic groupings added a ruling class\working-class element of exploitation to this relationship.

The timing of my first draft – right on Easter – helped significantly in finding a surreal angle at which to come at the subject matter. I've taken an intertextual approach by paralleling the story of Christ coming into the house of the money lenders and criticising them on the basis of their greed and exploitation of the poor. I've used the events of the crucifixion also, in exploring the dualism that exists in many of us: our facility to exhibit greed one minute and then being able to be generous the next; cold and then compassionate; weak then brave and so on. These themes are explored through the main character\nnarrator, based on no one person in particular. The man is an amalgam of flawed humans and has the strengths and fallibilities I've noticed occurring at various times in my own character and behaviour, and in those of many people I've known through my life. The man's greed also sees him deny Jesus in an exploration of the Judas aspect of human nature – allowing one's loyalty to be purchased off.

As a writer this was a very liberating experience for me – my prose to this point had been written in a very realist style and had confined itself mostly to relationship-driven dramas between men and women, or family dysfunction. But it also represented a challenge – the socio-political function inherent in the subject matter resisted the notion of being done in a conventional narrative and demanded satire become its vehicle. As previously stated, Easter arrived and threw me the aspect of surreality I needed. It was like growing a pair of wings – although the story is quite short (just 840 words) I am pleased at what is packed into it. Interestingly, I was unable to write it in about two hours and the first draft required just three or four changes to make me satisfied with its final form.

It produced one small dilemma when, at my initial public reading of it, some people in the audience laughed at some of the lines delivered by the main character. This concerned me more than a little because I never intended the piece to be funny. I thought then of a rewrite undercutting the man's eccentric naiveté. Subsequent readings to a couple of short story classes I was teaching brought a similar response, although on these occasions ensuing discussion and feedback told me that the social points were not being missed – on the contrary many students indicated the humour worked in an ironic way to highlight the main themes.

The successful completion of this fictionette (it doesn't seem long enough to call a short story) threw up a fresh vein of gold by virtue of its form and encouraged me to write a series of these short pieces – most of which were written more on intuition than prolonged thought or research, and are almost always *surreal* rather than *real* in style. I am thankful for them, they are a temporary but joyful release from the harder slog of 3000 or 6000 words, or the word-level concentration required for poetry. The downside is that many of the first drafts for these fictionettes fall on to the page lacking the substance to justify their existence, and so end up in my bottom drawer of failed writing at a rate that is very much higher than the longer, more complex and researched short stories that I've written.

Over the last six months I've found myself revisiting a couple of these and reworking them as prose-poems. The two I am pleased with most are *The Creek* (reworked from the fictionette in: Smith, 2000, p 47) and *Woman Photographed*, both in *The Poems* (p 167).

I have found that writing these prose-poems presents an interesting tension that relates to an earlier discussion of the conflict that arises from competing interests inherent in the 'schizophrenic' person\writer split (Introduction, p 21). Although prose-poems give a certain freedom from the stricter prosody of poetry (with regard to rhyme, rhythm etc) and allow a little more of the concrete\informative with less reliance on the emotive elements that are far more time-consuming and difficult to achieve – they constantly have you wondering whether you have established a satisfactory balance between the emotive and the denotive. Too much of the poetic can give a rhetorical tone; too little and you end up with chopped-up prose dipped in a queer sort of diction. My poet's ear wants the rhythm to get back into perfect line; the irregular and somewhat arbitrary line length perturbs my poet's eyes. And the prose-writer in me tends to look at these end-stopped lines with skepticism – is this prose trying to put on side? Is prose-poetry a legitimate genre or just an adventurous diversion that ultimately fails to fully satisfy as either prose or poetry? Unlike short stories, fictionettes or poetry, which are problematic in the writing but ultimately very satisfying at completion, I find prose-poems extremely difficult to get to a point where I feel them to be simultaneously successful to the ear and the intellect.

On reflection this probably means I have not yet come to grips with what constitutes an *authentic* prose-poem; its generic agenda, strengths and limitations. And I'm wary because I've read many more of what I consider to be failed attempts at them, than those coming anywhere near the effect of a great poem – which is like touching an electric fence

– or the lingering emotional-intellectual journey of a stand-out story of perhaps 5000 words.

### **Remembering Meg** (*Stories p 93*)

This story is an exploration of my observations of the changes of personality that occur due to the ageing process, and dementia related problems specifically. Both the story and the central character came initially from a conversation with a former student whose own mother was exhibiting similar behavior I have gone on to describe in my story.

I then began to focus on what my attitude might be on seeing myself drift into this other world where objects; the names of things; and even the people who have been closest to me, begin to gradually lose their definition, identity and meaning. Coupled with these thoughts were conversations with my wife who works as an aged-care coordinator. She identified as most painful (in the old people she dealt with) that period of transition between sanity and dementia where old people can be quite lucid one-day and demented the next – themselves, then not themselves, whilst being fully aware of this phenomenon. I wondered about the fears I would have and how my mind would come to terms knowing I was slowly being 'taken' (emotionally and intellectually) away from those I loved.

I also wanted to explore a little of what the effects might be on others in the family setup where an old person\loved one is still there physically but whose intermittent loss of mental facilities might create relationship stresses and result in an emotional distancing between sons, daughters and grandchildren.

The first couple of attempts presented a problem – that of a very depressing and unremittingly bleak narrative. The story was conveying Meg's pain, anxiety and fear, but I don't think readers would have stayed with it for too long. At that point I remembered a humorous anecdote from my ex-student similar to the 'Vegemite' incident described in my story. I decided to abridge the more painful aspects with a humour predicated on these sorts of idiosyncrasies. I've tried to layer-in the black overtones of this humour – in her lucid moments Meg can laugh at herself for her irrational act of putting Vegemite in the washing machine, but the laughter has a bitter edge, hopefully brought home by the end lines of the story.

The others laughed – Jim, Michael and my other daughter... what's her name? Anyway they all chuckled about it over dinner that night.

'Can I have some cornflakes on my undies next time, Nan?' Michael said and they all laughed then – even Susan's face began to crack a little.

The things I do when I'm not remembering to be Meg. If I were a made-up character, like in a story, they'd be funny. (p 96)

I was also worried about the narrative point of view. I was using an omniscient third-person narrator who travelled across three perspectives: Meg, her daughter and the granddaughter. This resulted in a tone that did not seem intimate enough when it came to projecting the emotions of Meg, though its observation and reaction functions worked okay for the other two. I thought long and hard before giving the point of view wholly over to Meg. But the irony – complete control of the

narrative perspective to the character who has less control over her identity than anyone – became impossible to resist.

In identifying one of the most defining aspects of the sort of writer I've become, I would have to say that the urge to write in the first person perspective is very compelling. The idea of getting into the minds and personalities of other people\characters and their dilemmas is a fascinating one to me. In trying to analyse why this is so I have come to a variety of conclusions, some of which I feel comfortable with and others I don't.

At the base of the positive feelings is the idea that this method\ploy is the best effort I can make to *fully* understand a particular character's joy or pain in given circumstances. It forces me to observe and research and to 'become' them as near as I can. I am less comfortable at the realisation that I can only ever *pretend* myself into someone else's idiom, and that the narrative territory: the mores, thought processes, actions and reactions I'm relating *on that character's behalf* (a character I want my readers to assume is based on a *real* person in a *real* situation) has a fidelity that equates to a 'lived' experience. And this is both a major problem and a most tantalising challenge for writers attempting to portray a 'reality'. EM Forster speaks very succinctly of this in his essay: *People*, in *Aspects of the Novel*:

They [characters] do not come thus coldly to his mind, they may be created in delirious excitement, still, their nature is conditioned by what he [the writer] *guesses* [my emphasis] about other people, and about himself, and is further modified by the other aspects of this work... we are occupied with their [characters'] relation to actual life. What is the difference between people in a novel and people like the novelist or like you, or like me, or like

Queen Victoria?... if the character in a novel is exactly like Queen Victoria – not rather like but exactly like – then it actually is Queen Victoria, and the novel, or all of it that the character touches, becomes a memoir. A memoir is history, it is based on evidence. A novel is based on evidence + or - *x*, the unknown quantity being the temperament of the novelist, and the unknown quantity always modifies the effect of the evidence, and sometimes transforms it entirely... And it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source: to tell us more about Queen Victoria than could be known, and thus to produce a character who is not the Queen Victoria of history.

... in daily life we never understand each other, neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confessionals exist. We know each other approximately, by external signs, and these serve well enough as the basis for society and even for intimacy. But people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed... even if they are imperfect or unreal they do not contain any secrets, whereas our friends do and must, mutual secrecy being one of the conditions of life upon this globe. (Forster, 1972, pp 52-3)

The challenge and the problem – some would argue impossibility – with Forster's notion of revealing 'the hidden life at its source,' is best summed up in the first three lines of the above quote, and especially in the word *guesses*. And although there is something discomfoting in the thought that we can never truly know whether we have replicated the reality of a particular life in the characters we might devise, I believe there is the basis for validation of the attempt, and that the result of the fiction writer's *guess*, holds out the *possibility* of taking us far closer to the reality of a life and its inner thoughts and experiences than either the journalist or the historian – whose ethics and agenda (should) demand a factual imperative – can ever hope to achieve. Though the fiction writer builds his\her evidence by slower and more complicated means, I

would argue that the resulting 'characters' have far more depth, complexity and likeness to reality than other genres are able to achieve.

In an accumulative life-process a writer will experience and/or observe situations and events involving the dynamics of a broad spectrum of human behaviour and interaction. These encompass physical and emotional actions, reactions and repercussions; a full range of conversation dynamics and body language subtexts; psychological trauma and its consequences and so on. Many times over the writer's life these same actions, reactions and consequences are observed in similar 'types' of people with the same interrelationship dynamics. For example, a male writer attends a barbecue with a number of his/her friends. One of the males gets very drunk at the barbecue and confides to the writer that he is not very happy in his relationship. He is also having sex with other women as well as his partner. A little later, in front of everyone, the man makes a joke at his partner's expense – she has recently gained weight. The writer observes that the man's partner says nothing in her defence, although the blood has rushed to her face, her eyes have watered, and she excuses herself and goes quickly inside. The man gives a nervous laugh and shrugs his shoulders as if not understanding her actions – but the writer notices that he is blushing just a little. A week later the writer's wife relates a conversation between herself and his friend's partner where the woman tells of her feelings of anger, disappointment and betrayal relating to the incident at the barbecue. She knows about the man's infidelity and intends to leave him if things don't change. Two days later the writer is having a beer with his friend who boasts of further sexual exploits betraying no knowledge that his partner is aware of the situation. One month later the writer's wife informs him that his friend's partner has left the relationship. A

week later the writer again meets his friend, who is absolutely distraught that his partner has left. Three years later an almost identical situation occurs with another couple known to the writer. The catalyst for the relationship breakdown is slightly different this time but the writer observes very similar actions, reactions and repercussions arising from the situation.

In wanting to write a short piece of fiction relating to the issues, emotions and themes of the above factual realities the writer can, with a fair degree of certainty and based on his knowledge and observations of the personalities involved, imagine\guess at conversations he was not privy to. He can also make a very informed guess at ‘scenes’ that took place between the men and women involved. There can be a lot of certainty in those guesses. And in his fiction the observed subtext of facial expressions and body language; and the private emotions and thought processes the writer deduces *must* have occurred in these relationships to instigate certain reactions and repercussions – are as close to actuality as it is possible for him, or anyone else outside the people concerned, to know.

### **Collecting the Kid** (*Stories p 97*), and **Picking Them up** (*Stories p 115*)

The Genesis for these two stories can be traced back to the same day and location in my life. For this reason and because the two are as different in terms of form, style and tone as any two stories I have written, I have decided to explore them within the same essay. As far as writerly issues of identity, I think it is interesting to ponder how it is possible from the same starting point to arrive at both a heavy social

drama with themes of sexual predation and murder to an almost slapstick comedy\satire.

At the base of this I think, are two notions integral to the identity of the writer. First there is the idea of tapping into and harvesting all of the imaginative possibilities your initial subject matter throws up to you. The second – and this can be tied very closely to the first – is that notion of *choices* of subject treatment over, because of, or despite other possibilities. This can arise from a mood or personal whim on the particular day you decide to sit down and write, or it can arise due to a perceived need at a certain time, to write a certain *type* of story.

### ***Collecting the Kid***

Though it had the same genesis this particular story bears no relation in subject, style or formal treatment to *Picking Them Up*. The issues of male predation, deprivation of the maternal aspect within a family, and so on had been bubbling to the surface for some time and I had been thinking about concrete locations and circumstances which could act as a suitable setup and idiom for the story. For whatever reason, my thoughts went back to that first funeral parlour lunchroom gathering and the comment that came from one of the workers after the anecdotes and the laughter surrounding the unusual removal of dead bodies had diminished. He turned to my boss and myself, directed our gaze out into the workshop to a small white coffin and indicated that the one thing none of them could ever find humour in was going to pick up the body of a child or young person.

It never ceases to amaze me how the (writer's) brain throws up past events\ideas\conversations from the store room and announces them

as useful elements or locations for stories you are writing one or five or thirty years later.

With relation to ideas of familial and social identity, this story is primarily exploring the function and importance of the maternal aspect within the family unit and the dysfunction that can occur when it malfunctions or is taken away altogether.

