

# **Doctor of Philosophy**

## **Hyperrealism and The Everyday in Creative Practice: Exegesis, Play, Novel.**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this exegesis, play and novel is to develop a practice-led poetics of everyday theatre and literature. This emerged from a research question about the way the everyday is constituted within my own practice and within contemporary theatre in Melbourne and overseas.

The major component of the exegesis is to analyse my development as a writer and dramaturg of performance texts with Ranters Theatre over a twenty-two-year period, covering three phases of work, each of which engage everydayness as part of its methodology. A key focus is text dramaturgy, how the text is constructed, critiqued and dramaturged in order to create a finished performance text or novel. Comparison is drawn with other contemporary theatre practitioners in Melbourne and overseas that also engage the everyday as a central component of their *raison d'être*.

The exegesis also analyses the processes in which my plays/texts are enacted in order to facilitate live interaction, and their methods of representation in relation to the audience. The application of everyday aesthetics within narrative and dramaturgical structures provides the performers with a platform to focus on the moment-to-moment minutiae of actions that take place between them. In the theatre of the everyday that I describe the audience are invited into the same conceptual space and time as the performers, one that sits in the blurred lines between the fictive and the real. The narrative frame is partly supplied and defined by the audience in a way that elicits and intensifies a need for the performance of the text to take place.

In the section 'The Everyday and the Novel' I investigate how the everyday is presented in the novel, referencing its relationship to performance creation and the development of hyperrealism in situation and dialogue. I also investigate how the

creation of the novel might inform the development of my performance texts and their analysis as a way of developing future pathways for text creation.

In ‘The Everyday – Methods’ I analyse the way my observations and recording of everyday human actions in specific environments and spaces within Melbourne inform a critical part of my methodology for text creation. The complex, meticulous manifestations of human ‘action’ and language that I observed in the everyday environment have profoundly shifted and affected my practice during the period of my PhD research.

The exegesis represents approximately 40% of my total work as a Thesis by Creative Project.

‘The Fear of Being Watched’ entails an assemblage of verbatim conversations and observed behaviour alongside invented dialogue and monologues, which serve as a comparison. The novel, entitled ‘The Dream Life of Butterflies’, is designed as a subjective and contemporary literary expression for the interplay between an imaginary peripateticism and actual observations of everyday life. The play and novel represent approximately 60% of my total work as a Thesis by Creative Project.

The exegesis, play and novel have enabled me to envisage, contextualise, analyse a practical process for the development and critique for an everyday theatre and literature. The play and novel are designed to offer the reader/audient modes of contemplation, where ordinary, banal, but sometimes extraordinary, occurrences have the potential to reveal a narrative singularity, a point where the forms of storytelling breakdown and unexpected possibilities are realised.

The reading, critiquing and comparison of relevant theory, literature and performance texts, and to a lesser extent, reproduced and original art works, DVDs and sound recordings formed a continuous part of my research. I also observed numerous theatre and dance productions between 2007 and 2012, as well as films, DVDs, art installations, street performance, live art performances, or anything classifiable as organised performance, in order to create my written response pertaining to my research enquiry. I was also able to utilise studios at Victoria University and elsewhere in order to conduct and observe performer improvisations that explored specific situations, dialogues, scenes, circumstances and behavioural impulses.

The exegesis explores the ways in which everyday theatre and dialogue/situation reveals hidden agendas and subtextual content that would otherwise not present itself and remain invisible within the everyday field itself. This same content, recontextualised and manipulated, while suggesting and inspiring new texts and actions, now offers itself as a 'reading' with the potential for profound implications for the viewer.

The Thesis by Creative Project should be read in the following order: Exegesis, 'The Fear of Being Watched', and then 'The Dream Life of Butterflies'.

**Doctor of Philosophy Declaration**

“I, Raimondo Cortese, declare that the PhD thesis entitled Hyperrealism and The Everyday in Creative Practice: Exegesis, Play, Novel is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work”.

Signature

Date

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I would like to express my thanks to my three supervisors, Dr. Mark Minchinton, Dr. Karina Smith and Dr. David Sornig for their highly constructive feed back during the time I spent writing my exegesis, performance text and novel. Their insight, detailed comments and suggestions greatly contributed to the improvement of all aspects of my Thesis. I would also like to thank Victoria University, and the staff at the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development, for my scholarship and their continued assistance, which enabled me to complete my research. Lastly, I would like to thank my family for their patience, especially my partner Beth Buchanan for her generous support and encouragement, and her wonderful skill as a proofreader.

## List of Publications and Awards

### PUBLICATIONS

#### Novels & Short Stories

*The Indestructible Corpse, A Collection of Fantastical Stories*, 1998, Text Publishing, Melbourne.

‘The Immolating Nun’, in *Penguin Australian Summer Stories*, 1999, Penguin, Ringwood.

‘The Preacher in the Tower’, in *The Penguin Century of Australian Stories*, 2000, (ed. Carmel Bird), Penguin, Ringwood.

#### Published Playscripts

*Inconsolable*, 1997, in *The La Mama Collection: Six Plays for the 1990s* (ed. Liz Jones), Currency Press, Sydney.

*The Room*, in *Picador New Writing 4*, 1997, (ed. Beth Yahp & Nicholas Jose) Pan Macmillan Australia, Chippendale.

*Features of Blown Youth*, in *Melbourne Stories*, 2000, (Andrew Bovell, B. Bradley, et al.), Currency Press, Sydney.

*St Kilda Tales*, 2001, Currency Press, Sydney.

*Roulette: 12 Dialogues*, 2005, Currency Press, Sydney.

*Holiday*, 2009, Currency Press, Sydney.

*Buried City*, 2012, Currency Press, Sydney.

### AWARDS

1<sup>st</sup> prize Age Young Writers Short Story Competition for *A Story Written Backwards in the Sand, The Age*, 1993.

1994 Green Room Nomination for Best Australian Writing - *Lucrezia and Cesare*.

1995 Green Room Nomination for Best Australian Writing – *The Room*.

1998 *Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Novelists, for *The Indestructible Corpse*.

2007 Green Room Award – *Holiday* – Best New Australian Writing.

ADC 2010 Australian Leadership Award.

2010 Green Room Nomination for Best Writing for the Melbourne Stage – *Intimacy*.

The Inaugural Patrick White Playwright’s Fellowship – Sydney Theatre Co 2011

2011 Victorian Premier’s Literary Award nomination for *Intimacy*.

Awgie Award for Community and Youth Theatre for *Yet to Ascertain the Nature of the Crime*, 2011

## **GRANTS & FELLOWSHIPS**

Arts Victoria, New Work Grant, Writing for Performance, 1994

Australia Council, Literature Board New Work Grant, Writing for Performance, 1994

Australia Council, Literature Board New Work Grant, Writing for Performance, 1995

Arts Victoria, New Work Grant, Writing for Performance, 1997

Ian Potter Travel Grant, Germany, Czech Republic, Denmark, 1999

Arts Victoria, New Work Grant, Writing for Performance, 2000

Dame Elizabeth Murdoch Travel Fellowship, Portugal, Spain, France, UK, Slovenia, Croatia, 2001

Australia Council, Literature Board New Work Grant, Writing for Performance, 2001

Arts Victoria, New Work Grant, Writing for Performance, 2004

Churchill Fellowship, ‘To Study Methodologies for Conducting Dialogue & Improvisation Workshops’ Berlin, Paris, Porto, London, New York, 2005

Australia Council, Literature Board New Work Grant, Writing for Performance, 2005

Australia Council, Literature Board New Work Grant, Writing for Performance, 2009

Arts Victoria, New Work Grant, Writing for Performance, 2012

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## 1 - Introduction

As a professional writer since the early nineties, I have written, dramaturged and developed over forty texts for theatre or performance. My plays/texts have been performed widely in Australia and in over a dozen countries (in English and in translation), in both main stage and fringe contexts. In 1992, I founded Ranters Theatre (initially called Potlatch), along with other graduates of the VCA School of Drama; it is this company that has produced the majority of my texts, and with whom I have shared an ongoing exploration of the practice of everyday and hyperreal aesthetics and processes in relation to writing and theatrical production.

Each of Ranters' productions has undergone a rigorous development period where the text and the action were continually refined. The company does not view the performance as an end in itself but rather as a continuation of the developmental process with the inclusion of an audience. Since the company's inception, there has been a clear commitment to producing contemporary theatre, initially within an urban setting, that focuses on stripping away the artifice of acting/performing in order to release unconscious human behaviour in the actor. Our performances set up strategies and mechanisms in order to reveal unmediated behaviour; the text becomes a prime mover of unconscious actions.

The performance texts I write for Ranters are required to complement the company's acting process; they are pared-back and raw, with an improvisational tenor that approximates everyday speech. My early texts, such as my twelve *Roulette* plays, or *Features of Blown Youth*, are early examples of hyperrealist theatre, and constructed around an agenda that engages an everyday aesthetic. My work over the past twenty-two

years has evolved towards refining and synthesising this aesthetic. With each new production, the text and performances have challenged stage conventions or performance codes, such as character development, plot, conflict, representation (temporal/spatial/persona), mise-en-scene, dramatic trajectory and theatrical language (i.e. metaphor, theme, narrative, history) among others. While conventions such as written characterisation within representational settings, minimal plot lines, subtle though distinct elements of conflict, are present at a minimal level in my earlier work, they have been eliminated entirely from latter works, such as *Affection*, *Holiday* and *Intimacy*. The texts I write for Ranters have always eschewed narration, the text's content (as action) is revealed through the engagement of actors, but a process of refinement and evolution is clearly discernible when comparing earlier texts with later ones. My plays/texts require the audience to commit themselves to defining/reading the action for themselves.

The objective of this development in my writing is to encapsulate a more effective and rigorous commitment to engaging the everyday in order to enable the production of hyperrealist theatre. The rationale behind this strategy is clear; I shared a desire, along with other Ranters members, to reject the prevailing theatre aesthetics; a dominant manifestation of theatre that was beset with nostalgia and a reverential attitude to stage conventions, which, in my view, undermined the theatre's potential for immediacy and 'liveness'. I wanted to write theatre texts that embodied language as an experiential engagement, one that emphasised the audience's imaginary involvement. A text that embodies everyday theatre utilises the multiple verbal discourses that present themselves within daily life: the banal, the ordinary, the vital, the fantastic all bound up to create a complex but fragmented textual entity. The languages of everyday existence, while

lacking a narrative epicentre, possess a rawness and vitality that transforms into theatrical content via their enunciation in the present by an actor/performer.

The work of Alan Read had been significant in analysing a spontaneous and everyday theatre aesthetic that defines itself in relationship to people and sites, rather than idealised or utopian models. According to Read, ‘the everyday relies on a “saying” rather than a “said”’ (1993, 95). Rather than employ formal structures to assert a particular narrative supremacy over content and form, a text for everyday theatre enables the active engagement of the performer/actor to assert, offer, share speech acts in the present, as a creative fluid act that embraces ‘liveness.’ As Read further elucidates: “The ‘said’ of theatre exists in its repetition and reproduction; the ‘saying’ in its improvisation and innovation” (1993, 95).

My aim in writing the exegesis, play and novel that constitute this thesis is to develop a practice-led poetics of everyday theatre and literature. This emerged from a research question about the way the everyday is constituted within my own practice and within contemporary theatre in Melbourne and overseas.

My work with hyperrealism and everyday theatre began in the early nineties. This places my theatre texts and Ranters’ work at the forefront of the development of hyperrealism in world theatre, alongside companies such as Oriza Hirata’s Seinendan<sup>1</sup> Richard Maxwell’s New York City Players<sup>2</sup>, and Pan Pan<sup>3</sup>. In recognition of this, and the quality of our productions, Ranters are regularly invited to prestigious international festivals and venues (performed in over a dozen countries), such as Noorderzon Festival,

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<sup>1</sup> Formed in Tokyo in 1983 by Oriza Hirata, who defined their theatrical aesthetic as ‘Quiet Theatre’.

<sup>2</sup> Founded in New York City in 1996 by Richard Maxwell, the company is a seminal example of hyperrealist theatre and has toured to over sixteen countries.

<sup>3</sup> Founded by Gavin Quinn and Aedin Cosgrove in 1992, the company is devoted to exploring new performance ideas.

Groningen (twice), The Project Arts Centre, Dublin (twice), Culturegest, Lisbon (twice), the 1999 Theater Der Welt Festival, Berlin, PS122, New York, and recently, Theaterformen, Braunschweig, among many others. My work has premiered in six Melbourne International Arts Festivals, two Adelaide International Arts Festivals, two Sydney International Arts Festivals, as well as the Centenary of Federation Festival in 2001, and numerous professional main stage contexts, such as MTC, Malthouse/Playbox, Arts House, The Arts Centre, STC, Belvoir St, Griffin Theatre and the Performance Space. Most recently I have been invited to the PEN World Voices Festival as a playwright. Under the directorship of Salman Rushdie, the festival has long been regarded as one of the world's key literary festivals, with numerous Nobel laureates attending. I believe this recognition is evidence that my practice and methodology of text and performance creation with Ranters is worthy of analysis.

A major component of this exegesis will be to account for my development as a writer and dramaturg of performance texts with Ranters Theatre over a twenty-two year period, covering three phases of work, each of which engage everydayness as part of its methodology. A key focus is text dramaturgy: how the text is constructed, critiqued and dramaturged in order to create a finished performance text or novel. How do my observations and recording of everyday human actions, correlate with the production of the performance text (designed to be enacted) and the novel (designed to be read)?

I have categorised the development of my theatre practice under three categories: 'Intimate Hyperrealism' (includes texts of *Features of Blown Youth*, *The Large Breast or the Upside-Down Bell*, through to my *Roulette* plays); 'Epic Hyperrealism' (includes *St*

*Kilda Tales* and *The Wall*); and ‘Neo-Hyperrealism’ (includes *Holiday*, *Affection*, and *Intimacy*).

I aim to examine these phases of development under the following headings/questions:

Text dramaturgy: What is my methodology for text creation?

Narrative, story and dramatic action: How is the text constituted?

Rehearsal and development process: How is the text enacted?

Representation and Audience relationship: How do audiences read the text in performance?

In the section entitled ‘The Everyday and the Novel’, I will investigate the following sub-question:

How is the everyday presented in the novel, referencing its relationship to performance creation and the development of theatre texts?

In this section I will examine the application of language and form in the playtext and novel, including ways in which my observation, analysis and application of the everyday in life and theatre/performance has affected novel creation, especially in relationship to developing a sense of hyperrealism in situation and dialogue. On the other hand, I will also be investigating how the creation of the novel might inform the development of my performance texts and their analysis as a way of developing future pathways for text creation.

My exegesis will also draw on the work of other practitioners in Australia and overseas who similarly utilise the everyday as a core part of their *raison d’être*. Since the early nineties, a number of practitioners have emerged that incorporate everydayness and

informal presentational theatrical styles into their work, including hyperrealist performance techniques, both in theatres, and in site-specific environments. Between March 2007 and September 2012, I observed numerous theatre and dance productions, as well as films, DVDs, art installations, street performance, live art performances, or anything classifiable as organised performance, in order to create my written response pertaining to my research question. By engaging the work of these companies and practitioners, I aim to critique the methodology, outcomes, challenges, successes or failures evident in this type of practice in relation to my own.

The reading, critiquing and comparison of relevant theory, literature and performance texts, and to a lesser extent, reproduced and original art works, DVDs and sound recordings formed a continuous part of my practice-led research. I was particularly interested in comparing the way everyday theatre, dialogic text and narrative in theatre and the novel has been theorised and narrated with my own peripatetic observations and practice as a writer. I did not attempt to identify any kind of social pathology, or veer into the arena of social science or psychological analysis.

While everydayness might now be considered *de rigueur* in the contemporary theatrical festival environment, it hasn't come about overnight. The development of my own concept and practice of everyday theatre has been a gradual process of altering the relationship between performer and audience, much of it informed by my exposure to canonical texts and theoretical discourse of other practitioners. The innovations of the nineteenth century naturalistic drama brought about by Chekhov were a marked influence. Brecht's notion of the *Verfremdungseffekt* has also had a significant impact on my practice, as have my readings of Grotowski, whose desire to 'study what is hidden

behind our everyday mask... in order to sacrifice it, expose it' (1968, 37), corresponds to my aims for everyday theatre, with its emphasis on hidden, unconscious behaviour.

Alongside the development of everyday theatre (including postdramatic theatre in general) and its formal repercussions, a critical discourse emerged around role-playing in public, espoused by sociologists such as Erving Goffman in the fifties and sixties, as well as a number of philosophers, such as Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre. De Certeau's book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, has been drawn on in my analysis as a way of elucidating the everyday as a site for multiple texts and performative actions, which de Certeau describes as the 'microbe-like, singular and plural practices, which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress' (1984, 96). It is these unlimited 'enunciatory operations' (de Certeau 1984, 99), in defiance of organisational (and thus theatrical) structures, which form the basis of my observations underpinning my methodology for text creation.

My practice has been influenced by various Situationist exponents, such as Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem and Constant, who have theorised on the everyday as a field of performance. Constant's research into dynamic space, which 'leads to constantly changing behavioural patterns' (1998, 275) has been an inspiration for the design of the non-representational setting for many of my plays. My methodology for sourcing material has been informed by Debord's notion of the *derive*, where the spectator, rather like a Baudelairean *flaneur*, engages in wandering about the everyday environment as a 'mapping of the psychogeographical areas and ambience of the streets' (Read 1993, 117). Recent theorists, such as Alan Read, Sarah Gorman and Noelia Ruiz, provide a critical focus on everydayness in theatre, which I have also utilised in my research to expound on

the ways the text of the everyday offers fragments, multiple trajectories, and ‘seemingly random configurations making the viewer responsible for the production’s dramaturgy’ (Crawley 2010, 23). For Read theatre is a process of ‘giving everything, of not keeping anything for oneself’ (1993, 95). The everyday offers immeasurable minutiae of verbal and physical acts that can revolutionise the way theatre is constituted; traditional performative codes and structures can be dissolved and re-bound together in a multifarious, inter-relational matrix. This new everyday theatre ‘resides in the micro-gestures of society, not in its flamboyant theatrical expressions concretised as the discourse of theatre’ (Read 1993, 95).

I have also included my reflections on Peter Eckersall and Eddie Patterson’s article, *Slow Dramaturgies* as this offers a comprehensive analysis of what the authors view as a call for an ‘apparent new aesthetic sensibility of slow time’ (2011, 1). While the authors have constructed their arguments in relation to my text *Holiday* among others, their analysis is also pertinent to my earlier texts with *Ranters*, which from the very start involved a removal of dramatic action and a repositioning of the dramatic frame away from grand narratives and fast paced action towards an engagement with silence and ordinary, everyday activities.

Hans-Thies Lehmann’s analysis in his seminal book, *Postdramatic Theatre*, has been drawn on to elucidate developments in performance aesthetics and practice since the emergence of new technologies in the 1970’s. Lehmann’s work is of particular relevance to contemporary performance dramaturgy.

The theories of Philip Auslander, in particular his investigation of the concept of ‘liveness’, have also been researched to offer a contrast to Peggy Phelan’s assertion of the

primacy of ‘live’ theatre as opposed to ‘mediatised’ performance as evinced by digital productions. Enhancing the element of ‘liveness’ is a critical aspect of my practice and methodology.

In the ‘The Everyday – Methods’ section, I will demonstrate how my subjective observations and recordings of everyday human interaction within sites in Melbourne, are utilised in the dramaturgy of my performance texts, as well as the narrative content of ‘The Dream Life of Butterflies’. A constant challenge was to discover how the aesthetics of everyday theatre has continued to evolve in my methodology and how it might offer new challenges for the future.

In making my observations, I focused on two central questions: How do observations of the everyday inform my own practice and methodology of text and performance creation?

My response to this was augmented by the following: How might a constructed theatrical environment with an audience, or the context of a novel, suit my agenda to amplify or reveal what I claim to be hidden to a casual observer of the everyday.

My observations were based on visits to environments that were mainly pre-planned, as I wished to describe a variety of different contexts, in order to vary and observe the effects of space on the way people behave, such as inside lifts, offices, playgrounds, libraries etcetera. I visited some spaces at random, when interesting opportunities arose, and also as a way of inserting an increased element of surprise into my analysis. I viewed each site as a theatre of human interaction, as it correlated with my aim to record or gather material that I considered useful *as* performance. In other words, the interactions and behaviours I observed became theatrical by virtue of the fact that I

framed them as such. In this respect, I discovered that my subjective experience of viewing everyday life assisted the way I framed the narrative while observing constructed performance in a theatre.

I was also able to utilise studios at Victoria University and elsewhere in order to conduct and observe performer improvisations that explored specific situations, dialogues, scenes, circumstances and behavioural impulses. Some were invented, while others were based on examples witnessed during my urban wanderings. These improvisations were used to refine, alter, re-contextualise existing texts, or create new texts, in order to discover new content and possibilities that were not otherwise visible to me. The employment of actions, or unconscious performative behaviour, significantly altered the significance of the texts from their observed impact in the everyday. Sometimes I kept the text mostly intact; on other occasions I rewrote the text entirely, while imbuing it with a sense of ‘everydayness’. This latter decision was made when I discovered content that I believed was more revealing, or disrupted my expectations. I viewed the space non-representationally, as an actual studio space rather than an imaginary, representational environment, in order to focus firmly on the intuitive and instinctive interactions of the performers I worked with. Discussions with the performers also shed light on the reason why particular choices were made, what reactions they observed in each other and what they believed they were doing and saying. These improvisations also assisted in illuminating possibilities for the creation of play texts, and dialogues and behaviour for the novel, as well as discovering and testing ideas and performance methodologies that correspond to my exegesis.