The story also focuses strongly on aspects of sexual predation and group sexual mores, attitudes and actions within a masculine context. A secondary theme being explored is the tendency by males to internalise emotions not considered to be masculine under the criteria placed on that notion by much of society, especially by men themselves: what it is to be thought of, and to think of oneself, as *a man*.

The narrative is conventional in style and has been written as a social-realist drama with a heavy emphasis on ironic elements. Both personally and through the various media, I have watched, heard about or read of identical events, attitudes and situations as those described in the narrative. The setting is contrived for purposes of irony and pathos while the characters, their attitudes and the narrative events, though fictional, are based on personal experience.

This story was a discomfoting one to write as it confronted, examined and criticised negative sexual attitudes towards women that I recognise as having carried and displayed myself as a younger man. On this level it is attempting to explore the relationship between sexism, pornography and male-voyeurism as they pertain to attitudes that may or may not lead to sexual predation upon women. In terms of identity it is positing

notions of power and weakness based on assumed gender-specific qualities such as physical strength (male) and vulnerability (female), plus male peer-group assumptions and expectations of masculine behaviour.

### *Picking Them Up*

The pressure to write a story like *Picking Them Up* began with questions and comments from readers\friends: 'Your poetry is always so dark.' 'Why are all your short stories about sad things?' 'The story moved me, but in a way that was depressing...,' and so on. I remember this issue coming to a head after one particular guest reading at a *Melbourne Poets Union* meeting around five years ago. A lady approached me from the audience, expressed satisfaction at my poems, then added, 'But I feel sorry for you – your life must be so unhappy.' The fact that she saw me forever carrying the weight of my subject matter around really got to me at the time – and if *she* saw me this way, then perhaps everybody who heard my poems imagined me the same depressive character in all my selves. This is not how *I* see me, nor how I want others to perceive me – for the most part I am happy with my life and relationships. From time to time rubbish happens – people you love go off the rails, or you fight with them or sometimes they die on you. But in between these unhappy interjections I enjoy my life and the people in it enormously; it is an adventure I am very thankful for. So I felt a need (a subtle social imperative) to change this perception. I was pushed also to think about my choice of subject matter and why, as a writer, I concentrated mostly on the darker side of human nature; its evil and dysfunctional elements.

On reflection I suspect it is the same reason that makes the nightly news bulletin the highest rating half hour on television – a fascination with the drama inherent in the clash of human difference and indifference.

Whilst I enjoy the odd comedy or action movie I find the rewards from media or art that sets out to *entertain* are temporary and shallow – they are an *escape* from this main game. I get more fulfillment and satisfaction from being *moved* emotionally and in ways that might bring me to a greater understanding about human relationships: why was it that small children and dogs loved the company of Adolf Hitler? Why as a child did I both love and hate my father? And as a reader I have a fascination for literature that explores and tries to understand the complex and uncomfortable notions: why are human beings so stupid as to judge, differentiate then treat each other according to a ratio of power aligned to social, familial, genderist, religious or political paradigms? And the same subjects interest me as a writer.

In the week following the woman's remarks I made a calculated response by writing the poem, *The Poofster Speaks to Fred Nile* (Smith, 2000, p 31), and adding *Ned's Secret* (see: Appendix B, p 328) to a sequence of dramatic sonnets I was writing for my honors thesis. The short story reviewed earlier, *Sonia, the Plumber and the Priest* was written out of this same imperative, and is the only story I have written for humour alone. Many people get a laugh out of that story, and it was fun to write in an escapist sort of way, but it has little substance in human terms and is a story that once read is unlikely to be thought about or revisited.

All this is not to say that I'm sorry for having been pushed to write humorous subject matter, or more to the point that I have been made aware of the advantages of including it in my bag of tricks. I am beginning to come to terms with its use in a subtler guise for irony and satire, and as a way to break or vary the narrative tone in darker stories.

Examples of this include *Easter at Crown Casino*, previously reviewed and *mister jones*, explored later in this section. It has been a helpful discovery that the didactic tone of narratives containing broader social and political themes can be abridged by the judicious use of humour.

So this was the context in which *Picking Them Up* was written. The central idea was to reveal the informal processes and mayhem that often go on behind the carefully cultured facade of the funeral industry. When I was an apprentice plumber, my employer held the maintenance contract for a St Kilda funeral parlour. On my first visit my boss and I had completed fixing a roof leak and were having morning tea in the lunchroom with a couple of the workers there. All of a sudden a man who had been out on a 'pick-up' burst into the room and flung his coat and tie against the back wall. 'That's the last fucking time,' he yelled. 'The next time some old bastard dies on the dunny, someone else can go...' As in the story, an elderly man had had a heart attack while sitting on the toilet – quite a common occurrence according to these men. He had slid off the seat and rigour-mortis had set in to wedge his legs straight and hard against the toilet door. Because toilet doors open inwards, this event trapped the corpse, making it necessary for the funeral parlour worker to locate a sledgehammer in the man's shed and break down the toilet door in order to get a man out. Unfortunately he broke the dead man's legs in the process. He related this story to gales of laughter from his co-workers, my boss and me. A rush of hilarious anecdotes then followed from the other employees about the extrication of dead bodies in queer and unusual locations and circumstances.

There was something quite surreal and darkly ironic about this moment that clung into the recesses of my imagination – being brought to tears

and bent double by laughter while staring into the workshop where a sea of coffins sat in various stages of manufacture. In terms of how I understood the personality and demeanour of funeral industry workers, it broke my preconceived idea of them as stoic, ultra-sensitive and humourless people who carried out their maudlin tasks only because somebody had to. In reality they were like any group of working-class men in any industry at that time – they swore a lot, they talked incessantly about the football, they told filthy jokes and they had *Playboy* centrefolds plastered over the walls. It seemed terribly incongruous after this incident to see these same men done out in their black suits, straightlaced, unsmiling and ready to perform their sombre work.

It is the most demonstrable example I can think of in terms of the identities we change in to and out of as we alternate between our workplace occupations and back to our ‘normal’ social and familial selves. As I observed these funeral industry workers, there was a manufactured facade of sincerity, sympathy and empathy that needed to be affected and must have been difficult to accomplish at various phases of their mood-cycle. It exemplifies the need and/or responsibility we have to become the person our occupations demand we become at those times, and that we then go back into the lunchroom, or we go home, or go out to dinner and then have to *unbecome* that person, with a need then to become somebody else.

### **mister jones** (*Stories p 125*)

This story is quite long; around 5000 words, and fairly complex in the ground that it is attempting to cover, especially for a short story – there are several themes working in parallel, and what comes uncomfortably to mind when I think of this is Edgar Allan Poe's oft-quoted

remark/definition that a short story, if it is to fulfil the proper criteria should only focus upon one theme or idea (Poe, 1983, p 1123).

Like my story, *Remembering Meg* the focus of this narrative, written in the first person and with an 'imbedded' narrative (also in first person) explores notions of aged-identity in an institutionalised environment and its accompanying issues of vulnerability, disempowerment, isolation and dementia. The story is also attempting to make a social criticism about the general state of the aged care 'industry' within a contemporary Australian context. I've also developed a secondary theme of academic pretension and envy which serves to both lighten the dramatic tone of the narrative, and as a device allowing the two main characters to 'identify' themselves out of their dementia and into its very opposite state.

I chose a substantially 'real' setup and location for this story but have overlaid this with surreal elements and experimented with form and style to both affirm this idiom and to facilitate and differentiate the 'story within the story'. The primary narrative is quite conventional in form but the imbedded narrative begins in playscript format leading on to a ficto-documentary sequence reflecting this narrator's persona. I wanted to separate this section in order to break and contrast the mood and tone of that carried by mister jones. The secondary narrative is quite cold and clinical and I hoped to heighten the pathos by coming from it to jones' more human concerns at the end.

The ability – or more correctly the propensity, of a writer to experiment with and change formative and stylistic elements (or not) is an interesting facet of each writer's personality. Both mindsets have their

tensions; their advantages and disadvantages. Personally, I enjoy experimenting with both subject and form, it has always been a natural inclination and it's interesting to postulate what the driving impulses might be. As a writer I get bored easily, that is part of it, I think. I like to alternate between conventional and more innovative modes of prose fiction, and to swap from short story to poetry at regular intervals. I find this process extremely stimulating and regenerative. I think it is the reason I found writing my honors thesis – a novella of 20,000 words – far more painful and frustrating than my current PhD creative thesis, comprising 70,000 words of short fiction and poetry.

I also like to think of myself (and have others think of me) as a writer in the broadest sense of the word. As well as poetry and short fiction I have written and published a handful of feature articles – mainly on social issues – and played around with a dozen or so one-act plays as a form of entertainment when getting together with other writers\friends.

In terms of my identity and function as a teacher there is also a pressure and responsibility to write at least proficiently, and to be published if possible, in the genres I teach my TAFE students. It is vital for my credibility that students know I've been through the process, and what I've come up with has been judged (at least by a handful of reputable editors) to be publishable and what the TAFE system regards as *industry-standard*. It boils down to a distinction – one of which students become acutely aware – between teaching writing genres as *theory* or as *practice*. It is difficult to advise or understand the frustration of writers block or to suggest ways around it unless you have experienced it first-hand, and impossible to empathise with a student who has sat into the small hours, alone, fighting to find personality and substance for a character

who just won't form. Or how to hold on to your self-belief upon receiving two rejection letters in the one day.

Another reason writers experiment with form and subject is in the hope of pushing the boundaries of these to end up writing something original (setting aside arguments regarding the disputed validity of that term as it applies to the writing process, and which have been canvassed earlier in this thesis). Interesting tensions arise between these writers; and readers, writers and critics with a more conventional bent.

American short story writer and poet, Raymond Carver abhorred experimentation of any kind. In his essay, *On Writing* he wrote about the dangers he saw, especially for student writers, in experimental style – that which he termed ‘tricks’:

I overheard the writer Geoffrey Woolf say to a group of writing students: ‘No cheap tricks’. That should go on a three by five card. I’d amend it a little to: ‘No tricks.’ Period. I hate tricks. At the first sign of a trick or a gimmick in a piece of fiction, a cheap trick or even an elaborate trick, I tend to look for cover...

Some months back, in the New York Times Book Review, John Bath said that 10 years ago most of the students in his fiction-writing seminar were interested in ‘formal innovation’, and this no longer seems to be the case. He is a little worried that writers are going to start writing mom and pop novels in the 1980s. He worries that experimentation may be on the way out, along with liberalism. I get a little nervous if I find myself within earshot of sombre discussions about ‘formal innovation’ in fiction writing. Too often ‘experimentation’ is a license to be careless, silly or imitative in the writing. Even worse, a license to try to brutalize or alienate the reader. Too often such writing gives us no news of the world, or else describes a desert landscape and that's all – a few dunes and lizards here and

there, but no people; a place uninhabited by anything recognisably human, a place of interest only to a few scientific specialists. (Carver, 1985, p 76)

This seems naive criticism given that every act of creative writing is an act of reader-manipulation, and most of the negatives mentioned – the carelessness, the brutalising of readers etc can just as easily occur in stories written in conventional form. Carver himself used certain ‘tricks’ to more effectively convey his subject matter and try to influence and impress his readers. All this is not to say that traditional form and style – in terms of getting the job done – are any more or any less worthy, as Carver, an archetypal traditionalist has proven by enduring in the bookshops and on secondary and tertiary English and writing curriculums wherever English is read.

But writers who experiment by taking a less conventional route can succeed just as well to move readers. An excellent example of this is Carver’s contemporary, the American short story writer, Donald Barthelme. It is interesting to compare their relative success, stature and peer group influence. It would be true to say that Carver, by virtue of the somewhat tragic nature of his own life, and as it pertains to the dysfunctional, underdog working-class subjects of his stories, was and is, like Robert Frost to poetry, the best-loved and most popular short story writer in America.

Barthelme on the other hand chose to write on a much broader range of subjects, though with the same hard edges to the subject and the same respect and affection for his characters. The great difference was in style. Barthelme was a postmodern-minimalist with an enormous stylistic range, as opposed to Carver's steadfast and formulaic – though

never uninteresting – social realism. And as Carver's primary appeal was to readers, so Barthelme's was to critics and other writers. His influence was such that he was widely acknowledged as 'the most imitated writer since Hemingway' (Parks, 2002, p 38). Malcolm Bradbury wrote of Barthelme's final collection, *Forty Stories*:

Donald Barthelme is the best of contemporary American short story writers. He's the most cunning experimenter and the most thoughtful explorer of the fate of fiction in the era after realism and modernism. He deals with the sadness of modern life, but is among the wittiest and funniest of writers. Together his books make up a collection of the best stories of modern urban life, the contemporary mind, and the contemporary flavour of creative invention that we can find. (Bradbury, 1988, p 8)

As a reader, I love Raymond Carver's subject matter and the way he explores, heightens and brings understanding to it. But for me *as a writer* he offers little by way of stylistic stimulus or instruction – his fictional form shows him to be a one-trick writer. Conversely, as a reader I am sometimes disappointed by Barthelme – he is a writer with perhaps too many tricks, some of which (I feel) bear out Carver's articulated fears regarding experimentation. But they are brave failures in my estimation, and when I pick up one of Barthelme's short story collections and begin to read, the anticipation is like laying a saliva'd tongue over the positive and negative ends of a small battery. This anticipation is not so much for subject matter but for the innovation and originality of his form. And it's not that this pushes me toward imitation (though I can see his *influence* in my fiction) but that his style waves a red flag of innovative possibility; of doing it differently *in my own way*.