Alongside my exegesis, I have written two discrete creative works; a novel, as well as a dialogue based performance text that combines original writing with verbatim interactions observed and recorded within Melbourne

The novel, ‘The Dream Life of Butterflies’, represents a contemporary, subjective narration based on observed and imagined interactions between various characters within specific sites in Melbourne as explored in my methods section. I explored how the city of Melbourne, more than just a background, suggested situations and occurrences that influenced and instigated events, how the city itself ‘multiplies lines of flight, intensities, and deterritorializations’ (Read 1993, 147). Much of my initial writing was based on my notes recording everyday life, or from an imaginary response to actual observed occurrences and places.

The aim of the novel is to discover a subjective and contemporary literary expression for the interplay between an imaginary peripateticism and actual urban wandering, while comparing the way in which novelistic writing uses language to describe events, as opposed to a performative text that aims to enact them. I intended to write a novel that assisted me, in a process of literary reflection, to discover the existence or otherwise of a performative consciousness that impressed itself on occurrences, interactions, friendships and intimacies between people, and to discover how novel writing might inform the development of a performance text.

In addition to the novel and exegesis, I have written a discrete work titled ‘The Fear of Being Watched’, based on original texts and verbatim conversations between real people within Melbourne. A number of recent playwrights (Pinter, Fornes, Beckett, Shepard, Handke, Strauss et al) have created dialogue forged outside a conventional

theatre matrix. Peter Handke's play *Ride Across Lake Constance*, for example, was written while observing tourists in St Mark's Square, Venice. Everyday occurrences offer dialogues, situations and actions that flow from reactive, spontaneous behaviour in a way that belies formal composition, yet can have dramatic intensity as well as a semblance of a narrative trajectory. My own work entailed a dialogic assemblage of everyday incidents, happenings and behaviour concerned primarily with intimate relationships or connection. My invented dialogue and monologues were designed as a comparison, and serve to place the verbatim dialogues into relief.

The 'The Fear of Being Watched' is non-representational. The key question the project addresses is: How might a series of recorded conversations, such as the performance text, inform the production of a text or performance?

Although designed as discrete works, 'The Dream Life of Butterflies' and the 'The Fear of Being Watched' have informed my exegesis, as well as each other, enabling me to envisage, contextualise and develop a practical process for the development of everyday theatre and literature.

## **2 - The Genesis of Ranters Theatre: Why did I begin my practice as a theatre writer/maker?**

A question that is commonly asked of theatre makers, often by peers and collaborators, is: why do you do it? The assumption is that theatre cannot possibly compete with what is available in digital media, at least in most countries. Easy access to the Internet, TV or DVDs, has made live performance, if not irrelevant, at least economically unviable.

When one considers this economy in relation to the film or TV industry, we refer not so much to the human labour involved or even the means of production utilised to create a traditional theatre event, but rather its dissemination. Theatre is generally far more economical and less labour intensive than making an hour length television drama or a feature film. The key advantage of theatre is that it is accessible, can cost very little in material terms. Yes, there are venues to furnish, maintain and hire, rehearsals spaces to organise, people to contract at award rates or in co-op arrangements, marketing and ticketing and so on, but the reality is theatre can be done cheaply, quickly, and can be readily mobilised for touring. Its user-friendliness is precisely what makes it attractive to artists. More money requires more compromise.

So why does this question of theatre's so-called unviability persist? Is it because the malaise of corporatized language has infiltrated and poisoned our cultural lexicon, requiring us to justify arts subsidies accrued from government agencies and therefore taxes? Is it even possible to measure the success or health of cultural activities such as theatre? A recent study on cultural consumption, defined by ticket sales, suggested that we are consuming more art in Australia than ever before (Potts/MacDonald 2011, 15). But

ticket sales cannot measure the influences and affects exerted by a particular theatre event on culture more generally, or specifically on the minds of those who witness it.

The question concerning theatre's economic viability is rarely posited around methods of production, but rather its distribution as an end product. A live event cannot be so readily downloaded from the Internet or packaged and put in the post like a DVD (which is not to say a theatre event can't take place over the internet, or be digitally recorded). More efficient economies of performance, such as television, can garner a mass audience share in ways that theatre simply cannot. They also offer far more lucrative rewards to artists. A mass market also offers fame; it can satisfy a narcissistic need for recognition that many artists crave, and can grossly exaggerate their cultural significance. If more people know about the work of a particular artist, it therefore must be better than something that floats about in obscurity. Would we hold up those standards for literature? Many modernist masterpieces such as *Ulysses*, *The Man without Qualities*, and *In Search of Lost Time* cannot be ruled out as irrelevant simply because they were printed in a limited first edition. Theatre of course differs from books in that it is generally produced for a short season, never to be seen again (Brook 1980, 142).

Theatre defies ready commodification. Its ephemerality, its lack of materiality, challenges our understanding of the way consumption occurs. As Peggy Phelan puts it, '[P]erformance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital' (1993, 148). How do we place a monetary value on it? You might say, 'I had a fun night,' and therefore you got your money's worth. Or perhaps, it was seven hours long and 'bored me shitless,' and so you might feel ripped off. In theatre, there is no reproducible product to be exchanged. The reception of the theatrical event cannot be

separated from what is performed. The theatrical event is a live exchange between people, and this exchange is not quantifiable or easily defined; it is fundamental to the nature of theatre (Read 1993, 61). The fact that theatre and performance denies ready commodification and reproduction accentuates its authority and endurance. ‘Performance’s independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically, is its greatest strength’ (Phelan 1993, 149).

Auslander, on the other hand, disputes that theatre or performance can remain outside the economies of western consumption. ‘It is unrealistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or operates in a cultural economy separate from that of mass media’ (1993, 40). While I agree with Auslander that performance and theatre must exist and be affected by the dominant economy of exchange value, there are variations in how different forms of theatre/performance play their role within this economy; there are others, such as the work of Augusto Boal, that actively challenge it through a desire to reveal the social mechanism at play through theatrical production; ‘it becomes necessary to utilize certain techniques which allow the spectator... to see the social needs... to see the character’s alienation...’ (Boal 1979, 191). Theatre, like all art forms, can be driven by ideals that attempt to critique or subvert the economic and socio-political context that give birth to it.

An important question to ask is: who decides what constitutes a theatre event in the first place? Are we talking about, at one extreme, a performance that takes place in a recognised theatre venue, or a kind of theatre that takes place in the context of any social interaction between one person and another, or an object (Read 1993, 133)? Does the interaction in this latter instance need to be witnessed, in order for it to be theatre? Can

theatre come into being, not through conscious creation, but rather as an occurrence within the ‘psychopathology of everyday life’ (Blau 1982, 7)?

Theatre can be defined in a narrow way i.e. as a live performance within a theatre venue, or broadly to the extent that it includes the entire scope of human activity, even including the observation of the natural or molecular world. Theatre can be a state of being. It is capable of synthesising any art form, moulding itself to radically new environments, altering form and content in a way that obliterates all previously recognised theatrical signifiers, and still call itself theatre. It is this extraordinary flexibility that helps it to endure. This flexibility is given its full range of expression because theatre cannot be separated from the way we live. Theatre is an exchange that is live. Theatre is actual; it exists between people, or at least between a person and a thing (Brook 1993, 8).

It is theatre’s ‘liveness’ that makes it such a powerful form of expression. No matter how brutal the historical attempts to suppress theatre, it always endures. There are many famous examples of theatre practitioners that have been tortured and/or executed over the centuries, from playwrights such as Antonio José de Silva, who was burned at the stake; Thomas Kyd, tortured as a heretic; Vsevolod Meyerhold, murdered by Stalin’s henchmen (Braun 1979, 269); to individuals and organisations that continue to make theatre despite immense obstacles, including political suppression, as in the case of Eritrean playwright and journalist Dawit Isaak, who has been in jail for the past ten years (Amnesty Report 2001).

Theatre can be highly flexible and mobile, making it difficult to control, or pass more easily under the radar of military dictatorships. Under communism theatre makers and artists would create works in the intimate environs of people’s homes to avoid detection by

the secret police. The work of installation artist Ilya Kabakov, particularly in his utopian project, *The House of Dreams*, at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2005, illustrates the levels of surveillance under which artists had to work during the years of the Soviet Union and the strategies employed in order to keep their work free of official scrutiny.

Artists functioned through fantasizing about the world that lay outside of Soviet boundaries and influence. Implicit within this context were attempts to envision interpretations of this internal world from the outside. This required the artist to occupy two simultaneous positions: An artist had to be both observer and object. (Kabakov, 2005)

A similar situation occurred during the Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s and '80s; theatre practitioners managed to use techniques of counter censorship in order to disguise their work's political content, often called 'metaphorizing reality' (Graham-Jones 2000, 28). The theatres became places where dissent towards the authoritarian regimes became possible providing the signs of rebellion were not overt or directly challenging, which ironically caused the theatre to proliferate. Repression inadvertently nurtured theatrical culture by creating a need for it (Graham-Jones 2000, 28).

In the western democracies, while theatre practitioners do not have to contend with political restrictions, there is an overwhelming sense that theatre has become irrelevant, that it is being smothered under the formidable weight of mass media (Read 1993, 6). From mobile phone apps and Internet games, to pay TV, it seems we are being increasingly assailed by technologies that separate us from each other. While this is perhaps true, it also nurtures a need for a different type of theatre, where the enemy, or the

repressing agent, is not so tangible. Perhaps our need for theatre, in all its infinite forms, will also proliferate under these conditions, providing it adapts itself to its new circumstances. The basic need of people to engage with one another, to share our humanity without the apparel of social conformity, ‘to tear away the masks behind which we hide daily’, is perhaps more compelling than ever before (Grotowski 1975, 212).

Theatre has always evolved within the culture from which it arises, it ‘is learned by osmosis since early childhood’ (Turner 1982, 105), though sometimes when it looks back and studies itself there is a tendency to want to prop itself up, to be seduced by its own cultural edifices instead of focusing on what makes it truly powerful. When all the trappings and conventions are stripped away, all we are left with is a recognition that contact has been made with another person; something is happening between them (Cortese 2005, x).

Theatre unfolds in the present; it occurs in front of an audience, sharing a real space in real time. It engages through the impact of ‘live’ actions/behaviour on an audience. According to Phelan, ‘Performance’s only life is in the present’ (1993, 146). It is this intrinsic relationship that performers and audience share in the present, in the ‘now’ that ultimately gives theatre and performance its vitality and significance and causes it to endure. As a ‘live’ exchange between people that exists only in the present, theatre attempts to place itself outside the bounds of commodification. Any experience of it cannot be replicated, recorded, or reproduced. As Phelan points out, ‘To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology’ (1993, 146).

Countering this, Auslander argues that the notion of theatre's 'liveness' is overstated, that indeed all performance exists in relationship to the culture of mass media. Rather than exist in an oppositional terms to mediatised cultural production, theatre is in fact dependent upon it (1993, 53). Theatre has merely appropriated existing forms and practices, which have in turn been appropriated by both film, and then television, and presumably the Internet. 'In the economy of repetition, live performance is little more than a vestigial remnant of the previous historical order of representation...' (Auslander 1993, 42).

While I do not disagree with Auslander's general argument presented in his analysis of 'liveness', there are two key points that I query in relation to my practice with Ranters Theatre.

Firstly, Auslander critiques the concept of theatre's 'liveness' in relationship to mediatised performance, but he does not critique it specifically in relationship to contemporary, postdramatic forms of theatre. I agree with Phelan that 'liveness' is essential to all theatre, but I contend that some forms of theatre are *more* live than others. The emergence of Ranters Theatre and its brand of hyperrealism (together with other forms of postdramatic theatre) have come about in reaction to the perceived conventions of theatre practice and production, particularly dominant in mainstage contexts, which have diminished its potential for 'liveness' on the stage. It is my contention that specific forms of contemporary theatre incorporate 'liveness' to a greater or lesser degree than others. Certainly, my methodology for text creation, and Ranters' rehearsal processes, are designed to enhance the 'liveness' of the theatrical exchange between performers and their audience. I do not dispute that 'liveness' can also be achieved in mediatised performance, measured in part by their reception by an audience, or that 'liveness' is dependent on, and

exists in relation to, mediatised or other more prolific forms of cultural production. But there are degrees and types of ‘liveness’. My practice with Ranters Theatre is designed to increase the degree of ‘liveness’, and deliver it in a very particular form.

Secondly, while Auslander contends that theatre and mediatised performance are mutually dependent, he accepts that theatre offers a different experience from what can be achieved elsewhere. ‘It certainly can be the case that live performance engages the senses *differently* (italicised in original) than mediatised representations...’ (Auslander 1993, 55). Auslander does not elaborate on the different ways that live performance engages the senses, but I would take his point further; different types of live performance engage the senses differently. As a theatre practitioner and writer, I aim to attract audiences that are engaged with the particular form of theatre that I create. An audience that responds to the ‘live’ content of a Ranters’ show may not react in the same way to other forms of performance. My work with Ranters offers a particular brand of ‘liveness,’ which is attractive to, and responds to, the particular audience that consistently attend our shows.

In my experience, much of what occurs on the stage is a process of conventional wisdom that has been passed down via the skills base of generations of writers, directors, actors and theatre workers in response to practical questions that arise when working within particular performance contexts, such as a stage. But how do we define the stage itself? Is the stage or performance arena simply one of an infinite series of habitable spaces and environments that impose an awareness of performance simply because it is being watched? As Lefebvre states, ‘Every space is already in place before the appearance in it of actors... space conditions the subject’s presence, action and discourse’ (1991, 57).

Since founding Ranters Theatre in 1992, I have witnessed the emergence of a number of radical theatre companies in Melbourne that have aimed to invigorate performance aesthetics, often by redefining the performers' relationships to their audience. Much of this work evolved the aesthetic investigations that occurred since the 1970s, with companies that emerged from the Pram Factory<sup>4</sup>, such as seminal writer/director Richard Murphet's pioneering and unique work with Nightshift<sup>5</sup>, and companies and artists like Whistling in the Theatre<sup>6</sup> and Jenny Kemp<sup>7</sup> in the '80's.

In the early to mid-'90's, a new wave of independent theatre companies emerged, such as Not Yet It's Difficult<sup>8</sup>, Gilgul Theatre<sup>9</sup> and Ranters. These new companies created their own unique, signature styles of theatre-making in response to very specific aesthetic explorations, oscillate between the fringe and the mainstream. There was a palpable move away from a generalised 'uber' culture towards a kind of theatre that arises specifically out of its own cultural bedrock.

During this period, Australian companies, for the first time, began to receive exposure in international venues and festivals, which has had an impact on their work, encouraging the pursuit of greater experimentation and risk. At the same time, the mainstage companies began to shift and diversify their content. The independent companies began to radicalise in response and create works that increasingly sought to take the theatre into new environments. At the heart of much of this experimentation, was the reinvestigation of the performer-audience relationship. Gilgul's work, such as *The Dybbuk*

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<sup>4</sup> Home of the Australian Performing Group from 1970 to 1981, after which the company disbanded.

<sup>5</sup> A splinter group formed with the APG in the mid-70's, which was responsible for a highly innovative and singular approach to making theatre that had not been seen before in Australia.

<sup>6</sup> A Melbourne-based theatre company, creating experimental, self-devised works, which operated from 1986 until they disbanded in 1994.

<sup>7</sup> A highly innovative and influential theatre-maker, especially with her postdramatic work created since *The Call of the Wild* in 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Founded in 1995 by Artistic Director David Pledger, with a focus on producing postdramatic physical performances that incorporating digital technology.

<sup>9</sup> Founded by Barrie Kosky et al in 1990, premiering *The Dybbuk* in 1991. The company produced five productions, then disbanded in 1997.

and *Es Brent*, was site-specific, premiering in a mechanic's garage in St Kilda. Not Yet It's Difficult often use specific public sites, where the audience are participants, or at least are required to have an active role in the performance, such as *Eavesdrop* and *The Meaning of Moorabbin*. Back to Back<sup>10</sup>, with shows like *Small Metal Objects*, use the everyday environment, in this case a train station, to posit the relationship of audience to performer. The mingling of actors with disabilities, and the public, within the performance, questions the intrinsic theatricality of everyday behaviour.

Ranters generally work within theatres, but the work itself is non-representational, not just in terms of the performance space, but also in terms of the way the actors perform. Ranters' actors play themselves, with full awareness of the audience. The work initially evolved as a reaction to what we perceived were the mainstream processes of theatre making. Rather than engage traditional performance codes, such as complex plots and narratives, larger-than-life characterisation, structured scenes driven by conflict, or mannered styles of performance, our initial productions (such as *Inconsolable*) stripped them away. The company's interest lay in the spontaneous interplay to be found in everyday interaction. We saw theatrical conventions as stymieing the ability of the performer to react spontaneously, in an immediate way, to what was directly in front of them. We wished to break down the theatrical codes that impeded what we perceived as 'liveness' and awareness of the present. The key was to discover a process that enabled us to frame and distil the spontaneous minutiae of the everyday in a theatrical context. That way we might reveal actions/content, the 'mysteries' of everyday life that were not visible in an everyday setting.

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<sup>10</sup> Back to Back Theatre was founded in Geelong in 1987 to create theatre with people who are perceived to have a disability.

My practice with Ranters focuses on the transient, performative relationship between people that leaves no reproducible trace; it attempts to release the mechanisms for unconscious and unmediated behaviour in the performer. My practice rejects conventional methods of theatre where characters as subjects utilise dramatic conflict as a mode of enacting stories within a fictional situation. My productions with Ranters seek to engage the audience through the observation and reflection of encounters/actions with actors 'being themselves'. The work investigates the ontology of presence.

While my practice with Ranters has undergone a clear evolution since our inception as a company, my practice and methodology has always been grounded in a consistent exploration of everydayness. From the initial observations of everyday life, through to the conceptual stages, then development, rehearsal and production, incorporating the everyday into my work has been central to my creative vision.

**Everyday Aesthetics** – The key elements that define everydayness in relation to the text in a play or novel include; narrative composed of or utilising banal, ordinary, fantastic or vital incidents, encounters and events, sites and situations from daily life; language that mirrors or utilises natural speech effects and patterns, such as rhythms, ellipses, non-sequiturs, repetitions, mumblings, sounds, intonations, fragmented, disrupted, unstable or circular narratives, intertextuality, nuance, concatenation, simultaneity, conversational rhythmic structures, diegetic fissures as expressed in daily life; behaviour that describes, or is composed of, actions from daily life, such as random gestures, reactive or spontaneous physical actions, ordinary or banal, or vital activities that do not necessarily have causal logic; narrative and dramaturgy defined by invisible, minimal, asymmetrical,

nonlinear, heterogeneous or random structure; a minimisation, invisibility or absence of story and plot; absence or minimisation of narrative unity or teleology; absence or minimisation of conflict, actions and objectives; avoidance or complex use of characterisation and development of character, hybridised personas, unstable or fluid identities, absence of minimisation of overarching psychology, contradictory motivations, absence of minimisation of character history.

**Everyday Theatre** – The main aspects of everyday theatre include the above, as well as; performative behaviour that corresponds to the complex minutiae daily life; an array of postdramatic structures and aesthetics; the blurring of boundaries between audience and performer; a representational space or spatial design based on everyday life or the use of site specificity, or a non-representational or site specific space or spatial design that uses metonymy rather than metaphor, and encompasses an awareness of audience; a fragmented structure or minimal structure that enables the audience to construct their own dramaturgy.

**Hyperrealist Texts** – The main ingredients of hyperrealist text in theatre and the novel include the qualities described above in everyday aesthetics, but with a particular emphasis on; the realness of the spoken text and behaviour in performance or the novel as it corresponds to daily life; the use of real-time action, or seamless or invisible use of temporal fissures; the absence of formal, or mannered textual content and dramaturgical or narrative structures that might disrupt the realness of the event or narrative content.

### **3 - Text dramaturgy: What is my methodology for text creation?**

The question critical to my own practice as a writer for the theatre is: how do I make a text not sound like a text? In other words, how do you strip away the recognised conventions from theatrical language in order to make the spoken text appear unmediated? In Ranters' version of hyperrealist theatre the most problematic issue in relation to language is that the spoken text is pre-determined. The performers have to discover a process to make it sound and feel spontaneous. The text becomes dynamic in utterance; its effects change in the performers who must engage their instinctive responses to every miniscule alteration in their relationship with each other. According to Joseph Chaikin, an actor should be as 'free as his breathing. And like his breathing, he doesn't cause it to happen' (Herman 1986, 104).

In my own practice, the text serves a physical encounter. It sets up an uneasy and undefined space between people, which prompts spontaneous reactions. The text both encapsulates and engenders an ever-changing interconnection. My writing process begins with observations of the everyday. The everyday allows me to absorb and redefine the multifarious ways language is utilised between people in response to, and as a result of, immediate behavioural mechanisms. Within the everyday, dialogue between people is generated by unconscious actions, from deep-seated, often unknown and indeterminate, objectives that prompt and manifest themselves as conversation. As Lefebvre states, '[p]rior to knowledge and beyond it, are the body and the actions of the body' (1991, 135). In the everyday encounter, as with my practice in hyperrealist theatre, language begins with the body (Grotowski 1975, 56). The physical relationship impresses its myriad qualities upon the text. Recorded text from the everyday has a multi-layered structure that

both resonates with the contextual surround that gave birth to it and also suggests possibilities for new ones. The everyday as a field contains multiple domains of performance, both quotidian and extraordinary. As Lefebvre states, ‘Are not the surreal, the extraordinary, the surprising, even the magical also part of the everyday?’ (Cited in Read 1993, 127).

Before I begin a hyperrealist writing project, I wander through the city of Melbourne (or any city), making copious notes of the conversations, encounters, and happenings between people. The aim is to observe and record the relationship between the spoken discourse and the physical responses of the body when two or more people are conversing with each other. The sites I observe are mostly, but not always, where people are engaged in a relaxed state, as this corresponds to my aesthetic interest in stripping away dramatic content.