I have mentioned Barthelme's more diverse subject range and I feel that this is where Carver's lack of awareness and empathy for the needs of *this sort of writer* leads to his disillusionment and criticism. His use of the term 'lizards' in the quote above is a direct criticism and reference to one of Barthelme's stories, *Rebecca* (Barthelme, 1988). Carver, with his narrowly-defined subject base, simply saw no need for stylistic diversity. But this is not so for writers wanting to tell stories about a diversity of characters in a range of different environments for their subject matter, and where the accumulation of a diverse range of form and stylistic elements to affirm that subject becomes absolutely crucial. Some subject themes respond beautifully to certain stylistic treatments yet fall terribly flat with others.

In a broader literary sense, style and form need to evolve to reflect changing mores, attitudes and communicative modes within society itself. As nations and societies change, evolve and expand intellectually, so must the literature. There are many examples of this in an Australian context. One is the Jindiworrobak poets mentioned earlier in this thesis, who came in for peer-group derision for their misadventurous experiment in appropriating an aboriginal diction and cultural persona (Bennett & Strauss, 1998, pp 161-2). And Patrick White's attempts to vary and diversify the novel form also caused tensions amongst the prevailing literary elite, who showed a great reluctance to embrace the more innovative style of modernism (and postmodernism) in the 1950s. Susan Lever speaks of the tensions aroused by writers such as White, who, in a pivotal moment for Australian literature openly criticised those who refused to explore the more experimental forms developed and developing in Europe and America, choosing instead to cling to traditional prosody:

In 1958 Patrick White famously dismissed the work of most of his Australian predecessors as 'the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism' and so announced the beginning of a shift in literary values in Australia – from a concern for the accurate depiction of Australian life to an interest in formal experiment. By the late 1960s White had been joined by a younger generation of Australian prose writers who claimed that they were part of a 'counter-culture' of protest against conventional values. White may be seen as the bearer of a belated novelistic modernism to Australia, in that, in retrospect, international modernism appears to be a pre-war phenomenon, and, by the mid-1960s, the techniques of modernism had been overtaken by the more self-conscious approaches of postmodernism. Yet, in Australia, White's determination to experiment led the way for a widespread interest in formal change; and innovation – whether under the banner of modernism or postmodernism – has been valued as a prime virtue of literary art since the late 1960s. (Lever, 1998, p 308)

### **Last Trick** (*Stories p 142*)

This story became an exploration of the problematic aspects of identity via sexuality, and the role-model assumptions (primarily from men toward women) and agenda power plays that become acutely manifest via issues that surface in the prostitution industry.

Because it is the one with which I am most familiar, the narrative instance I have used is an Australian one – but one that is no doubt replicated in most (if not all) societies on earth. The primary thematic exploration centres on issues of feminine self-worth in relation to the selling-off of the sexual function, plus a variety of male reactions and perspective judgments on women who, for whatever reason choose (or are pressured into choosing) to become prostitutes.

Central to this is the pervasive sexual double-standard inherent in the term *slut*, a pejorative notion coined and slung at promiscuous women by men (for the most part equally promiscuous, or wanting to be), and sometimes by other women.

For the main character, Christie, being able to offer her body to the males in her peer group becomes her perception of her *value* as a functionally valid identity within that group:

... Her mates were rough and loose, smoking joints at fourteen, and Christie collapsed from her first alcoholic stupor a year later. Sex too, about the same time, with every male in her pack.

'It made me feel like I belonged,' she told old Les at the Salvos. 'I couldn't fight. I wasn't game to ride the train roofs – sex was the one thing that I could do pretty well. It made me feel like I was a do-er, not just a watcher.' (p 142)

At the moment of Christie's initiation into 'the game', sexual predation becomes a thematic concern. For many young women (or girls) in oppressive social, familial and/or financial situations, the relatively good money to be made from prostitution must seem like an expeditious, if emotionally uncomfortable alternative. And at the moment of Christie's greatest need, the fact that she encounters a sexual predator (deliberately not named, to denote him as a 'type' so prevalent he can almost be considered an omnipresent masculine *aspect* within his society) rather than Les from the Salvation Army (a masculine 'father' aspect who identifies her as a fallen-feminine object of pity) cements her destiny.

'Come on, Sweetie,' he said, bringing her attention back upon him. 'You know the game, even if you haven't played it yet. You look like you could use a dollar?' She was freezing without her denim jacket and

jumper, which were buried back at Carlisle Street. 'I don't have all night.' There was the hint of impatience in his tone which served to focus her and then, with a smirk that inferred some knowledge of the outcome, he rustled the two yellow notes together.

The fall, Christie now knew, came quickly – not so much a matter of choice, but of choices closed off. 'Can you take me into the city?' And as Christie fell into the front passenger seat and looked across at him they both knew her question was the answer his smirk anticipated.

(p 145)

Notions of masculine self-worth are also explored in the character of Christie's last trick\client. When the man cannot successfully complete the sexual act by physically climaxing, he is verbally humiliated by Christie – a person he holds in utter contempt and considers to be the lowest of the low:

His head cocks to one side. Then he looks at her for a second before laughing out loud. 'And you, you piece of filth, you can talk. You think because you charge three hundred a shot that you're any better than the others out their humping the beat. Not fucking likely, my girl.' Then he goes quiet, his lips come to within an inch of hers. 'All you are,' he assures her, 'is a prostitute.' (p 152)

His character also presents certain masculine perceptions of assumed female functionality, and societal expectations of female behaviour in terms of moral worthiness:

'What sort of a man are you?' she says, tears dripping off her lower lids. 'Hitting a woman.'

'A *woman*, is that what you call yourself? I mean, how many cocks have you had in say... the last month? Tell me that. You're not a woman you're a *receptacle*. Who'd ever want you as their woman?'

Fully naked now she raises herself and sits on the bed end. 'There's a man coming in half an hour who wants me.'

'Jesus, he must have even less pride than you.'

'You can talk,' she replies. 'If you had someone, you wouldn't need to be here with me.'

'Shut your mouth.' He flings out with the belt catching her a glancing blow to the top of her head. She sprawls back instinctively onto the bed curling up like a foetus. 'Get on your back or I'll give you a hiding you'll never forget. She folds both arms across her face and rolls onto her back. 'Now spread your legs.' She does so. 'My God, look at you, you're just a pathetic little whore. A *woman* – Jesus, what a joke. A woman is someone who's got some sense of being faithful to one man. A woman is someone who can be a good wife and mother. Look at you, what kid would want you as his mother?' He lets one end of the belt drop between her legs and slaps it lightly against her vagina. Then he bends down right into her left ear. 'You're just a *whore*, that's all you are.' (p 153)

There continues to be one problematic aspect to the structure of the story, and that is the ending. I have cut it then reinstated it three or four times. It seems (to me) too didactic in its tone to be valid as a *fictional* attempt to get a point across. Art should persuade, I think, rather than direct its audience\readers.

But because I feel it makes an important statement regarding societal complicity in the protagonist's emotional and physical demise I've left it in. I found it extremely difficult to explore this broader societal notion (in what I consider to be a valid ficto-creative form) within the parameters of a short story already exploring a range of issues on a more personal level. It would have necessitated adding to the list of main characters – always problematic for short stories in terms of focus, or significantly increasing the length of the story, probably into a novella.

Looking at it now – though I want it in and I’m leaving it in – it looks to be ‘tagged on’. The dilemma reminds me of my first poetry workshop. I had this (what I considered to be) wonderfully original and dramatic line in a poem being scrutinised. The leader of the workshop, prominent (and ruthlessly honest) Melbourne poet Barbara Giles, politely but firmly told me it didn’t fit with the rest of the poem and it needed to go.

‘You have to be prepared to murder your babies,’ she said.

I resisted: ‘But it’s the best line in the poem.’

‘Then write another poem around it,’ she came back with a finality I wasn’t game to challenge.

The same notion applies to prose works – sometimes there are terrific phrases, lines, dramatic moments or thematic points we create as writers, that don’t quite want to marry with the form of their encompassing text. The last paragraph in this story might be one of them, I’m not sure. But for the moment it’s in, it’s going to stay – until some reader I really trust says: ‘But what about the ending, a bit preachy isn’t it?’

### **Anniversary** (*Stories* p 157)

*Anniversary* is an examination of identity via notions of one's ability to exert power: physical force or psychological will, over other people. It explores accompanying issues of humiliation, 'courage', vulnerability, intimidation etc and how these can add to or diminish a person's standing within a familial, social or community context.

The dynamics of power and the ways that it is exercised are omnipresent and, for the fiction writer a human aspect of great fascination and source material. From the moment we are born and through the various stages of our lives it is a fact that our given emotional and psychological personalities plus our physical attributes will determine whether we predominantly exert power or have it exerted over us. On a one-on-one level these dynamics exist between married couples, lovers, friends etc. In families it operates between parents and children; between parents and grandparents; and between siblings. In the workplace there is an institutionalised hierarchy of power, which often challenges and conflicts with the assumed gender power-dynamics operating in other environments. Then there are the power dynamics that exist in social and recreational settings, sporting endeavours and in all 'marketplace' situations (buyer versus seller).

I have chosen a social environment to set the story and given the theme two aspects: one masculine (bully versus coward) and another focusing on gender politics in its aspect of power-role assumptions. The story is realist in style, it uses conventional form and is reasonably short – requiring just the 'bones' of a setup to let readers in on the dynamics between two main characters before thrusting them into the short dramatic incident through which the main narrative theme becomes manifest. A small end-scene allows the central issues to be confirmed by irony.

It is interesting to sit here thinking about other stories I've written that contain elements of power assumptions within the context of the politics of identity. And the answer is: every one of them. It occurs to me that power – either physical, intellectual, psychological or even

technological – is the basis for the assumptions we make as an individual, a society and a nation whenever we think – consciously or unconsciously – and then assert: *I* am better than *you*; the game is going to be played *my way*. The reason we identify certain people as having certain rights to act in specific ways towards us, or maintain a certain status in *our* estimation, is predicated upon our power-relation with them.

And there is a parallel dynamics of power for creative writers: between editors\publishers and writer; between reader and writer; between a writer and other writers; and very certainly between the writer and the person in which the writer lives – that at times exerts enormous pressures and tensions. At the bottom end of this pyramid are writers. Until and unless an individual writer becomes extremely successful the levers of power; financial and for the writer's feelings of self-worth etc, are going to be pulled by editors and publishers (on behalf of) their readers.

Beginning\student and aspiring writers are acutely aware of, and identify themselves as being extremely vulnerable in the writing 'industry'. This places a great strain on the writer's notions of self-worth, especially over a prolonged period of time. Inferiority complexes are common in these groups, and are frequently accompanied by feelings of envy, jealousy, disillusionment and sometimes despair. Editors and publishers are especially crucial to a writer's identity – their subjective choices (more often than not commercially driven) about what will and will not be published, are life and death for writers – the only validation for identifying oneself with that term being publication or performance.

There are also tensions – sometimes negative, though not always – *among* writers. Emotions such as envy or jealousy amongst peers (and especially between writers of the same genre) at one writer's success can stimulate healthy competition leading to stronger writing from some or the entire group, but it can also result in feelings of inadequacy and insecurity (in one's notion of oneself as a writer). A recent personal experience – the success of a playwright friend in getting a play both performed (with two separate theatre companies over an 18 month period) and having it accepted onto the 2004 VCE curriculum left me with mixed feelings. I was elated for him; he has worked like a demon and deprived himself of all but the necessities of life in order to gain this success. But at the same time a feeling as I was being left behind; as if I was late for something, enveloped me. And I felt very envious of his leap forward. All of a sudden he was publicly and unarguably *a writer*, and if that was so then perhaps I was something less.

## *On the Poems*

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### **Immigrants** (*Poems p 171*)

This is a small but important poem (for me). I wrote it as a performance piece whose success hinges upon past racial prejudices and stereotypes having lost their pejorative currency.

I was about seven or eight years old when the first wave of migrants moved into my street, causing great distress to our parents, who labelled them (as we learned very quickly to do) *dagos* and *wogs*. As a child this was my first awareness of the notion of cultural identity. My family did not yet have a television, through which worlds of 'other' could be viewed; and the longest trip away from my home at that stage was to St Kilda beach – my world was absolutely embedded in its Anglo-Australian-ness. And these newcomers were not like any Australians I knew – they looked different; and when they conversed it seemed like a continual gesticulating argument. 'They lived differently as well – two families to a home was common and, much to our parents' disgust, they worked like demons removing all of the shrubs and flowers in the front gardens and replacing them with any vegetable that would grow there. Both the husbands and wives worked, with housekeeping and child minding duties usually assigned to grandmothers who wore black head scarves and never learned a word of English. These people could have been from Mars, and yet a tense coexistence slowly established itself between 'us' and 'them'. This I think was due in large part to the fact that they shared a common religion, Roman Catholicism, with a majority of the 'Australians' in our area. This dimension of their identity was crucial in smoothing the waters of fear and distrust.