My interest in wandering has been partly informed by my reading of theoretical texts. Since the 60’s wandering has become a motif for much contemporary theory, reflecting an ambition to realise theoretical discourse within the everyday. Lefebvre’s notion of the ‘urban tissue’, the ceaseless city that is both real and psychological, encouraging the nomadic interplay of diverse societies was pivotal in bridging modernist subjectivity with the post-modern articulation of space and environment as a multiple narrative in itself (Lefebvre 1991, 99). Certeau described a critique of walking, endowing pedestrian movement with a legibility analogous to a series of speech acts; a decipherable score that functions as an ‘appropriation of space’, ‘spatial acting-out of place’, and ‘relations to differentiated positions’ (1988, 97).

Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of the nomad as a 'vector of deterritorialisation' offers parallels to unrestrained, urban wandering (1986, 53). Debord insisted that the wanderer should not passively walk by, but actively engage and provoke activities wherever possible. The Situationist *dérive* was employed to maximise sensory experiences that fulfil our childlike desire for adventure and exploration. The modern city should assert 'games of rendezvous that would provoke situations, encounters in unfamiliar places' (Debord cited in Sadler 1998, 94). Debord claimed that this would then create the conditions for people to be aware of their 'behavioural disorientation and alert people to their imprisonment by routine' (Debord cited in Sadler 1998, 94). This emphasis on an active role for the artist suggests a view of everyday sites as a theatrical field.

The Situationist writings contain echoes of Artaud, whose opiated visions might have accommodated their panegyrics to urban wandering. 'If our lives lack fire and fervour, that is to say continual magic, that is because we observe our actions, losing ourselves in meditation on their imagined form, instead of being motivated by them' (Artaud 1974, 2). Although Artaud offers no precise methodology for text creation, his writing affirms a desire to embrace physical imperatives at the expense of literary plenitudes. The audience are being asked to engage life. In the brand of hyperrealist theatre I pursue with Ranters, the theatrical site is a concrete space shared with the audience; the audience are part of the action.

Futurist and Dadaist artists were also important in introducing me to the everyday, as evinced by their assimilation of spontaneity into their practice, and their ability to formulate a theoretical rationale for their endeavours (Kirby 1971, 41). Surrealism was an influence too, with its attempt to sublimate desire through artistic activities by pivoting our

fantasies on the plane of everyday reality, allowing our momentary impressions to gain access to a dream world. It sees life as a junkyard of raw materials with which to manufacture and concretise our secret and perverse trials (Breton 1969, 27).

It is my contention that we are at a point where theories of the everyday and theatre practice have converged in much contemporary theatre, particularly in the work of companies like Richard Maxwell's New York City Players, Philippe Quesne's Vivarium Studios<sup>11</sup>, Pan Pan, Back to Back Theatre Company, Tamara Saulwick<sup>12</sup>, Rimini Protokol<sup>13</sup>, Oriza Hirata's Orizu's Seinendan among many others. The practice of everyday theatre has also seen a corresponding rise in theoretical analysis of its methodology and practice, the most notable being by writers such as Peter Crawley, Sarah Gorman, Noelia Ruiz, Sodja Lotker and Christiane Kuhl, and the seminal article *Slow Dramaturgies* by Peter Eckersall and Eddie Patterson, which provides analysis of many of the practitioners cited above, as well as *Reality Hunger*, by David Shields. Everydayness is now firmly infiltrating itself in the vocabulary of staged performance and theory. We are witnessing a growth in performances that 'seek to achieve realness as opposed to rehearsed repetition' (Ruiz 2010, 129).

My recordings of text, such as those that occur in 'The Fear of Being Watched', do not literally convey the content of the action, i.e. the impact of a physical encounter; the way people affect change upon each other. Rather speech in the everyday captures a resonance of the dramatic surround, a verbal essence that gives expression to the physical impact yet defies our ability to encode or describe it. As de Certeau describes, languages of the city are like a '*forest of gestures*', whose 'movements cannot be captured in a picture

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<sup>11</sup> Formed in Paris by Philippe Quesne in 2002, the company is prime example of new form hyperrealist theatre.

<sup>12</sup> Melbourne based theatre maker, her work engages everydayness both in conventional theatre spaces and in public sites.

<sup>13</sup> Founded in Berlin in 2000, the company specialises in verbatim theatre utilizing non-actors in performance.

nor... circumscribed in a text' (1984, 102). Language in the everyday offers a break with narrative forms; it provides the nexus to instil a process of physical response in the performer as it corresponds to minutiae of dynamic forces that come into being when people encounter each other. The text manages to encapsulate these microscopic, and at times physically overwhelming, permutations that ripple back and forth between interlocutors. Peter Brook uses the Hindu word 'sphota' to describe this process, the manifestation of 'a flow of formless energies' (1993, 50).

The following excerpt from 'The Fear of Being Watched' was recorded in June 2008 in Federation Square. This section begins on p. 21 and continues until p. 22.

*A MAN IN NEW YORK CAP walks towards BUSINESS MAN.*

BUSINESS MAN      How's it going?

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP      What's up?

BUSINESS MAN      Day off.

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP      Nice.

BUSINESS MAN      Yeah it's alright

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP      Ok.

BUSINESS MAN Yeah.

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP      You enjoy the game?

BUSINESS MAN Yeah I reckon.

While I regularly record conversations, content such as that cited above does not literally find its way into in my plays, but it does inform text creation. In the everyday, dialogue doesn't follow clear-cut patterns of dramatic action. Each conversation has its

own idiosyncratic texture that is influenced by personal, socio-political, environmental, cultural and economic considerations, just to name a few. The section in its entirety is ontologically ambivalent; the relationship between the two men is unclear, and can be subsumed or invented by the performers speaking the lines. The focus is very much on an implied physical reaction, which is generating the text. Any agenda between the two men is kept hidden, but is suggested by the repetition, circularity, and manoeuvring presented in the language; they are talking, but don't seem to know what they want to talk about, or even why they are talking.

The dialogue within an everyday encounter only reflects a small component of what occurs in any given situation, which is not dissimilar to a theatrical encounter. As Brook succinctly puts it, in theatre 'the word is a small visible part of a gigantic unseen formation' (1980, 15). The spoken text may not even be central to what is occurring, though the audience's desire to seek rational explanation for what takes place around them (within the everyday and the realm of constructed theatre), can endow verbal language with a greater role than what it perhaps deserves.

Everyday language is intertextual; in actuality it is constituted from a vast array of texts, from spoken language, recorded voices, overheard music, incursions from radio and TV, advertising, phone apps, and an infinite array of idiosyncratic languages that too rarely find their way into the theatre.

As an attempt to capture everyday speech, 'The Fear of Being Watched' might be viewed as a sequence of verbal counterpoints, of expanding and diminishing events. Nuance and rhythm, fragmented utterance, inarticulate sentences, the meandering, free-floating shifts in speech, simultaneity, concatenation, disconnected narratives; these are

qualities that theatre has traditionally ignored but potentially reveal the slippages and cracks in performance where a fragile, underlying narrative is yearning to declare itself; they are definitive of everyday theatre. It is this unadulterated use of speech in relation to the body that has profoundly impacted on my writing methodology and dramaturgy. The everyday is a site for innumerable events which, to paraphrase Anton Chekhov, might give rise to new thoughts and actions, moments of critical energy that lead to a thousand paths (McGuire 2008, 1).

There has been a significant development in my writing over the past twenty years. During my ‘Intimate Hyperrealist’ phase, covering plays such as *Features of Blown Youth*<sup>14</sup> and the *Roulette*<sup>15</sup> plays, my original texts were influenced by recordings of everyday dialogue. After an extensive period of peripatetic engagement with human activity and conversation within inner-city Melbourne (usually lasting a couple of months), I began the conceptualisation process. My *Roulette* plays, for instance, were based on an obscure Chinese cosmological chart called ‘The Twelve Themes of Life’. The themes include: desire, travel, fortune, inheritance, parenting, friendship and so on. I wrote one play on each theme, i.e. *Borneo* corresponds to travel, *Friendship* to friendship, *Inconsolable* to desire. Each play is set in a single site within Melbourne and requires two actors, covering gender equally across a range of ages. My aim was to capture a broad example of everyday encounters between ordinary people; professionals, workers, parents, older people, younger people, from a wide range of cultures, and sexual and political persuasions. In totality, they ‘present an epic display of human frailty’ (Cortese 2005, viii).

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<sup>14</sup> Premiered with Ranters Theatre for the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts in 1997.

<sup>15</sup> The plays premiered at the 2000 Adelaide Festival in two programs, before touring to Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney, Chapel of chapel, Melbourne, and overseas at PoNTI 2001, Porto, Portugal.

Below is an excerpt from *Inconsolable*<sup>16</sup>, the first of the *Roulette* plays, which marked a profound shift in my methodology of text creation from my earlier heightened language plays, as well as Ranters' acting process. According to Adriano Cortese, the director of Ranters, *Roulette* 'has helped to define Ranters' performance style: raw and immediate, seemingly improvised, haphazard in structure' (Cortese 2005, vviii). The play was written in one sitting, in a two-hour time frame.

*TOM is sitting in a cafe. He mutters under his breath, begins to a whistle a favourite tune, then pulls out James Joyce's Ulysses from his briefcase under the table and begins to read it. KAT approaches him.*

KAT I'm not disturbing you... am I..?

TOM No... no... disturb me. Ah... can I order you a cigarette?

KAT What...?

TOM Sorry I mean...

KAT No... I've had a couple already thanks.

TOM Oh...

KAT Just thought I'd sit down.

TOM Sure.

*KAT sits down in the spare seat opposite TOM.*

KAT I could sit somewhere else if you like?

TOM No problem...

KAT Just felt like...

TOM Well course...

KAT You know... talking too someone...

TOM Course...

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<sup>16</sup> Premiered with Ranters at La Mama in September 1996.

KAT Who I don't know.

TOM It's ok... right where you are.

KAT And you seemed... nice enough.

TOM Oh... thank you.

KAT I mean... you know... from a glance.

TOM Yes I know what you mean. (Cortese 2005, 1).

When writing my 'Intimate Hyperrealist' plays, I focused on the imaginary physical circumstances, such as the environment, and more importantly, the physical relationship between two imaginary personas. I began each play by having a clear objective for each persona. Tom wants to meet a partner, whom he believes will fulfil what he believes is missing in his life. Kat wants to free herself from her relationship, and needs Tom to help her achieve this. Sal in *Borneo* is seeking someone she can manipulate into trusting her, so she can plant drugs on them. Her opposite, Angela, wants to befriend someone in order to confess her secrets. In *Fortune*, Terry wants to appease and reassure Vince that he is not a threat in order to stay in his house. Vince wants to control Terry to the point where he is enslaved.

While the objective for each persona is clearly defined, they are usually quite different and in contradistinction to each other. I did not work with actions, or tasks. I did not think about *how* the personas achieved their objectives, as I believed this would make the writing too self-conscious and contrived. Nor did I ask myself what their character histories were i.e. what has happened in their lives to bring them to this point? I was not interested in delving into their psychology, burying the action in backstory and analysis. The text generates an immediate physical response from each persona that carries them to

their objectives, which in turn offers the audience the opportunity to reflect on their own life choices.

Before writing any dialogue, I imagined I was one of these personas while focusing on their objective. I meditated on being/inhabiting one persona for several minutes, sometimes longer. I always acknowledged that the imaginary persona was me, or an aspect of me. When I had a clear sense of who the persona was, to the point that their physical attributes and personality were clear in my mind, I began to place my full attention on what she/he was doing; their gestures, facial expressions, physical impulses, behaviour. It was my physical response to what they were doing to me (as the first persona and seen through the frame of my objective), which generated a verbal reaction in me. My reaction resulted in words, which I wrote down.

After writing down one line, it was a matter of winding back to the start, except that I now swapped personas. I began meditating on my new identity and new objective, which comes from another, different aspect of myself. I repeated the same process except through the eyes of the second persona and their objective. I repeated the first line of dialogue, while responding to what my opposite is doing, allowing their behaviour to impact on me. My response included a new line of dialogue, a sound, or sometimes silence, which I wrote down. I then went back to the start, swapped personas again, and so the process continued until I require a break, after which, I resumed meditating/writing from where I left off.

My ‘Intimate Hyperrealist’ plays were written in two or three drafts. In rewriting I spoke the lines out, incorporating the rhythms, pauses, non-sequiturs, ellipses, vocal textures, repetitions, concatenation, and verbal patterning present in my own speech or influenced by observations of people in the everyday. I incorporated an awareness of the

objectives of each persona speaking, as well as their underlying actions, which I used as tools to edit and pare back the original text. The action allowed me to focus on keeping the action moving towards the final engagement of the play. While I spoke out my dialogue, my speech was amended according to the particular idiosyncrasies of the personas speaking. I gave them a clear personality, though the audience learnt almost nothing factual about their lives.

I ascribe my ability to shift between voices to my life-long propensity to observe and study the way people speak in everyday environments, which was especially focused during my PhD research period. The speech patterns, rhythms and intonation of the personas in my ‘Intimate Hyperrealist’ plays, such as *Roulette*, are designed to appear individuated and specific. My dramaturgical focus is on tasks that enable me to manipulate language to counterpoint, or work against the objective, show resistance to it, stretch it out, create a surprising pathway that contradicts the objectives and sometimes actively tries to prevent them. I am always aware that the audience will be in close proximity to the actors; they will be in intimate proximity with them, close enough to eavesdrop. The dialogue does not progress in a smooth or linear trajectory; it is bumpy, difficult to navigate, littered with obstacles. As within the field of the everyday, language is complex, part of an inseparable, heterogeneous mix of voices and texts, where it develops by ‘poaching in countless ways on the properties of others’ (Read 1993, 133). The ethical or moral premise/dilemma posed within my plays is not clear-cut or obvious; the personas discover qualities about themselves as they progress. The language presents characters in a state of ontological uncertainty. They slowly gain clarity through their actions. They are not self-aware; they learn through interfacing with others.

The text in my plays does not state the content of the action i.e. the text does not describe or overtly reveal what is occurring between the personas. The audience are required to invent and project the hidden pathways/actions for themselves, as with the work of much postdramatic theatre, ‘the dialogues get filtered through the audience... it is their perception that ultimately gives meaning’ (Ruiz 2001, 129). For this reason, it is essential that the audience is close enough to the action to allow them to ‘read’ the behaviour of the performers. While the plays maintain an appearance of natural speech, the personas are affected by reaction to each other. There is dramatic movement, but on an everyday microscale that does not distract from the focus on the immediate, ‘live’ encounter with its potential for intimate exchange.

The critical reception of my ‘Intimate Hyperrealist’ texts has been positive, both in Australia and overseas. Helen Thomson, writing in *The Age*, found them ‘works of nuance, throwing light into the shadowy realms of human experience’ (2002, 12). Writing in *The Sunday Age*, Sian Prior stated ‘the dialogue sounds utterly spontaneous’ (2002, 32). Steve McLeod in *The Daily Telegraph* wrote, ‘At times it's theatre so good you wonder how cinema ever took over in our estimations of performed reality’ (2001). Terry Ward wrote in *The Australian*, ‘Ranters undoubted theatrical alchemy consists of paring back conversations between characters to the point where the viewer is almost beguiled into believing they are spontaneous, happening now’ (2000). What these critiques all revealed was an ability of the reviewers and audiences to engage in intimate communion with the performers; the lack of overarching plot driven dialogue did not seem to impede their ability to connect with the language and content.

The next phase of work is termed ‘Epic Hyperrealism’. This phase includes the plays, *St Kilda Tales*<sup>17</sup> and *The Wall*<sup>18</sup>. These plays have large casts, have multiple narrative trajectories with simultaneous actions, and employ complex stage and lighting designs. While these plays are presented in real time, they give a sense of condensing temporal experience, squashing a sequence of several months into a two-hour time frame.

My initial approach to text creation with these plays was a little different from the earlier plays. In editing and paring back lines of dialogue, I employed actions and tasks to ensure the language reflected behavioural reactions. But there were two key ingredients that differed from my previous methodology.

Firstly, the ‘Epic Hyperrealist’ dialogue was not written according to the dictates/frame of imaginary personas. The dialogue in these plays was constructed from a neutral voice. Persona in these texts consists of the individuated contribution of the performer saying the lines; they are not emphasised in the original text. On occasion, when I detected ‘character’ nuance in the dialogue, I stripped this element from the text.

The excerpt below comes from *The Wall*. The personas are given names, but they are not ‘characters’ in any traditional sense; we learn very little about their lives, their dialogue are not particularised according to character and there is no psychological development revealed though their interaction with others. The dialogic focus is momentary, and devoid of teleological progression.

ZEL        You want to have coffee later?

PARIS     Yeah? Whereabouts?

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<sup>17</sup> Premiered by Ranters at Playbox as part of the Centenary of Federation Festival in 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Premiered by Ranters as part of the 2003 Melbourne International festival of the Arts at Horti Hall.

ZEL I've got to do a few things first. How bout I call you?

PARIS Ok. Great. I'll give you my card.

*PARIS gives ZEL his card.*

ZEL Hmm.

PARIS It'd be great to catch up.

ZEL Of course. You'll be here?

PARIS Yeah.

ZEL Do you have a car?

PARIS Yeah.

ZEL Maybe we can go somewhere else if you want.

PARIS Sure.

ZEL A drive somewhere?

PARIS Yeah I'd love to.

ZEL Nice to get away from here I think.

PARIS We can go wherever.

ZEL I think so.

*ZEL gets up and goes to leave. (Cortese 2003, 25).*

The second critical difference was that that the texts were conceived without reference to a fictional location. The spaces in these texts are defined as non-representational, as per below, an excerpt from *St Kilda Tales*.

*The following dialogue between FLEUR and LUCY continues through the opening music or song and only portions can be heard. Can be improvised.*

*The space is non-representational* (Cortese 2001, 1).

While the performers in the earlier *Roulette* plays worked with awareness of audience, in the epic hyperrealist plays they are given the specific instruction to regard the theatrical site as a concrete reality. Both *Features of Blown Youth* and the *Roulette* plays maintain a fictional location. In ‘Epic Hyperrealism’, all references to an external space, outside the frame of the theatrical context, are removed from the dialogue. The dialogic content reflects a concrete stage, one where the audience are sharing the same conceptual space and time as the performers.

Removing these two ingredients of traditional drama, representation and characterisation, presented difficulties for some audience members and critics. Some more conservative reviewers were critical of the work, such as Michael Shmith, who wrote in *The Age*: ‘*St Kilda Tales* is a jumble of displaced dialogues, performed by dysfunctional people who seldom elicit any sympathy, but instead provoke scorn, fear, ridicule, contempt and downright repulsion’ (Cited in Cathcart, 2001). Michael Carthcart deferred to this review in his own and strongly disagreed with Shmith’s assessment of the work, finding: ‘This production really does extend the possibilities of the Australian stage... It pushes theatre into a new relationship with the world of experience’ (2001). The production was embraced by practitioner/ theorists, including Richard Murphet, who wrote in *Real Time*: ‘The Cortese brothers are charting new territory in what can only be called ‘reality theatre’. The piece is plotless in any conventional sense.’ He goes on to write, ‘the critique it presents is less of society than of the way theatre has represented it’ (2001, 16).

My third and most recent phase of performance writing, which I term ‘Neo-Hyperrealism’, includes texts such as *Holiday*, *Affection* and *Intimacy*. They develop the dramaturgy and methodology of text construction from the earlier phases of hyperrealism through the complete abandonment of objectives in text creation, and the absence of characterisation and representation. Unlike the ‘Epic Hyperrealist’ plays, these new works require small casts, no more than two or three actors, and intimate proximity with audience. They also explore minimal set and design construction, and long silences between dialogic sequences. The following excerpt is from the opening of *Holiday*, the first play that marked this dramaturgical departure from *The Wall*.

*The space is non-representational and contains a wading pool, a beach ball, a chaise-lounge and, up front, are a couple of bar stools. The actors have full awareness of the audience. The baroque songs that intersperse the dialogue are delivered directly to it.*

*SONG: My Heart ne'er Leaps with Gladness.*

ARNO My mum sent me this parcel the other day.

PAUL What's that?

ARNO My mum sent me this parcel the other day.

PAUL In the mail?

ARNO Yeah.

PAUL She spot something... out shopping?

ARNO You know those plastic thingummies?

PAUL No.

ARNO The ones you used to find in the cereal.

PAUL The funny creatures?

ARNO She sent me a whole bag of them.

PAUL Why she send you those?

ARNO I don't know. (Cortese 2009, 1).

As with earlier hyperrealist texts, *Holiday* does not engage character; names are ascribed only out of convenience, but could just as easily be called something else. The text provides no information about the personas; either what they do for work, where they live, which city they are in, who their loved ones are etcetera. This absence of history or identity takes the process of de-characterisation further than in previous works to the extent that the dialogue is stripped of nuance; the non-sequiturs, slippages, murmurs, fragmented rhythms that imply individuated responses and were a consistent feature of earlier works have been pared down even further. The text does not mirror natural conversation; there are no icebreakers. Conversation begins, engages a particular theme or content then segues to another sequence of dialogue without apparent connection to what has already been said. The audience is required to supply the narrative frame themselves. Instead of a process of causal logic, or contiguity as with traditional theatre texts, the dialogic sequences are constructed through thematic juxtaposition, or equivalency. Both 'Epic' and 'Neo-Hyperrealist' plays/texts are built around 'disparate heterogeneity,' which accumulates as an unconscious narrative in the minds of the audience and leads to 'the intensified perception of the individual phenomenon and simultaneously to the discovery of surprising *correspondences*' (Lehmann 2006, 84).