In an historical time-frame context, the homogeny\assimilation of Italians into the Australian cultural milieu was breathtakingly quick. So much so that I can read my poem, referring to this first wave of post-war humanity as *dagos*, in public without any fear of giving offence. During my lifetime the term has lost all sense of negative potency and its use, except on rare occasions, is light-hearted and ironic. It is both sad and interesting to reflect that the same cannot be said of words like *slant* and *abbo*. Especially as the races they refer to, indigenous Australians and Chinese immigrants, have been here far longer than the Italians I first encountered in the mid to late 1950s.

The poem has been constructed as a small joke I could tell to a gathering of 'them' and 'us' and we could *all* laugh at it. And as I look at its form it leads me to think about the intuitive aspect of writing – that which drives the writer's mind to subconsciously turn everything it has learned (about form) over and over to come up with the *best* poetic vehicle to convey a specific subject. It is simple, direct, and matter-of-fact in its telling. This poem lacks any formal device except rhythm, and perhaps a little attention to sound. I can identify the genesis of this back through my reading of the poets who comprised the *New York School*, and primarily the informal, warm and pithy poems written by Frank O'Hara to friends and loved ones.

It's my lunch hour, so I go  
 for a walk among the ham-colored  
 cabs. First, down the sidewalk  
 where labourers feed their dirty  
 glistening torsos sandwiches  
 and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets

on. They protect them from falling  
bricks, I guess. Then onto the  
avenue where skirts are flipping  
over heels and blow up over  
grates. The sun is hot, but the  
cabs stir up the air. I look  
at bargains in wristwatches. There  
are cats playing in sawdust.

(O'Hara, 1989, p 2633)

In hindsight I can also trace a line of influence for my poem back to a specific poem by the American minimalist, William Carlos Williams (1883-1963).

**This is just to say**

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving for breakfast.

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

(Williams, 1989, pp 1174-5)

Though I came to these poets and was influenced by them at different stages of my own development as a writer, it is interesting to note that O'Hara professed to being influenced by Williams in formulating his

own style (Baym, et al, p 2628). In terms of writerly identity it is interesting to see yourself so placed; at the end of a queue of sorts, but one that is a continuum, huge and disparate, full of helpful ghosts who by their example enable the limitations of form to be stretched or imagined-out just a little as each generation of poetry builds upon the last. For me personally there is a subtle sense of affinity and community to be had from this – and sustenance – it helps when you are sitting on your own at one o'clock in the morning fighting with a line, or a verse, or an image that won't come together, to know that others have done this before you and that what they have written can perhaps offer solutions of fresh form that might open the door upon which you now bang your head in frustration.

### **Bad Jimmy** (*Poems p 178*)

I wrote *Bad Jimmy* to help gain an insight into the cyclic nature of male dysfunction. It was inspired by a radio news item telling of 'the death of an old homeless man – as yet unidentified.' The man had been set upon in a Melbourne park and kicked and beaten to death 'by several young men who then fled the scene.' I was able to put the poem together, and the characters that are its subject, by remembering an incident some years earlier when I had been verbally abused by – as I related it to my mates later – a drunken 'derro' on a park bench. He ranted and waved a fist at me as I'd passed by, cursing everything and everyone for reasons I couldn't begin to understand. As I walked away I began to think of him as someone who had once been my own age, and I wondered how he had gotten to his current state of disrepair.

I coupled this with the relatively new phenomenon (at the time) of the emergence of a subculture of very young homeless people – males mostly, with some as young as 12 or 13 who for whatever reason no longer lived with parents or guardians but slept in tunnels and laneways doing theft and drugs and prostituting themselves and learning how to take what they needed by force from those more physically vulnerable than themselves. It occurred to me that many of these youths would become the old men on park benches of the future, and so the ironic premise of the poem was formed.

The form in which it is written stemmed from a desire to write a solid performance piece. I had begun to attend open readings at pubs, cafes and regularly at *Melbourne Poets* meetings. As I listened to those who received the loudest and longest applause I began to gain an awareness of the differences between subject written to be read *on the page* and that written to be *spoken\performed*. I wanted to succeed at this level and felt a great pressure to write poems that had depth, were easily understood by a listening audience and were structured in a way that ‘sounded’ dramatic.

Bad Jimmy was also one of several poems written specifically to meet another need. At around this time I was involved in poetry workshop\readings for senior high school students. To sustain their interest I felt pressured to write poems that they would understand and relate to, yet would still have a depth I was happy to call *poetry* rather than just entertaining *verse*.

So the form I chose was very structured. It has a constant rhythm and rhyme for each verse with low-sounding vowels predominating (for mood) plus a falling last line in each verse to denote despair.

An interesting compromise I was asked to make from (just two) secondary school English teachers when I read this poem was the removal of the word ‘fuck’ from the last verse. I had argued strongly against this on the grounds that students of this age would all have a vocabulary that included the word, besides which I felt it was crucial to the consistent character of the old man and for dramatic impact. I got my way and all went well until one student showed a copy of the poem to his mother who complained to the principal who in turn criticised the teacher who had allowed me to read the poem in class. For school performances I have subsequently omitted the offending word and instead use ‘damn’, with a resulting loss of verisimilitude, impact and drama at the poem’s conclusion.

### **The Literature of Birth** (*Poems p 179*)

When one of my short story students gave birth to her first child I decided in an idle hour to write her a small poem on a congratulatory card. The form for the poem came quickly and playfully to mind – she was a student for whom the function of words was paramount, and I a writer teaching other writers that this should be so. There seemed to be a certain idiomatic logic then, in balancing the emphasis between what the words were *saying* and what they were *doing* to say it. Thinking about why I chose this particular postmodern engagement with form (or that it chose me?) I come to the conclusion it was a matter of me identifying her primarily as a writing student in a (secondary) condition of new

motherhood. Our contact and knowledge of each other existed only within a world contextualised by word-tools and the poem was an attempt to communicate my best wishes within that idiom.

Having written the poem I immediately began to think about the genesis of its form. At the instant of finishing it the poem seemed like an original 'party trick' – had anyone written a poem like this before? I hoped not, but even at this stage I could hear disappointed whispers telling me it had come from my reading material at some time or other. I went searching through my anthologies and finally located the source – a poem titled, *Permanently* by the American, Kenneth Koch (1925-2002):

One day the Nouns were clustered in the street.  
An Adjective walked by, with her dark beauty.  
The Nouns were struck, moved, changed.  
The next day the Verb drove up, and created the sentence...

(Koch, 1983, p 1251)

I blushed a bit when I re-read the poem, to know my party trick was not a new one. It's true, I had put my own spin on Koch, but it irritated me to feel even the shadow of the word *imitation* hovering. I was discussing this notion with a writer friend who related a story about the Spanish poet, Federico Garcia-Lorca, which helped assuage me a little. It happened one day that Lorca gave his brother one of his new poems to read. On finishing the piece Lorca's brother expressed the notion that the phrasing of the poem resembled that of another poet they had both read a year or so earlier. Apparently Lorca furiously denied ever having read the writer in question and refused to speak to his brother for several months. He was mortified, on accessing the particular poem, to

realise he had indeed read it, but had not remembered it as being remarkable in any way or that he had *taken in* its form as the basis for his own poem.

It is interesting to gain the perspective of years and look back to identify specific poems, stories and writers that have coloured one's ideas of style and form. It upsets some writers to come to an awareness and acknowledgement of this, whilst others understand and accept the notion of historic\peer group influence as being a natural and acceptable phenomenon. Jorge Luis Borges was of the latter school:

Borges is always quick to confess his sources and borrowings, because for him no one has claim to originality in literature; all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the spirit, translators and annotators of pre-existing archetypes. (Yates & Irby, 1983, p 19)

A personal experience gave me an example of the other reaction. I once attended a reading at the *Montsalvat Poetry Festival* to listen to Bruce Dawe perform. It struck me that his free-verse rhetorical tone, and the rhythm, phrasing and subject concerns of a couple of his poems were striking in their resemblance to those of the very popular Chicago poet, Carl Sandburg (1878-1967). I approached Dawe at the conclusion of his reading and told him so. I meant it as a sincere compliment, but I could see by the intense look on his face, coupled with his off-hand 'do you really think so?' and a dismissive turn-away shrug, that he wasn't all that pleased with my observation\comparison, which he seemed to take as back-handed.

Some – especially young or beginning writers, feel quite vexed over the notion of 'originality'. I've had many student writers express a resolution

– quite seriously, not to read other published or established writers in case some imitative pollution takes place within their own style. And this can happen – as an editor for the literary journal, *Verandah* I once received a batch of poems with a bracketed dedication: *for Sylvia*, from a young female poet. The poems were Plath imitations almost to the point of plagiarism.

But this phenomenon seems to pass as the writer's own style develops and matures and as they realise the impossibility of either outdoing the originals, or of having these imitative works published. Sometimes the influence can still be detected after this realisation, but it has by then been subordinated as part of a fusion of existing elemental devices rather than being, as it was, the dominant 'voice' within the narrative.

The maturity and development of one's individual personality also has a bearing on this issue. It becomes like a fingerprint once life has hauled us over its coals for a while – our genetic code; our environment and upbringing; our experiences: the marks and scars our parents, peers; our lovers, children etc leave upon us means that we (as writers) must inevitably respond to everything (that could serve as subject matter) in an entirely unique way. And although language is a given, and all the tools of form and style a writer uses have been developed by those who have written before, no two writers (unless deliberately) *can* articulate the words, phrases and nuances of language, nor manipulate the elemental weaponry in *exactly* the same way. In this sense one could argue that a limited form of originality is unavoidable. If we were to consider it as an equation, the writer's accumulated identity will always be the indeterminate *X*-factor that makes duplication impossible.

## War Crimes (*Poems p 180*)

The poem *War Crimes* typifies the problems and dilemmas faced by writers who choose political subject matter lacking popular currency. This poem takes for its subject two instances of wartime atrocities. The first involves the execution of Jews in Poland during World War 2; the second involves the execution of unarmed Arab prisoners by their Jewish captors in 1972. Inspired by a poem written by the American-Jewish writer, Anthony Hecht, *War Crimes* attempts to highlight, through irony, the hypocrisy of successive Israeli governments in claiming the high moral ground over Palestinian 'terrorists', when in fact their actions – in my opinion – perpetuate the very notions of superiority and moral expediency inherent in the Nazi regime whose racism\anti-Semitism resulted in the deaths of millions of European Jews during World War 2.

On completing the poem I showed it to the editors of two reputable national literary magazines. In both instances the poem drew praise, with words such as 'powerful' and 'evocative' being used to describe it, and with one editor in particular professing a strong desire to publish it. But in both instances the poem was rejected for publication on grounds that were strongly hinted at and inferred, though never spoken outright. The big disappointment is that it is not uncommon to read poems that are critical of particular countries and their politics – American foreign policy, and the treatment of aboriginals by white European Australians have been consistent themes over a number of years in Australian literary magazines, but for some reason the criticism of Israel brings enormous pressure to bear upon the media in which it occurs. The poem was subsequently commended in the *Melbourne Poets National*

*Poetry Award*, which has given me some hope that it will receive a wider audience in the future.

The pressures and ramifications associated with writing such a piece are interesting in their range and subtlety. On a personal level I have a handful of friends, also writers, who are Jewish. It worries me that the nature of the poem could affect those friendships or cause them discomfort. One writer friend suggested I remove all the nouns denoting ethnic origin, so avoiding the issue altogether. But I realised that to do this would completely betray the intent of the poem. Two days after reading it at the Melbourne Poets award night I received an anonymous copy of Leon Uris' *Exodus* in the mail. At the same awards night a Jewish lady – and child-survivor of the holocaust, took exception *not* to the subject matter itself, but to the fact (as an Australian-born writer with no *personal* experience in either of these events) I felt I had any right to explore this subject matter at all.

The result of all this is to throw one's hands up and say, with regard to writing about this specific subject matter: 'It's just too hard,' and to desist from writing it. As a writer who desperately writes to be heard and read, and therefore has a very high priority for publication of the work, I find myself asking: what is the point of spending 10 hours on 16 lines of poetry that will only bring me angst and handful of readers?

Many writers I've spoken to take this stance – they just *don't* write about it; it's off their literary agenda. And in a wider social context their opinions and perspectives on the issue – which will always have a broader representation than just themselves – are not debated or discussed as they should be. Public opinion is then left to be formed

primarily through the narrow focus, political bias or self-interest of daily newspapers. In Australia this situation is compounded by a very limited and concentrated ownership of all our mainstream media.

### **Death of a Gardener** (*Poems p 188*)

The death of a woman working in her garden on a storm-racked day in Melbourne set me thinking about gardeners in general. I like to look at gardens but I don't like working in them – getting sore knees and dirty hands; getting excited over the emergence of little green buds is not my idea of something to do. I've never understood the obsession of those we identify as 'keen gardeners'.

So the poem became on one level an exploration of why the woman was out there on her hands and knees in the storm tending her garden and on another the relationship between gardeners and the contents of their gardens, which seems to me to have many of the vagaries and tensions of human relationships. Thus, personification (along with irony) became the prime device used in the poem. *Death of a Gardener* has been published in Box Hill TAFE's annual on-line poetry magazine, *Divan*.