Perhaps the most radical development in methodology is the absence of actions or objectives in relation in the text. The text was dramaturged purely in relationship to

aesthetic determinants (relationship to space, duration, physicality), which were discovered in rehearsal, and thematic considerations. The structure of the text remained unaltered, but any semblance of fictional content, or dramatic tension, was smoothed out.

Another new development in the ‘Neo-Hyperrealist’ texts was the inclusion of baroque songs by Gluck, Paisello, Schubert, Pergolesi and Bononcini. These songs are sung at various intervals during the production. The songs reveal the subtext, hidden desire and yearnings, which are not made manifest in the dialogic sequences. The inclusion of songs in *Intimacy* by The Ramones, Brian Wilson and Francois Couperin ruptured the dramatic pattern and, as with *Holiday*, created a layer of subtextual inferences, suggestive of unrealised and unrealisable aspirations.

The critical response to the later texts has been positive, reflecting a developing aesthetic awareness of new forms of drama within the audience. John Bailey, writing in *Real Time* at the premiere of *Holiday* at Arts House in 2007, stated: ‘This is theatre of the moment, in which no word exists before it is uttered, no action before it is performed’ (2007). In *The Herald-Sun* Jason Blake wrote, ‘you could almost be fooled into thinking no one is really acting at all. But therein lies a paradoxical point of *Holiday*: we perform all the time. When we're watched, we're theatre’ (Blake, 2008). According to Emer O’Kelly writing in response to seeing *Holiday* at The Dublin Festival, *Holiday* was ‘a subsuming into another place that send the audience into the night refreshed and afloat on a sea of calm...’ (O’Kelly, 2009).

Since the early development of my work with Ranters, there has been a proliferation of companies that utilise everydayness in their work, ‘in what is perhaps the latest chapter

in the avant-garde... a theatre that may have lost its illusion but not its ability to illuminate’ (Crawley & White 2011, 14).

Some texts in hyperrealist performances are taken directly from verbatim material and are edited and rearranged in such a way to hide any interference on the part of the dramaturg, as is the case with *I’m Your Man*<sup>19</sup> by Australian director Roslyn Oades. The text is collated and edited, before being performed by professional actors. The ‘exact’ vocal intonation, ellipses, stutters, and inarticulate sounds from the original recordings are reproduced on stage. Her work also utilises a fictional stage setting, as in the case of *I’m Your Man*, which is set in a gym.

Rimini Protocol, with their documentary-style presentations of real conversations assembled from the very people (non-actors) who perform them, perhaps takes this process further. They have been described as creating ‘a live archive of the everyday’ (Kühl 2011, 29). While their methodology is different from Ranters, their interest in creating a permeable space between audience and performers that investigates authenticity, liveness, the rejection of fictional representation is not dissimilar.

Richard Maxwell’s work also embraces everyday language, closely following the rhythms, ruptures, repetitions, and circularity of natural conversation. As with the work of Ranters, Maxwell tends to smooth out dramatic tension, or dramatic patterning in the text. Unlike Ranters, Maxwell’s productions thus far, maintain a degree of characterisation and representation. The texts are usually set somewhere, incorporating fictional content, often

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<sup>19</sup> Premiered at the 2012 Sydney Festival at Belvoir St Theatre.

as a way of addressing a socio-political question, such as presented in *Good Samaritans*<sup>20</sup> and *Neutral Hero*<sup>21</sup>.

In writing my plays/texts, I have aimed to discover a new everyday theatre, one that engages the totality of experience, a language of the everyday that needs to be reconstituted within the body of a physical engagement. My observations of everyday discourses were disordered and re-imagined in order to shatter any preoccupation with the literary qualities inherent within my previous dramatic dialogue, as well as natural speech. My focus in the later ‘Neo-Hyperrealist’ plays does not offer a radical departure from the earlier works; the processes and aims of the work have simply been refined and honed with practice, and show a greater appreciation of the behavioural impulses presented by the bodies in space. ‘Dialogue in the everyday environment is built around a need to protect private, inner worlds, while avoiding discord with others. Still our language and bodies betray us. Slowly we are revealed’ (Cortese 2005, ix-x).

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<sup>20</sup> Premiered by New York City Players in New York at St. Ann’s Warehouse in 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Premiered by New York City Players at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels, Belgium in 2011.

#### **4 – Narrative, story and dramatic action: How is the text constituted?**

In my hyperrealist plays/texts for Ranters, the dialogue is crafted to sound similar to everyday conversation. In the earlier plays, such as *Features of Blown Youth*, or *Roulette*, narrative, story and action are built into the text in a way that is invisible to the audience. In order to achieve this, the conventions of narrative structure and characterisation are reconstituted and submerged with the underlying action. In the ‘Epic Hyperrealist’ plays, such as *The Wall*, or *St Kilda Tales*, narrative and story (and characterisation) are removed entirely; dramatic action is pared back. In the latter plays/texts, such as *Holiday* and *Intimacy*, dramatic action and objectives are stripped away entirely. Events and scenes function in relational or juxtapositional networks by virtue of their context within the show; they do not refer to a time and place outside the theatre space (Shaw 2011).

This gradual and evolving of performance codes has occurred over a twenty-two-year period; each of my plays has progressed my hyperrealist aesthetic to a point where the boundary between fiction and reality is undefined. The audience is asked to supply the narrative frame, imagine a story as it might impinge on their own lives, and reflect on their own underlying tensions and impulses for unconscious action. The audience is being asked to take responsibility for what they see and how they see it. According to Artaud, ‘we choose to observe our actions... instead of being motivated by them’ (1974, 2).

Rather than place the focus on external indicators of change, such as narrative, story, or physical action in the text, the everyday hyperrealism I write places the focus on the minutiae of moment-to-moment expressivity. The dialogic content is made up of independent yet relatable fragmentary sequences. As Sodjka Zupanc Lotker puts it in relation to postdramatic theatre: ‘The traditional coherent plot of a ‘well made’ theatre play

was atomised into a script with fragments as the main dramaturgical building blocks.’ (2011, 198). The plays reject conventional unity and symmetry in favour of a ‘rhizomic’ structure in which ‘unsurveyable branching and heterogeneous connections prevent synthesis’ (Deleuze and Guattari cited in Lehmann 2006, 90). The theatrical ciphers are recalibrated and turned away from fictive content towards the dynamic, live exchange between audience and performer. The pay-off for the audience is direct contact, a heightened degree of intimacy that the theatre of illusionism cannot cater for.

The postdramatic theatre of hyperrealism that I practise eschews dramatic narrative or story in favour of a new form of theatre that ‘turns the behaviour onstage and in the auditorium into a joint text, a ‘text’ even if there is no spoken dialogue on stage or between actors and audience’ (Lehmann 2006, 17). The audience is placed at the heart of narrative and story construction; narrative fissures are created, which allow the audience to weave their life experiences into the fabric of the performance. According to Jacob Wren, artistic director of PME-Art,<sup>22</sup> ‘the most consequent contemporary theatre is that which deals with the immediate, concrete situation’ (2011, 64). Aristotle’s notion of unity of time (1996, 15) is discarded and replaced with a nonrepresentational and decentralised ordering of events that dissolves the disparity between theatrical time and real time. As Sodja Lotka points out, ‘Spatial and temporal dynamics become the core of the dramatic composition in this era of fragmentary dramaturgy...’ (2011, 205).

A key influence on the development of dramatic narrative, story and action in my plays is the work of the Naturalistic writers of the late nineteenth century, such as Chekhov, but also Strindberg, Ibsen and Hauptmann, who discovered a way to present

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<sup>22</sup> Founded in Montreal, Canada by Jacob Wren in 1996.

everyday time, space and action as an enacted, rather than a reported, event. This radical development of performance dismantled the word as a vehicle for literal information. While the past can sometimes dominate the verbal content of a particular scene, as in many of Ibsen's plays, which often employ 'long and involved expositions', it does not constitute the centre of action (Murray 1990, 89). The writers of Naturalistic drama were able to create dramatic action between the 'living' constituents on stage, but they also inherited much from their forebears. Ibsen owes a lot to the romantic drama, and cannot seem to resist a degree of symbolism in his work, such as the tarantella in *A Doll's House*, or the duck in *The Wild Duck*. The same can be said of Strindberg, whose naturalistic plays, like *Miss Julie*, and *The Dance of Death*, are bolstered with symbolic motifs. Chekhov borrows props from the melodramatic tradition, but distorts their usage, thus Uncle Vanya shoots his pistol at the Professor but misses. In *The Three Sisters*, which according to Szondi, is a play that contains only 'the rudiments of traditional action' (1987, 20), the Baron is shot dead by Solyony in a senseless duel.

Melodrama relies on an external convention of narrative and story development, familiar to the audience, which allows the characters to exposit the literal content of the scene that is identical to the content of the action. There is no room for nuance in melodrama, as a form it is 'stripped of extra details and pauses' (Stanislavski 1968, 147). But in Chekhov's plays there is something underlying, buried deep in a character's psyche that propels them forward; rather than consciously choosing their pathway, they react to circumstances that arise as a result of their previous actions. Their language reflects unconscious impulses, which are never made explicit. The resulting action or drama is a

consequence of the character's inability to learn from, or at least acknowledge, their failings. 'One's bearing (character) shapes one's fate,' as Heraclitus wrote (2003, 83).

Chekhov's mature plays, such as *The Seagull*, *The Cherry Orchard*, or *The Three Sisters*, 'are not plotted' (Murray 1990, 100). There is no main protagonist in his plays; rather he creates a weblike structure where each character is integral to the development of the narrative superstructure. As with my own hyperrealist plays, Chekhov's plays do not aim towards a climactic point; they are anti-climatic. At the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, Varya, Gaev and Andreevna leave the house they have been living in their entire lives, but their exit is drawn out, devoid of grand speeches or emotion. Just before they exit, they 'sob with restraint, quietly, afraid of being heard' (Chekhov 2006, 1042). In *Uncle Vanya*, Voinitsky is still presiding over a situation he despises, though accepting of the hopelessness of his predicament. Running his hands through his daughter's hair, Voinitsky says: 'How hard it is! How hard it is!' (Chekhov 2006, 872). It is a gesture of the ordinary passive acceptance of the everyday, not the defiance of classic heroism.

Despite what Chekhov might owe to tradition, his revolutionary ideas cannot be overstated. He abandoned Aristotelian principles of drama (Murray 1990, 99) and an overarching epic form within the parameters of a juxtapositional structure designated as 'real life'. The audience gets to watch the characters experience 'their collisions and evasions' (Senelick 2006, 812). The narrative structure of Chekhov's plays is designed to be indiscernible. The ordinary lives of every day characters had never before been considered worthy of dramatic attention; with Chekhov (and Ibsen, Strindberg *et al*) they occupied centre stage. Chekhov in particular resists adopting a grand narrative. There are no heroics, or epic undertakings. His characters linger in their isolation from each other, struggling to

articulate their innermost longings. The everyday became the primary source for representation while fitting within a traditional dramatic frame that was, for the most part, acceptable to its audience. As Murray states, Chekhov presents ‘a true image of human experience’ as he saw it (1990, 103). It is a significant development that posits the presentation of ‘reality’, the interactions played out between characters in silence, as a prime component of dramatic action.