# Section 4

## *Conclusions*

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## Issues of identity

Being a writer involves one in a succession of emotional highs and lows – there is great joy and fulfilment at perceived successes and depression at the pressures and challenges that threaten to disrupt these. As I reflect upon my personal experiences relating to the issues of writerly identity that have been explored through the body of poems, stories and essays written during this PhD project (both the creative and exegetical thrusts of my thesis), and those of the writers included in my research, a handful stand out as prominent. These include:

- writing with fidelity to perceptions of the lived experience;
- the impact and importance of literary\critical theory on the writing *process*;
- the person\writer 'schizophrenic' split and its impact upon the *person* who is also the *writer*;
- the pressures and issues associated with the choice of narrative point of view;
- the impact of notions of censorship and self censorship in relation to what then can, or cannot possibly be written;
- the pressures and issues associated with writing a creative (research) thesis within an academic framework.

## Fidelity to perceptions

For me personally, the notion of *fidelity* is crucial, especially as it pertains to writers of literary genres, in attempting to explore at the deepest levels and to glean some sense of meaning for that which we loosely term 'life', and to foster an understanding for the consequential interrelations of individuals, families and groups within a given society

of identifiable 'types'. And here I find myself circling back to what I consider to be the driving tenet for the (literary) writer: tell life as you perceive it; not as you want it to *be*; or want it to *be perceived*.

This is not to prescribe hard-line social realism as the be-all genre. On the contrary, attempts at a reflected reality can be written using the most surreal form and subject matter, as the work of countless writers from Homer to Cervantes to Gertrude Stein to Margaret Atwood et al attest. Reading even the most surreal works of these writers inevitably causes readers to reflect upon and gain a greater understanding for what human beings are and do to one another at different times and in different societies. This attempt is for me the defining marker for a literary work – as opposed to writing whose primary agenda might be to humour, to excite or simply to stimulate and entertain for the duration of the reading.

## **Death and violence**

In reflecting on subject matter for the creative work I find that violence and death are recurring elements. I think this has a lot to do with a personal imperative I feel in relation to attaining heightened drama. Most of my characters are at an extreme point of emotional trauma, and in real life these states often lead to verbal confrontation, physical violence, self-harm and suicide, even murder.

This is especially so with the stories. In *Fixing the Renault* (The Stories: p. 34) for example we have the youth/protagonist's moment of truth in his doctor's office – being told he has hepatitis – coinciding with his mother and father discovering he is using drugs and suspecting he has

contracted AIDS. This causes unbearable anguish for both the youth and his family and, as is happening all too frequently in contemporary Western cultures, the youth suicides.

In *The Sunbather* (The Stories: p. 44), the death of the woman is utilised as a deliberate manoeuvre on my part to accentuate ironic elements. This story was written as a contemporary suburban tragedy, and with her death goes all sense of hope for the main protagonist, Luke.

The themes for *Collecting the Kid* (The Stories: p. 97) and *Last Trick* (The Stories: p. 142) also revolve around circumstances of death and physical violence – of entensioned lives pushed to the points of extreme action, reaction and the emotion. And married to this is an exploration of the effects of psychological tension and threat mirroring that which has been my experience witnessing similar real life events and situations.

Exactly why I have chosen these themes is not, even after long thought, an easy question to contemplate. Thinking about it seems to raise more questions. How is it that the painful emotional situations of friends observed by the *person* are able to be seized upon and dispassionately used as subject matter by the *writer*? And here we circle back to the person-writer split of earlier discussions.

In the formative stages of the stories when such decisions are made, I am certainly not thinking of any affects or impressions I may want to make on the reader – it is more a personal choice and judgment that, for me (certainly for the writer) lives *in extremis*, lives at their most painful and tragic, are lives at their most dramatic and interesting.

## The impact of critical theory

The debate with selective aspects of literary theory has soaked up what I consider to be an indecent portion of the exegetical component of this PhD, given their minimal assistance or effect upon the writer *in the act of writing*. The mistake, I think, by those insisting it be taught in the volume that it is within the curriculum of university writing programs (and to the exclusion of other, more *processual* writing concerns) is to equate the critical *theories* (of literature) with the *processes* of writing – the unique *balance* of technical, emotional and intellectual aspects. The two seem to me to be cousins rather than siblings.

This is not to say it is not helpful for a writer's education – especially a writer whose intention is to become a writing teacher or to enter academia – to be exposed to the important figures and schools of thought to be found in literary theory. I found it an extremely helpful tool for analysing and comparing writing from different periods of time, and for 'placing' certain writers and texts into both technical and intellectual pigeonholes. I can also see the value and the necessity in a university course, of a rigorous interrogation of the processes and intellectual aspects of a writer's craft. In this regard it has also been helpful in scrutinising and placing my own writing and subject concerns. And it has been an enjoyable and challenging discipline in which to participate – I did a double Bachelor of Arts degree (professional writing & editing, and literature) and at least half my honours degree in creative writing was taken up with the study and robust debating of contesting ideas within literary theory. Finally though, I would say that except in a very general way, I can find little trace of its influence on the stories or poems I write. So I cannot help asking as I make a judgment in hindsight on its influence, effects and assistance to me *as a writer*; and

*on the writing*. In quantitative terms has the focus on it been too dominant? And if so what has been excluded?

Throughout my honors degree and for this PhD project I was strongly advised and encouraged by many teachers to engage with literary\critical theorists. I remember few instances of being advised to engage with the writings of creative writers or poets – we were pointed to their stories and poems of course; which is *what* they wrote, but very rarely to their collections of letters, book introductions or prefaces, essays, lectures etc: *how* they wrote and *why* they wrote. When a writer is mid-story, sitting up at 1 AM in the morning trying to get into the head of the difficult character, the experiential advice of Anton Chekhov's marvellous letters can be life-saving. Derrida and Barthes will only whisper that what you write is unreliable; that it can have no definable meaning or originality.

I think perhaps a proportion of course material focusing on these writings by writers, and an increased focus on the disciplines of narratology would make practical and helpful substitutes for a *portion* of critical theory taught in university writing classes. At the moment I think the balance is wrong, and especially for students\writers going into these courses wanting to end up as polished writers rather than well-researched academics, much of critical theory becomes a waste – whereas material focusing on both the technical and intellectual aspects of the writing craft would serve them better.

In summing up I feel there needs to be a firm acknowledgement, via selected study materials, of the distinctions between the disciplines of *literature* theory and the theory of *writing* (as a practice). At university

level I believe the above-mentioned writings and critical advice by writers themselves (notwithstanding writer-critics such as TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein etc) would make extremely enlightening exegetical material for a writer engaged *in the act of writing*, as they complement the reflection and study of literature (the end-texts) as categoric or politic. An excellent model for this is the large short story\essay collection: *The Story and Its Writer* edited by Anne Charters from the University of Connecticut and published in 1984.

*The Story and Its Writer* came into existence because I wanted my students to learn about the literary genre of the short story as much as possible *from the writers themselves* (my emphasis). In my years of teaching classes in the short story, most of the anthologies I used were either textbooks with a limited number of stories and a great deal of editorial discussion – categorising the stories... and often restricting the students interpretation and my classroom presentation – or anthologies collecting a hundred or so stories with almost no editorial apparatus except brief biographies of the writers that did not suggest their significance as *story* writers. (Charters, 1984, p v)

### **Turgenev's Idea of the Germ of the Story**

Nothing that Turgenev had to say could be more interesting than his talk about his own work, his manner of writing. What I have heard him tell of these things was worthy of the beautiful results he produced; of the deep purpose, pervading them all, to show us life itself... (James, 1984, p 1125)

### **The person\writer split**

It has been fascinating to acknowledge and explore the tensions inherent in the split between myself as a writer and myself as a person, during the writing of this thesis. My feelings and overriding conclusion

is that in those times I'm not writing I have a very definite image of myself when I am writing, in terms of it being another person – an altar ego who makes different decisions and has a different agenda from the person (who doesn't write). I find the transition from one to the other occurs as a subtle tension rather than a sudden toggling-on or off, and persists as an omnipresent process of manipulation as the writer tries to seize on social and familial events, situations, traumas and interrelationship tensions for subject matter – sometimes whilst they are still in progress – and the person attempting to make judgments on when (and sometimes if) utilising these events is morally or ethically appropriate for the purposes of choosing subject matter.

Has gaining a greater awareness of this aspect of my identity through these writings been helpful in deflecting its associated tension? I don't think so. The dynamic was, and is, always in play as a subliminal (to both writer and person) and intuitive moral bargaining process between how what is about to be written will affect the lives of people known to the person, and how much the writer – with the voyeuristic compulsion to get deep-down and far-in to the messiest, most painful corners of everybody's lives – can get away with.

A personal experience might serve to exemplify this tension. It involves the poem, *Appearances* (Smith, 2000, p 10. [See: Appendix C, p 329]), which portrays the final weeks and the death of a young woman from breast cancer. The woman in the poem was the daughter of very close friends – two people I see on a weekly basis and who have become like a second mother and father to me. I wrote the poem a year after their daughter died, wanting to explore the pain, frustration and futility of the death of a relatively young woman who left behind a loving husband

and 10 year-old daughter. The tension began immediately – as soon as the writer decided there was a poem to be written, the person began to think about the impact it would have on my friends\her parents. A conversation of thoughts ensued as person and writer put their respective cases. It was decided the poem would be written; this was strong and valid subject matter, experienced first-hand, the writer implored. But it was also decided the poem would not be shown to the dead woman's parents; that it would cause them pain. This notion was reinforced as the poem began to emerge with a structure that paralleled the final weeks and days of the woman with the demise of the family's hot water unit. As the poem tells, the water appliance burst its seams just weeks before the woman died, providing (for the writer) a convenient and ironic metaphor through which the deterioration and futility surrounding the woman's death could be echoed. This parallelism is brought painfully to fruit in the last two verses:

And the dead hot water unit  
 ... no more able to cascade  
 the warmth of cleansing fluid  
 over cold and sullied flesh –  
 was taken to the local dump  
 where wanting some retrieve it gleamed  
 incongruously against the old dead junk.

... Her memory;  
 a cold fluidity of acid over flesh,  
 and still so fresh it begs  
 a reconstruction as it waits  
 with incongruity, among the old dead bones.

(Smith, 2000, p 10)

The writer considered the metaphor an original and effective one. The person, picturing the mother and father reading it, suspected the parallel images may appear cruel and deny dignity to the circumstances of the daughter's death. The poem was subsequently published in a small anthology I knew my friends would not see. A couple of years later I was putting together my first collection of poems for publication and was confronted with the prospect of leaving out what I considered to be the best poem I had written to that date. Again, a silent debate between writer and person played itself out over a period of three or four weeks. Both the mother and father, in their capacity as friends had unstintingly encouraged and assisted me in my writing. They knew about the impending publication and I knew they would read the poem if it was included. The person accused the writer: you have used *her* death to write *your* poem – what if it damages *my* friendship with them? The writer fired back: they are smart people, they will understand what I was getting at; that the motive was to explore and give understanding to the futility of her death and the pain it caused her loved ones.

I published the poem and with trepidation I took a copy to my friends. I told the husband that I had written this poem about their daughter's death and that I hoped it would not offend them. He didn't open it up to read but put it aside 'for later'. That was three years ago; they were there to support me at my book launch, and we are still firm friends. But the poem has never been mentioned.

## Point of view

The issues pertaining to choices for particular narrative points of view I've made for these stories and poems have at times been problematic. The attempt in the short fiction has been to *surround* a particular issue or situation with as many relevant perspectives as possible in order to explore and understand it at the deepest possible level. The most overt examples are *Letting It Go* (appendix A, p 317) and *Fixing the Renault* (p 34). In situating this attempt within a philosophical framework, it is I think, closely aligned with Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of *dialogic heteroglossia*, discussed earlier in the *Introduction* (p 20).

*Letting It Go* is written as a series of monologues – including one each from the writer and the narrator, serving to express concerns regarding the nature of the creative writing process and the narrative perspective in particular. *Fixing the Renault* is written predominantly as a multiple first person narrative with a couple of larger monologue sections, all conveying characters thoughts (to affirm the dis-communicative aspect of this dysfunctional family) and offering minimal dialogue. There is also the occasional interjection from an omniscient third person narrator. The rest of the stories, with the exception of two very short pieces: *Remembering Meg* and *Easter at Crown Casino* are written in third person omniscient roaming incessantly from head to head. It seems very ironic as I reflect on these, my attempts to give the greatest fidelity I could manage to the characters and events\situations (as I perceived them occurring in life), that there is neither an objective narrator, nor even the attempt at one, to be found.

This is an unsettling notion. It highlights the fact that a discomfiting amount of what I would term 'educated guesswork' has gone on to

achieve the narrative perspectives in fictions I wish to have regarded by readers as reliable replications of attitudes, emotions and consequential impacts that *really happen* in the situations and interrelationships the fiction is attempting to explore and understand. It seems to me I am asking readers to place a lot of trust in my (subjective) judgments on the interpretation of specific *actualities*.

As I reflect upon this point of view aspect for the poems, a less problematic situation seems to exist. The narrators for these have given me little anxiety and as I examine them for reasons why, I find the form of the poem (at least as I am writing them) demands a single experiential focus as opposed to the multiplicity of perspectives for the prose fiction. As a poet my position in relation to the subject matter is also different to that for the stories. The poetic narrators I inhabit seem more closely *me* in their opinions and in what they are manipulating the reader towards. They also seem far more assured and proclamatory – as if they have no doubts regarding the moral ground surrounding the particular issues being projected\interrogated, whereas the stories are a contestive exploration of issues and situations of which I have little or no understanding. There seems to be far more definitive comment and judgments made by the poems' narrators.

As I look at them now, I am using the poems and the narrators therein for a completely different agenda to that of the stories. An aspect of my personality, different from that which wants to be democratic and understanding, gets in touch with an aspect of the writer's personality (or maybe it is *another* writer altogether) to employ a narrator who will exclude all but their own perspective:

Why lambast me on the talk-back,  
 Fred, disrupt my Gay Parades?  
 Then bleed a hypocritic prayer  
 when told that I have AIDS.

Do not instruct me who to fuck  
 in night's sweet privacy;  
 how best to quash this anal urge  
 that fuels your piety.

I'm *out*, it is a man I love!  
 And how he makes my penis stand.  
 He makes me feel as you must  
 when your cock has found *her* hand (Smith, 2000, p 31)

In the above poem Fred Nile gets jumped on from a great height and is given no opportunity to put his case. As a short story writer I could never allow that to be the situation. The fiction would need to persist – with either a privileged third person narrative section getting into Fred's mind, or with a contesting monologue from him. Similarly, the writer (I accessed) for the poem, *suite: september eleven* (p 210) was only interested in conveying anger and disappointment at the shallow and reactionary response of the US government and its allies to this traumatic event. The narrator brushes very quickly over issues of loss and grief in order to feast upon the political aspects and make a definitive statement\judgment.

This reflection on narrative point of view has been very instructive, especially as it pertains to my teaching activities. It has given me an awareness that, just as I can (and must) employ a variety of elements for the short fiction and poetry, and choose certain of them to convey

specific aspects of subject matter *in the best possible way*, I can also access and utilise different writing *attitudes*, through narrators who understand their different functions and agendas in terms of what needs to be written for either the short fiction or the poetry.

## Notions of censorship

Looking back upon the body of the creative work for this thesis I can identify instances where the writing has been shaped by notions of censorship and self-censorship. What have I learned from this, and are there conclusions that can be drawn to assist other writers, or my own students to avoid the negative aspects inherent in these issues? Are there any positives – for the reader, the writer or for the writing, arising from any forms of censorship on writers? In some contexts is it possible that *not writing everything*, or not writing certain subject matter in a certain form or style; or not using a particular narrative point of view, can be regarded as an ethical and morally disciplined act, rather than a giving-up of narrative territory in acquiescence to some (the writer's or someone else's) prevailing notion of political correctness?

There is a personal conclusion I have come to, but one that situates itself within the framework of notions of censorship explored in essays by writers/philosophers George Orwell, Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin.

In his text, *Problems of Dostoevskii's Poetics*, Bakhtin sets down his idea of *carnival*, in which individuals (or groups) use forms of popular culture (including the novel) as a parallel discourse that is a resistant, even subversive counter to what he saw as more authoritarian and sombre

discourse protocols that are markers of the 'official' culture within societies.

It could be said (with certain reservations, of course) that a person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, *two lives*: one that was the *official* life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence and piety; the other was the *life of the carnival square*, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything. Both these lives were legitimate, but separated by strict temporal boundaries. (Bakhtin, 1963, p. 129-30).

George Orwell's preface to *Animal Farm* highlights government and societal hypocrisy associated with notions of the censorship of 'unpopular' ideas to suit some prevailing political/social agenda, citing these attempts to censor as serious threats to the very freedoms upon which democracies have been built.

The issue involved here is quite a simple one: Is every opinion, however unpopular – however foolish, even - entitled to a hearing? Put it in that form and nearly any English intellectual will feel that he ought to say 'Yes'. But give it a concrete shape, and ask, 'How about an attack on Stalin? Is *that* entitled to a hearing?', and the answer more often than not will be 'No'. In that case the current orthodoxy happens to be challenged, and so the principle of free speech lapses. Now, when one demands liberty of speech and of the press, one is not demanding absolute liberty. There always must be, or at any rate there always will be, some degree of censorship, so long as organized societies endure. But freedom, as Rosa Luxembourge said, is 'freedom for the other fellow'. The same principle is contained in the famous words of Voltaire: 'I detest what you say; I will defend to the death your right to say it'. If the intellectual liberty which without a doubt has been

one of the distinguishing marks of western civilization means anything at all, it means that everyone shall have the right to say and to print what he believes to be the truth, provided only that it does not harm the rest of the community in some quite unmistakable way. Both capitalist democracy and the western versions of Socialism have til recently taken that principle for granted. Our Government, as I have already pointed out, still makes some show of respecting it. The ordinary people in the street - partly, perhaps, because they are not sufficiently interested in ideas to be intolerant about them - still vaguely hold that 'I suppose everyone's got a right to their own opinion'. It is only, or at any rate it is chiefly, the literary and scientific intelligentsia, the very people who ought to be the guardians of liberty, who are beginning to despise it, in theory as well as in practice.

(Orwell, 1946, p. 3)

... let us have no more nonsense about defending liberty against Fascism. If liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear. (Orwell, 1946, p. 5)

Michel Foucault, in his essay, *Untying the Text* (1971) posits the notion that societies have developed means by which they control/limit what can be written, spoken, shown, canvassed or explored by societal discourse-media. Discourse, he asserts, is the agency by which those who control it set the agendas within their discourse paradigms. He cites sexuality and politics in current (Western) cultures as an example.

Here is the hypothesis which I would like to put forward tonight in order to fix the terrain -- or perhaps the very provisional theatre -- of the work I am doing: that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.

(Foucault, 1971, p. 52)

So far as any societal or officially imposed censorship, like Orwell and Bakhtin I think writers should resist, even subvert it at every possibility. I've yet to be convinced by any argument attempting to justify why anybody should direct a poet or fiction writer to what he\she will or will not include in the writing. My argument would be that in the end creative writers live or die by the judgments and choices they make on the *how* and *what* of their writing (always leading to the *why*). If a writer takes on the narrative perspectives of 'other' and does it badly; perhaps in a way that is judged shallow or lacking authenticity or fidelity to actual events – then the writer's reputation suffers. If for example an author were to write a serious fiction and present a manuscript describing Adolf Hitler as a kind, loving man; the Third Reich as a noble band of heroes; and that only three Jewish people – all demented serial killers – died in what history knows as *the holocaust*, then that writer would almost universally be derided as a fool and a racist. Where would such a writer be published or taken seriously? And who and how many people would buy that book? If a dozen people then the folly of the writer would be manifest. If one million copies then something has been revealed about the nature of *that* society we could argue is better revealed and explored than not.

Notions of self-censorship are more complex and ambiguous for the individual writer, I think. Some exist, as Foucault notes, through cultural assumptions pertaining to what is *allowed to be written*. At some point writers come to recognise themselves as belonging to one of two broad categories. They will either be a writer whose moral boundaries – in terms of form and subject matter – will be inextricably linked to those of the *person*; that is, they will consider themselves an Australian writer, or perhaps a white Anglo-Saxon Australian writer, or perhaps a female

migrant Australian writer, and so on – and these persuasions of identity will inform everything written by that person when they are being the writer. Others will come to consider themselves as writers who feel quite unrepentant as they jettison all traces of their social, ethnic and even gender orientations – and the accompanying limitations, to become a sort of perfect nobody, an all-encompassing *medium* who attempts to access all and every familial, social, cultural and artistic influence in a quest for the most imaginative affirmation of the most substantial subject concerns possible – these are Bakhtin’s writers.

There are pitfalls and advantages aplenty for being (or choosing to be) one kind of writer over the other. There are also positives and negatives for the writing that emerges. Those who belong in the first camp can develop inhibitions about using certain form and subject matter, most notably around notions of transcultural appropriation, which can limit form and style. Then there are those writers who avoid using uncomfortable or traumatic experiences of those closest to them, or of using those people as models for characters, for fear of offending or damaging relationships, thus giving up fertile subject matter. This is the person’s moral ultimatum to the writer: life over art, which often results in writing that lacks experiential substance. Situations, events and characters have to be ‘made up’ or imagined from a less personally known perspective.

Conversely, those in the second group who give the job of writing over absolutely to the writer and his\her narrative concerns, risk damaging or even destroying relationships through injudicious revelation which, although imbuing the writing with the substance of experience and making the writer happy and fulfilled, will inevitably leave the person

less so. And writers who allow themselves access to *all* form and style – even those of ‘other’ (culture, gender etc) – will be judged by many of their peers, readers and critics to be insensitive, politically incorrect and even offensive in the way they have gone about character formation within their texts.

There are no comfortable answers (that I can find) regarding these issues of self-censorship. The multiple (and usually polemic) opinions about the validity, integrity and methodology of the two kinds of writer explored above have been; are; and I suspect always will be omnipresent. But the exploration of these writing ‘types’, at least for me, has been very helpful. I now have a greater awareness for my own stance on these issues; for why I choose to write the way I do, and a better understanding for those who choose the opposite. It is a shared conundrum – both positions can justify themselves entirely, but for reasons that are quite oppositional.

### **The pressure of writing a creative thesis**

Within the concluding section of this exegesis it would be remiss not to acknowledge and explore the pressures and challenges on me as a writer, of both the writing process and the more political aspects peculiar to the (relatively new) creative writing PhD thesis. This is especially so given one of the central research questions: how do external pressures affect the development of a writer's identity, and what can be done to maximise positive rather than negative outcomes? In this regard, an exploration of my experience may be helpful to others.

Through my own experiences, and through many conversations with a variety of university lecturers and students, I would safely assert that there is a tension between literary studies\critical theory, and creative writing disciplines (and their respective disciples) that is reflected in the way I have found myself, and a number of acquaintance-PhD writers (and the creative writing PhD itself) being regarded within some arts faculties steeped in traditions of literary studies, critical theory, cultural studies and so on, and whose supervisory personnel and curriculum focus come primarily from these disciplines, replete with assumptions of what constitutes valid research methodology and outcomes for knowledge-extension.

During a very frustrating and confusing Candidature Proposal process (of nine months duration) I was asked on three separate occasions, by different faculty personnel what my primary reason was for undertaking my PhD research degree as a *creative* thesis. In the first instance, and as I hesitated for a second to gather my thoughts, my answer was pre-empted with the suggestion that if it was *to be financially supported whilst writing a book project*, then I should think very seriously about approaching a publishing house instead. On the second occasion this same notion was put as a rhetorical question, *do you want to do the PhD to get a book done?* The question seemed a loaded one, and I was a little taken aback at the implied suspicion that here was a developing\emerging writer not so much intent on rigorous research in the interests of greater disciplinarian knowledge, as getting (paid) time to write a book.

So, from the beginning of the process I felt under some pressure to justify both my intentions for the writing and the validity of the very

discipline in which the writing would be situated. Would my creative writing project be valued (by the university, and the faculty that encouraged me to apply and accepted my proposal), equally with that of those being undertaken in more established disciplines such as literature or cultural studies?

The most problematic area lies in formulating a set of workable and realistic expectations regarding research methodology and outcomes for the creative thesis. How to satisfy the entrenched ideals of academic rigour by qualifying and quantifying the writer's reading and engagement with other writers and critics within a comparatively short (in my case 30,000 word) exegesis, that must also leave enough words to explore and make comment upon the creative component of the thesis? And hardest of all, how to render the most valuable commodity of all for the subject matter: the writer's life experiences – often very personal, abstract or emotional – as concrete concepts that can be documented and verified as having usefully pushed the knowledge forward for other writers? How to quantify (or justify as a valid research method) sitting in your study looking blankly out at your carport for hours at a stretch trying to come to terms with a set of characters who just won't jell?

Can the rigour of this research be seen? I would argue that it can. First, by other writers who have themselves gone through the same sorts of experiences, and also by readers intelligent enough to recognise it by the way those characters – when the writer has put the research time and effort into them – interact to make the subject matter jump off the page and throw a light on something that was hiding in a shadow before. The proof and validation of this research: its nature, quality and extensiveness, will be found in the resulting texts by those who know

*how* and *where* to look for them. As an example I would put forward Melville's *Moby Dick*, upon which the agenda-template of a PhD could be applied to satisfy its every aspect.

It is interesting, as I converse with tutors and lecturers across university and TAFE writing departments, to note almost invariably that those who have a creative writing background (with many also teaching literary studies and critical theory) see the validity of and support the creative writing thesis – some to the point of a 100 percent creative thesis – whilst those with literary studies and/or critical theory backgrounds (and not being creative writing practitioners) have solid reservations about the creative thesis.

Many creative writers currently doing PhDs are supervised by the latter, or are doing their PhDs in arts faculties whose disciplinary emphases and assumptions of research methodology have their roots firmly entrenched in that group's preferences for a *literature* theory paradigm rather than a *writing* theory paradigm. Therein lays both the problem and a pointer to its solution, I think.

And this rounds back to an earlier point – there needs to be a full awareness that the knowledge-realm of literature/critical theory contains within its boundaries only *part* of the knowledge-realm of writing theory. There are points of intersection and points of divergence. An accommodation needs to occur within a cross-disciplinary coexistence that appreciates both the mutual touchstones and irreconcilable differences.

Creative writing courses are here to stay. Their steady growth over the last 10 to 15 years now sees them thriving as fully established entities at both TAFE and university level. They are popular and they are big money-spinners for the institutions that have the responsibility of implementing them in a way that needs to satisfy student learning outcomes plus academic standards and expectations from associate diploma right through to PhD level. Clearly the movement toward the ideal model for the creative writing thesis is still in evolution. As more writers gain their (creative writing) PhDs and take up positions for the supervision of creative writers (and hopefully with genre-specific student to supervisor matching), the smoother and less ambiguous the process will become for all concerned.

Another significant and omnipresent tension was the problematic notion of justifying the worth of the creative component, comprising 70,000 words of poetry and short fiction. The academic research focus placed upon a PhD project exerts great pressure upon this aspect of the thesis – almost positioning it as ‘other’ to the exegesis which, although (permitted by the university arts faculties to be) the much smaller section of the PhD, is expected to carry the burden of proof of academic rigour and research\learning outcomes and contributions to knowledge.

I would assert the creative component more than justifies its place within the academic PhD process. In my own case I have made an attempt to push the boundaries and knowledge of form and style by various experimentations within both the poetry and the fiction in my thesis. In the exegetical essays I have explained some, though not all that has gone on with regard to this. For my examiners, much of it will

be obvious at the point of first reading, whilst other aspects may demand a second reading and closer analysis to make it manifest. I think all proof of their worth for the key PhD criteria of knowledge-extension: the techniques, possible applications and affects is there to be read in the creative works and so needed little if any exegetical revelation.

The subject matter certainly did, and benefited greatly from an exploration into the points of source and inspiration for story\poem events, issues and situations, plus the genesis and formation of characters and their fictional perspectives.

But I would justify the worth of the creative component on perhaps more cultural\social grounds, and repeat the premise laid down in the *Introduction* section of this thesis:

Creative writing, (in this instance short literary fiction and poetry) is a powerful medium through which writers, readers and society can explore, understand and generate debate surrounding the effects on people's lives of imposed or self imposed notions of identity and function, both on a personal and social level. (p 8)

And what is the resulting impact on readers of these texts so formed? This is important because in these will be the stories and poems that define the lived-generations of a world of *actual* interacting identities that is also the society that each writer experiences but then constructs idiomatically according to his or her formed identity. These texts – those that are (albeit arbitrarily) chosen and published – then become, in both a contemporary sense and also for posterity, representational of a particular society's mores, attitudes, politics etc. (p 25)

Fiction and poetry can be every bit as effective as the factual genres in shaping a social identity in terms of actions, attitudes and opinions on pivotal issues. Literature, especially poetry, usually arises out of an emotive impulse rather than an ideological imperative or commercial directive, as is the case with much factual writing. Literary novelists and poets, unless they are extremely famous, will rarely be paid enough money to make a living from their writing – no one is going to pay a poet \$20,000 to write a left or right wing manifesto in the form of a 20-line poem. It might be argued then that what is written by literature is in a moral sense, more to be trusted than much of the 'factual' editorialising that purports to enlighten popular opinion via the print and television media, where the commercial (sometimes linked to a political) imperative often becomes a fatal compromise in getting at the truth of issues and events.

There is too, perhaps a greater opportunity through the less didactic, more imaginative\entertaining nature of fiction, to persuade readers (who may be ideologically resistant to the subject concerns you are exploring in the writing) to a different, perhaps more enlightened position, or to at least have them question or challenge their current views on those subject concerns. It could be argued that nothing has done more to garner support for the continued existence of the state of Israel since its formation than the plethora of Holocaust literature – it is not so much documentary footage of the Nuremberg trials that one brings to mind, or has captured the popular imagination and emotions – as the fictional narratives (and movies made from them) such as *Sophie's Choice*, *Schindler's List* (*Schindler's Ark*), *The Diary of Anna Frank*, and the very popular novels by Leon Uris: *Mila 18*, *Exodus*.

Literature can also help to build upon the momentum of social opinion and attitudes toward issues adversely affecting the way individuals or groups interact and live within societies, in a way that contributes toward greater understanding and possible positive change. Fiction and poetry, in this sense, can offer complementary\supplementary dialogues to that of more factual or social-science based research into these same issues. My short story, *Fixing the Renault* was originally written as a short play to be read at an arts event organised by clinical staff at Royal Melbourne hospital to raise awareness of the personal, familial and social effects of the disease, hepatitis.

Authors, by fictionally exploring their way around, under, over and through many of these social and personal issues, and then by having readers experience (or re-experience) them through the reading, can also achieve a form of social catharsis, for both themselves and for their community of readers. And whilst literature doesn't often come up with solutions to the problematic issues it explores – that is rightfully the function of experts such as sociologists or legislators – the writing can often wave a red flag of awareness and also act as a vent for the pent-up emotions of individuals and their social collectives.

The creative fiction and poetry of our writers is also vital in affirming or even contradicting notions of national identity, and of exploring the clash of identifiable *types* within that overarching term: *Australian*. A good case study is the events surrounding the life of Ned Kelly and the immense personal, social and political fallout these events caused, and their impact on the national psyche. We would need a small library to house the number of newspaper articles and other non-fiction historical

accounts such as biographies etc, complemented by a plethora of fictionalised accounts of the Kelly 'saga'. Then there are the various films, paintings and other artistic interpretations of those same events. One could argue quite strongly that although they take their research and initial impetus from the factually reported sources, it is the literary (and artistic) renderings that have mythologised and embedded the Kelly events into the collective national ethos; exploring the deepest, darkest corners of that myth from a variety of narrative-interpretive perspectives. Coming immediately to mind are a continuum of movies dating back to the silent era; artist, Sidney Nolan's Kelly series of paintings, and novels by some of our best authors including Peter Carey, Robert Drewe and Jean Bedford.

It has been an obsessive and on-going facto-fictive project focusing on a powerful array of binary opposites: *authority/anarchy; Protestant/Catholic; English/Irish; settler/squatter; social equity/class greed and official corruption; loyalty/betrayal; wealth/poverty* – which played themselves out in their Australian, socio-historic context. And though these fictions define *that* society of that place and that time, many of the issues they deal with resonate with universal whispers as we ponder the solutions to similar contemporary issues. And again one could argue that it is fiction, digging like a wombat in a relatively small burrow of facts that has carried this exploration of identity into the popular imagination and kept it there.

In this same manner, Frank Hardy's novel, *Power Without Glory* serves as a powerful social document exploring Victoria's social, religious, criminal and political landscapes via their (rather seedy) interrelationship dynamics, set in a fiction that gnawed perilously close to the bone of

actual events and people. It is interesting to note that what Hardy managed to expose in his fiction would have been an unthinkable task (for reasons of litigation) for factual genres to tackle. Hardy was tried but acquitted on a charge of criminal libel, in a case that became significant for Australian writers and for our national literature.

... the case was able to focus quite sharply on the key issue for defamation purposes, that of whether fictional characters can be assumed to represent real individuals – which also happens to be a key issue in relation to the institutional autonomy of literature.

The second important feature of the case was that... [it] established a beachhead of literary freedom with considerable symbolic and strategic value for rebuilding institutional autonomy over the next two decades.

(Buckridge, 1998, pp 177-8)

So these then are the notions upon which the fictions and poetry within this thesis, in their own small way, endeavour to justify their value in the theatres of life and literature, and discipline of creative writing.

### **What's been learned, where can I take it?**

As I draw this thesis to its conclusion and think about the writing of the poems and stories: the processes of thought, imagination, observation, remembrance and inscription – and in the context of how they and their writing have changed me: how different elemental features have been sketched in to my writerly identikit and others rubbed out or blurred – I realise significant changes (most, though I suspect not all, for the better) have occurred. The exploration of vital issues of identity has been extremely productive on both a personal and writerly level. I have a far

greater awareness, I think, of where I am currently situated within my community of readers and writers. I have been able to test and affirm or discredit suspicions I had about my writing strengths and limitations. And I have developed a very healthy understanding about the tensions, both positive and negative of the person\writer split; and why I should no longer try to assuage the competing yet complementary agents (and their agendas) inherent in this phenomenon.

Being positioned thus by the still-gathering realisations of this new knowledge and awareness, I believe I can take my own writing, that of the students I teach; and the writing of those who might read and debate the ideas explored in this thesis, forward. And I am very hopeful of making a solid and ongoing contribution within the academic, educational and artistic circles in which I write, teach, perform, debate and publish – in a way that helps to facilitate an environment maximising vigorous and productive creative writing, and that fosters a greater understanding within each of these inter-disciplinary communities about the problematic aspects of functionality and identity for writers – within their families, societies, and within their own heads – to more clearly explore the notion: *who am I, and why?*

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# *Appendix*

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## *Letting It Go*

*'All the new thinking is about loss.*

*In this it resembles all the old thinking.'*

Robert Hass: *Meditation at Lagunitas*

### **1. The Writer**

I walked past your house for two years, Ray, after it happened. Silently I called, hoping the ghost of you would smile out at me, but white sheets covered the dusty panes with a silence as final as the back of the moon. At the time, Ray, no tears came, tears being for real hurt, like cut knees or a nose bloodied by the bully from Malta Street. Grasping your death was difficult, first grief as far away as Saturn. And television death, Ray, was no help at all when real death came. Five nights a week Wild Bill Hickock pumped hot lead into black-clad outlaws (who never bled), but next night they were back angrier than ever, shooting up the ranchers and making life hell for Wild Bill. Playing cowboys up and down the banks of the Darebin Creek, Ray, falling over and counting to fifty was all there was to being dead. During the Sunday hours following the moment I learned that you had died, the apparition of real death searched high and wide for me. I hid in the low dark place of refusal. Frank Stubbs, our teacher from the third grade, found me. You remember Mister Stubbs Ray; fair, but tough as the leather strap that hung above the wooden chalk box in room eight. My father said that Mister Stubbs had rucked for Hawthorn. At the Monday morning assembly though, being tall and strong didn't help him at all. He wept all over us, without apology or restraint, just a strong man showing us something. Watching him Ray, I was conscious that some small but significant part of me had broken off to hide in a time and place that I would never again negotiate. Fifteen years later on a hot lazy Sunday, I

lay on the white sheets with the easy sweat of remembrance. I thought of you then. Your round, vulnerable face. The short grey pants on cold, white legs. Small, fat fingers, unsuited for bat or ball. The heavy black shoes worn to the sock as you lumbered at the back never quite catching us before the bell went. It was those little things Ray, tiny details rising up out of the dark place; my gut tightened and the tears came all over me, ran over the living skin and soaked the growing hair on my chest. I tried counting to fifty, but I was too old Ray, it just didn't work anymore.

## 2. The Narrator

Most of it from here on is fiction and conjecture. I can only try to join the scattered confusion of narrative dots, only hope to alert the hand that strikes the match that lights the candle that then locates the light revealing all. I will begin by tracing a thin red line from the first dot. This will run along its own crimson curve, slicing through each other dot within its turn which may reveal a clarity; something you all can grasp onto like a Teddybear.

Kevin's axe came slowly up to the top of its arc. There was a stickiness on the handle now that gave the tool tremendous grip; he was absolutely one with it. He had been drinking, yes, but there was no anger, just the clarity of an unexplainable urge to get it done. Sympathy, regret - these were emotions no longer available to him.

Ray woke up in a cold sweat as the blade came down thwack onto the bundle in the other bed. A warm spray of something freckled surprise upon his face. In the greyness by his brother's bed he discerned a familiar form caught cold by a shard of street light poaching at the

darkness through the poorly mended curtains. Then Ray could hear a gurgling sound.

‘Michael,’ he said softly, slowly raised his small, rounded body, pupils expanding out to gather in the blurred fragments, to sharpen and interpret them. As the figure edged away Ray could see that his brother’s head and face had opened up. He could hear his own heart jerk to the rhythm of the blood and air playing in his brother’s throat. Glued into his own sweat he began to cry for his mother, something utterly fathomless as the figure loomed up hard and black. The axe was held, or seemed to hold itself aloft, focused then for a second upon the pink line of the boy’s head where the silky white hair parted, just a little left of centre. All sadness had leaked from the heart of steel that whistled through its line.

### **3. Kevin**

I’m being painted black as pitch. Events are dead against me, but I’m going to tell my side of it. Not square things up, things I did can’t never be squared, not ever. I wasn’t mad neither, get that straight! And I loved the kids, think what you want. Ray will tell his part too and this might help you to see the whole mess clearer, I don’t know. But don’t listen to Maree. What that bitch says don’t count. Maybe Ray’ll tell you what a monster I was, who knows what the dead can come up with after thirty six years? That’s a lot of hate for him to drop off and it’ll be hard, he was never a tough kid. He was my favourite, I tried to make him tough but he never was.

People - my mates and that, reckon I was tough. It was a good feeling, being appreciated for something you could do better than anybody; having that sort of power. Before the war I could clean up anybody at the pub, but after it I couldn’t have beat Maree. Well, not

for a year or so, the bitch'll fill you in about that. She never had sense enough to know when to let go of it, that was her problem. She'd nag away, digging the needles in knowing I was going to blow up and when I did she'd just stand there and take it; curl up like a snail. No sense. When I lost my temper and went at the kids, she'd just stand in front of them and cop it sweet. Got no respect for her and she never had anything interesting to say about anything; down at the pub with my mates and their wives she was nothing but a bloody embarrassment.

I know I wasn't good at giving out love and *sorry* isn't a word I used. I never got no affection or touched myself as a kid except to get my arse kicked and the only times I touched other people later was to bash them or have sex. I was capable of feeling it though. I had a real good feeling about Maree for a month or so after we got married, before I saw how bloody dull she was. I loved the kids when they weren't mucking up. If they couldn't see that, well... I can't change it now, can I? No one can. To be honest I felt closer to the blokes I fought with in the war than anyone else, before or after. Even the kids.

The war was good for me because it used and appreciated the hate I brought to it — the war couldn't get enough of blokes like me, and I didn't have to feel guilty about it after; like with Maree and the kids. I enjoyed the war till the Japs caught me and I ended up in Changi. I was thirteen stone six when I went in and seven two when they carried me out. The Japs did things to me, I've got no fingernails... and worse stuff I'm not going into. I couldn't hold a job when I got home, I was hard into the grog trying to forget my fingernails. *You don't care if the house falls down*, Maree said to me one day and she said that I'd got more hateful since the war, *lazy and hateful*, she went on and on till I snapped, *smack!* right on the nose, I *told you to shut your fucking mouth*, and she kept

whimpering, *you're an animal, nothing but a bloody animal*, as she folded up like a fetus that first time I thumped her, gave her what she deserved.

If you're expecting me to be the sort of bloke who'll say *I wish I'd never hit Maree all those times*, well don't. You never lived with her; with us. So you can't judge me and to be honest, even looking back I don't feel no different. She asked for it, I don't care what you say. She helped me to hate myself. I'm glad I killed her and what the hell were the kids going to do without me or her to look after them? It needed to be done. Once I saw that, I didn't have the slightest hesitation. I may have flinched for a second when Ray woke up and saw me putting Michael out, I forget. But I went on with it, deaf to his pleas and despite the blood spraying over the pillows and the sheets and the walls. It *must've* needed to be done.

Was I drinking?, yeah, I'd been on the grog that night. Temper?, yeah that too, I was born with that, it's taking hold right now, oh... I used the sharp end of the axe, if that's important. But who are you to judge me on what I done? Have you been to war, have you slept in your own shit, have you had bamboo shoots pushed up your fingernails, have you heard your best mates crying out with gangrene eating their legs away, watched your body scab and fester and shrink down to a cartoon stick-figure with hollow-nothing eyes? Sucked on leather belts, ate cockroaches just to survive, then wondered why you bothered because when you got home you realised through the grog and the hate that the Japs had tormented the future out of you. I never cried out once when the Japs were doing me over and never whinged about it when I came back, not once! And were you married to a slag who reminded you day after day what you'd become, how fucking useless you were. Have you had all that? Well when you have, *then* you can judge me.

#### 4. Ray

I'm Ray and I'm ten years old; forever. My dad went through a lot in the war. He never talked about it. My brother Michael hated him, said *he's a fucking bastard*, after he bashed mum or us or smashed stuff up when he was drunk. Mum hated him too. I never talked much with my mum, she used to yell at us a lot and say things over and over till dad got angry and hit her; almost like she wanted him to. I didn't like her then, doing that, it scared me knowing what was going to happen next. I loved mum though and I hated dad when he hit her, hated him. One time, I was eight, I came home and mum was standing at the sink and just staring out the window. A chair was broke and all mum's best cups were smashed in a heap on the floor. Mum was just standing there. *Go away, Ray*, she said real soft to me, without even turning. I don't know why I said what I did next, it wasn't something our family used to do. *I love you, mum*, I said. And when I did she put her hands up to her face and the top of her started to shake. She turned and bent down to me and tears were coming all over her face and even soaking her blouse. She was hugging me so tight I could hardly breathe and she had this sort of a smile cause I'd said I loved her, but there was other, sad things in behind the smile pushing and pulling it out of shape.

My dad said crying was for girls. The day Lance Gunn from Malta street bashed me up at school I came home crying from a blood nose and cut knees where I fell over running away. Mum was fixing me when dad came in wobbling a bit from drinking, his words were slow and not coming out right. I wiped my eyes and told him what happened. Gunny was a year older than me, though it wouldn't have made no difference even if he was the same age, I hated getting into fights;

getting hurt. *Crying's for girls*, dad said, *get outside!* I was real scared, I could see that the other dad had taken over.

When we got outside he just stared at me for a few seconds, then he said, *I'm Lance Gunn. Hit me.* When I didn't he shoved me hard. My head jerked forward and my back hit the brick wall of the house. *Hit me back, you girl*, and he slapped me hard on my face and kept shoving me against the bricks and I was bawling by now and when Mum came out and stepped between us he hit her too, *this is between me and girly here*, he said. *Don't you bloody touch him again!*, Mum was shouting as she was getting up and I yelled, *I'm alright, it's alright, Mum*, cause I wanted her to stop saying things to him when he was like that, but she wouldn't never stop when she got like that and then he punched her on the side of her face, *oh Jesus!*, she said and the blood poured out from her nose...

I wanted *the fuckin' bastard* to be dead then; wanted him to go to sleep that night and for a monster to come and take him away.

When he wasn't drinking he was okay to us, to me specially, he reckons I was his *little mate*. We had an old footy and he'd kick it back and forwards with me on the back lawn sometimes. I'm only ten, I don't know a lot about why people do bad stuff, but, I think my dad was two people. The drunk man in my dad was a monster, he really was. He kicked me one time and it took two weeks for the black and blue to disappear. I hated the drunk man, he's the one who killed us. That's how I have to think about it.

## 5. Maree

I'm glad I'm getting the chance to have my say. I was so ordinary, so...marginal. In life I had no say. According to the newspaper reports I was the mother who, quote, *...was also shot dead*. Unquote. An appendage, even in death, is what I was.

I was a Catholic housewife in Melbourne in the fifties. My jobs were to cook for Kevin and incubate for God. That's all. As Kevin used to say to the few people we ever socialised with, *meet the boss*. And then he'd turn, pretending his arm across my shoulder, and smile at the others and the men would laugh and their women would look half embarrassed as they smiled because they knew and I knew and most of all Kevin knew, that I could never be the boss of anything.

What drew me to someone like Kevin and what in the hell kept me there? I can't answer the second with any sense at all. Duty? No, I'd have gotten out if I could, but to where? How would I have looked after my kids? No such thing as a women's refuge then. And I'd never take my troubles home to mum and dad. Never. Father O'Connell said Kevin would change, *till death do us part, Maree, remember*. I wonder what he said over my grave a month later?

What I craved most from Kevin when I first met him would turn out to be the death of me. He came to our house to take my sister out. I peeked through the curtains sizing him up and I liked what I saw; average sized bloke but his body was hard and tight, no waste on him at all and he had those sharp, chiseled features, handsome then at almost every angle. Later they would bloat and blur back into his face through too much grog and sloth. I was just a fraction better than plain looking I'd say. Carmel was the pretty one but I had a real good figure. F'ellas made flash remarks to me at the pub sometimes, in fun like. I felt good about it. But they stopped after I started going with Kevin.

*I won't be going out with him again!* was what Carmel told me when she got back that night. *He wanted to bash every bloke who looked at me*. I couldn't see what Carmel was on about, I wanted more than a thousand quid for a feller to protect me that hard. I'd never had sex with a man but when I did, I knew it would be with someone like Kevin. Not long

after, I managed to attract his attention at the local swimming pool and then, well, it was pretty much full steam ahead and a week later he *broke me in*; that's the way Kevin put it, up against the cyclone fence back of the pool. I bled a fair bit. It wasn't what I thought it would be. I didn't feel anything much for myself – was I supposed to? – but when I felt Kevin shuddering at the end of it and he thrust hard up into me I felt something, not love, no, but sort of fulfilled my body had been able to bring that out in him; in anyone. I know now I should've felt like a used clag bottle.

*I broke her in and she bled like a stuffed pig. I'm not going to lie and say I didn't feel good about it. Mates at the pub backslapped me for an hour when I told them. Then I told them she was mine, I didn't want anyone else touching her. She belonged to me and it felt, well... not like love, she was okay looking though, had a terrific body and I could see they were all jealous and it made me feel, not happier but... more finished off. I needed someone. Doesn't everybody?*

Like a used clag bottle, as I said.

Why didn't I just head for the hills then? Was I stupid? Jesus, you think I haven't asked that one over and over. But I've come to this: at the time, it was what the particular person I *was*, wanted. I can see now, looking back from here that I - no, she, was stupid. Get me? Hindsight plays around a lot in this story but I think it's as useless as the blunt edge of an axe.

I was three months gone with my first when the chance to know I'd made a bad choice came. Down at the pub a mate of Kevin's who fancied me a bit— he knew, they all did, that I was pregnant— this bloke starts to rub my tummy. Looking back, I don't think he meant any harm at all, but it upset me at the time. I told Kevin, and Jesus, all

hell broke loose. *What do you think you're fucking doing!* He came straight at this bloke, headbutting, punching, kicked him on the ground. Six fellers had to drag Kevin off, they were backslapping him, shouting him beers and when he settled down he came back to the table covered in this other bloke's blood and his knuckles all cut to blazes. It frightened me it really did but, do you know what, I never felt bigger in my whole life than at that moment; never loved him as much again. I thought the smile he wore the rest of the night was pride on account of having saved me from something. He just enjoyed the blood was all. I know that now, in hindsight. But it don't help.

He fell over himself joining up when the war started. Couldn't wait to get there, *kill some Japs*. Didn't matter that I was pregnant.

It was six months after he came back from Changi when he first hit me. Did Changi change Kevin into a monster? I don't think so, I think it was an excuse to strip out of any pretence of being civil, to get stuck into the grog, laze around. It's true, I saw his fingers; made me cringe. I felt for him, I really did, but other blokes went through the war, some of them might've bashed their wives. But they didn't take an axe to their own kids.

Maybe I did deserve that first hit, I don't know, I was trying to pull him out of his depression and laziness, see if he still loved me I think. If I could get him to fix the house then maybe he still loved me. *You don't care if the bloody house falls down*, I told him, I said it over and over hoping he would get up and show he still loved me.

I know now he never did. *Shut your fucking mouth*, he said. He'd never swore at me before and in my gut I knew that was the beginning of the end. But even as I watched the colour changing in his face, saw his hand clench into a fist, I didn't think he'd do it - hit his own wife, Jesus. So I kept on at him; I had to know how low we'd gone. So maybe I deserved

it. As I lay there bleeding from the mouth and curled up to protect myself I called that *bastard* for everything.

He never apologised for it. Not next day, next week, not ever and I knew it was the end of us.

Him killing us was a surprise, it really was. I knew about the shotgun in the cupboard, he'd used it to go shooting and was always strict about keeping it unloaded in the house. He'd been real drunk and ranting like I'd never seen him that night. *I'll kill the fucking lot of you*, but he'd said it before, I never thought he'd go that far, shoot me in the face. Jesus, your own wife. That was one thing, my life was miserable enough, there was only Carmel to miss me when I died. But the kids, he used an axe on his own children. My beautiful little boys. When I heard Ray cry out my name that night and I came into the room, Jesus, I can't explain to you what I saw then, Michael's head opened up like that, Oh God! it's just too much. I wanted to be the Japs then, I wanted to push bamboo shoots into Kevin's eyes. He left the room to get the gun, I knew. But I didn't care, I just wanted to be dead then; needed to be. I curled myself up beside Ray, he was shaking and sobbing and I tucked him into me, *I love you Ray, I love you*, and all I could think as I wrapped myself over him like a cocoon and listened for Kevin's footsteps was how sorry I was I hadn't said it more.

Then there was an explosion and everyone had to let go.

## *Ned's Secret*

As I watch you bathe I swear this thought's unplanned;  
your body – glistening naked as the dust  
and weariness dissolve at waters hand –  
arouses my desire; crude anal lust  
and I blush with shame and guilt as I reflect  
upon the possibility of you  
down on your knees before me, cock erect,  
your warm lips hungry over mine. I know  
that your need craves the curve of softer flesh,  
the hardening of Kate's nipple on your tongue,  
but I was early dragged to male caress;  
fucked by Pentridge lags when I was young.

I dare not ask what my mind contemplates;  
bend over Joe, can we be more than mates?

## *Appearances*

Her hot water unit began to leak  
three months before she died.  
She wore a wig then,  
the only outward show and  
hard to detect unless you knew her well –  
a small concession to chemo's wrath.  
Her smile was, when I think of it now,  
polite and far too quickly gone.  
I took for tiredness the stage-one  
hollow sinking of her eyes.  
But otherwise she looked the same;  
a little thin perhaps, a whispered grey  
about her face, but after all  
it's not a sentence, just a word...

At first the small brown drops,  
you could not feel unless you reached right in,  
put out the pilot flame.  
Her husband then relit the spark,  
but lost it as the dripping fluid  
cursed it with a hiss of steam.  
And because the damned thing  
still looked good as new,  
he tried relighting it a dozen times or more  
before its straining innards ruptured  
dark-brown, septic over winter lawn.

He shook his head and gave it over  
to the tradesman's disconnection then;  
the blocking off of felt-lagged copper  
veins that drooped and gurgled  
on the concrete path.

An anguished month went by for her.  
And the dead hot water unit, having  
lost its proper purchase on the world;  
- no more able to cascade  
the warmth of cleansing fluid  
over cold and sullied flesh -  
was taken to the local dump,  
where wanting some reprieve it gleams  
incongruously against the old dead junk.

And three weeks later *she* is taken off  
and leaves, a load of dishes in the sink,  
a blouse, the one he loved her in,  
to billow out upon the line, she leaves  
him with the child of six, perplexed...  
They shake their heads, her memory;  
a cold fluidity of acid over flesh,  
and still so fresh it begs  
a reconstruction as it waits  
with incongruity, among the old dead bones.