Chekhov’s influence on narrative, story and dramatic action is most pronounced in my intimate hyperrealist plays. As with a Chekhovian play, *Features of Blown Youth* is structured through thematic juxtaposition, though I borrowed the Aristotelian convention of ‘the complication’ followed by ‘the unravelling’ (Aristotle 1996, 65), which is entirely uncharacteristic of Chekhov’s plays. The characters in *Features...* react to each other according to underlying actions/objectives, which are put into steep momentum with the arrival of the persona of Strawberry. Just as with Chekhov, there are no central characters in the play; the audience witnesses a web of dysfunctional relationships engage and disengage, then finally collapse. The play ends with everyone, bar Strawberry, psychologically or physically damaged or abandoned. While *Features...* contains more story and plot than any other play I have written, there is no backstory, or psychological development in the characters. We discover the characters purely through their verbal/physical interaction with each other. The language is hyperreal, composed of dialogues that flow laterally from one subject to the other. The play, like Chekhov’s theatre, is plotless; there is no singular story, but rather a sequence of actions that amount to an emotionally coherent but fragmented event. This view of the play is reflected in its

many positive reviews; Bryce Hallet, in *The Australian*, wrote ‘in its cumulation of detail and debris it packs an almighty punch’ (1997).

In the *Roulette* plays, developed over a longer time frame between 1995 and 2002, the construction of the ‘real’ is disguised to the point where it appears there is no construction at all. Language in these plays is not tied to a narrative superstructure, but rather is designed to give rise, as it does in everyday life, to unconscious behaviours. While the text is prompted by character reaction through the prism of an objective, the dialogue exists purely in relationship to human engagement. Performative language in these plays (verbal/physical) gives expression to the dynamic, irrational, instinctive, visceral aspects of the characters/actors. Their dialogue is impelled through action; narrative and story are embedded in, and indivisible from, a moment-to-moment evolutionary process, which, while following causal logic, plays out within the realm of an ordinary, everyday encounter. There are no grand dramas or gestures; the *Roulette* plays are devoid of plot. The characters are nuanced and particularised, but we learn almost nothing about them; the fictional frame supporting them, while significant, is minimised. The plays unfold in real-time, allowing the audience to frame what they experience as something akin to an everyday experience.

The dialogue is constructed around principles of dramatic action. While there is no teleological trajectory within the text, the plays do follow causal logic at a psychological level. The characters’ behaviours are in a direct response to an action in the actor/character they are engaged with. This reaction/response dynamic between characters conveys an interactive through line that finds its corollary in both structure and text. While there is negligible external story pertaining to history, backstory or fictive information in relation

to character in these plays, the ‘real’ story is the measure of the multiple vicissitudes that occur between the characters. They are not conscious of affecting change; they do so accidentally, without awareness, so creating an unexpected and highly variable series of moves and counter moves.

The plays explore chance meetings between strangers, or people who know each other but have lost connection. Familiar rituals of personal exchange, soon give way to uncertainty. The spaces between characters are uncharted, tenuous and give rise to unpredictable response mechanisms. This process creates a continual rupture in the dramatic pattern; rather than rely on narrative to progress a linear story, as in more traditional theatre, the *Roulette* plays focus on revealing an underlying ontology which expresses itself through an everyday physical/linguistic dichotomy. In this respect the plays are aligned with Grotowski’s objective to see theatre as a means to crack open the conscious rituals and games people play to reveal something essential about their humanity. The theatrical event should enable us to ‘experience what is real and... in a state of complete defencelessness unveil, give, discover ourselves’ (1975, 212-13). This implies a form of performative consciousness within actual everyday discourse that inhibits the way we behave. Our performative awareness, rather than liberate us, forces us to contrive our behaviour, usually in order to appease an agenda or further a cause.

*Roulette*, as a theatrical event, posits everyday discourse at its centre. Unexpected, and spontaneous reactions are released through the performative process that challenges and confronts the way we perceive everyday discourse. The expressivity is often barely discernable, manifesting itself via a manipulation of the dialogue to create mini-actions. These mini-actions become visible through the development of narrative, paring back

dialogic content to work in conjunction with action, and also the close proximity to audience, who are able to watch and focus their scrutiny on performer behaviour. Artaud spoke of an unnameable essence that swells and releases itself unconsciously during performance without recourse to formalised theatrics. ‘When we say the word life, we understand this is not life as recognised by externals, by facts, but the kind of frail moving source forms never attain’ (Artaud 1971, 6). But Artaud left us with no clear-cut model for what he had in mind, ‘no concrete technique... no method’ (Grotowski 1975, 86). His poetic sensibility is allowed free rein, but there is no identifiable methodology in his work that can be put into practice.

The text in *Roulette*, as with the ‘Epic Hyperrealist’ plays, is constructed to follow an objective end point, which is then resisted and obstructed by the dialogue, through ‘an elaborate labyrinth of sidesteps and manoeuvres’ (Cortese 2005, ix). Each of these plays, as with all Ranters productions, unfolds in real-time. The *Roulette* plays, as well as the plays that follow, such as *St Kilda Tales*, *Holiday* and *Intimacy*, might use everyday language as a model but they are not verbatim texts. The dialogue in these plays emulates the nuance, rhythms, ellipses, non-sequiturs, repetitions, and speech effects of everyday language but are structured in order to achieve an aesthetic objective. Content is stripped away so that each line works in combination with an action in with minimal reliance on narrative support. The following excerpt is from *Petroleum, Roulette 3*.

*STEVE sits down at a table.*

GORDON      You can trust yar in good hands.

STEVE      Sorry what? What did you say?

GORDON      Yar in good hands.

STEVE Yeah well.. that is reassurin. (*Silence*) Teach me not ta fuckin think. That's me problem mate. Gotta get those fuckin cogs goin... wasn't thinkin sharp comin here. Wasn't thinkin I can tell ya that now. I was goin god knows... wanderin roun. (*Silence*) (Cortese 2005, 2-3).

This excerpt underlines many of the essential features of the dialogue in *Roulette* as well as the 'Epic' and 'Neo-Hyperrealist' works. The social register, meter and rhythm of the dialogue are continuously altered to disrupt the reception of literal narrative. Sentence structure is often fragmentary, or interrupted, causing a break in the linear trajectory of an argument. These conscious manipulations of the text are not designed simply to create a mirroring of the everyday, but also to refocus the emphasis on the relationship of the text to physical responses. As Read asserts, language in the everyday 'is concerned with the socially abstracted individual' (1993, 133). The text in everyday theatre further disrupts and abstracts the relationship between the actor/character and the audience, between the material presence of the actor and the coming into being of the enactment. The audience must be alert to micro-changes in performance; they are invited to insert their own narratives within the uncertain spaces that emerge from the playing of the text. The texts at once create a realness, a fragile space that suggests the existence of other domains. Everyday language, once manipulated and enacted in this way, 'leads beyond presentness, towards an elsewhere' (Lefebvre 1991, 135).

According to Goffman, everyday conversation often resembles the way theatrical scenes are constructed due to the fact that the former provides the model on which the latter are based (1963, 78). But conversations within the everyday tend to ramble, are repetitious, do not aim towards any particular superstructure, which is very different from

the writing in my plays. The interlocutor in the everyday is given far more latitude than a character in *Roulette*. While having the appearance of free reign, the characters in my plays are moving towards an end point, which is predetermined. As a writer, having created this end point in advance, I disguise the pathway towards it by manipulating language and action, to allow the audience to vest themselves in the creation of the dramaturgy.

Goffman's work on the everyday, in particular his analysis of the many and varied ways people present themselves and perform roles in social situations has been important to my own research only in a very general sense. According to Goffman, awareness of performance involves a denial of the self; people perform impression management in order to gain acceptance, status and social leverage. But as Goffman indicates, 'a social place is not a material thing... it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished and well articulated' (1963, 81). In the everyday, when the relationship to the audience is personal or professional, vested interests are at stake; when talking to a stranger or a customer in a shop (while unconscious performative languages are still utilised), the relationship is relatively easy to terminate. Rules and protocols impinge on everyday life, often to encourage competitiveness in the workplace, or to enhance the enjoyment of social relations, or to establish standards of behaviour among colleagues and friends (Goffman 1969, 129-131). Many kinds of games and behaviours bring a level of consciousness that finds parallels in the way we might witness a performance (Goffman 1969, 81). But there is great variability in terms of the specific ways people achieve these ends. As Read points out, 'Theatre 'uproots' the everyday... to a place where it can be better lit' (1993, 133). Goffman's rigorous analysis of behavioural and attitudinal relations has not impacted on my methodology for text creation, everyday poetics, or performance processes per se. His

work is specifically related to the way people presented themselves in social discourse in American society in the 1950s. My approach to text creation is to embed the particular within the whole to create a multifarious structure. This is quite different from sociological analysis, which ‘partitions that which is organisable in heterogeneous and everyday activities, returning it to the homogeneous foundation of... an objective discipline’ (Read 1993, 133).

My own research into my practice of everyday theatre is focused on very specific scenarios brought about by accidental encounters, or interruptions in routine, where social decorum, mannered and polite behaviour, gives way to authentic unmediated contact between people. Formal social codes of behaviour are stripped away in order to reveal hidden agendas, desires, impulses, needs and objectives in the characters/personas. In relation to the actors working on my plays/texts, I have no interest in replicating social analysis. My research into actor improvisation with actors engages an entirely different process in order to create the circumstances where actors can embody the text, a process I will outline in a later section.

It is worthwhile to compare my experience with narrative construction in verbatim theatre with hyperrealist theatre. In verbatim theatre there is a conscious attempt to bring the everyday directly to an audience through the use of recorded real-life interviews. As Stefan Kaegi puts it, verbatim stories essentially need to be ‘selected, framed and given focus’ (Kuhl 2011, 34). But verbatim material can be ordered in an enormous variety of ways in order to create a viable theatre experience. Two recent examples of verbatim theatre I have worked on, *I’m Your Man* by Roslyn Oades and *We Are Yet to Ascertain the*

*Nature of the Crime*<sup>23</sup> by Melbourne Workers Theatre, had very different aesthetic outcomes. As in hyperrealist theatre texts, content was ordered with the intention of disguising any inherent interference with the sourced material.

The text for *We are Yet to Ascertain...* was heavily edited to produce a non-linear narrative focused on racially motivated violence in western Melbourne perpetrated against Indian students and taxi drivers. The project was motivated by a socio-political desire to provide a theatrical platform for a marginalised group whose negative experiences the media and political elites had chosen to ignore. Much of the vocal tone, social register, rhythm and texture present in the original interviews were edited out in the interest of story and clarity. The production employed multiple narratives, but with pared back approach to monologic and dialogic construction.

In the case of *I'm Your Man*, director Roslyn Oades insisted on the inclusion of the original quality of the recorded voices, including ellipses, non-sequiturs, digressions, unfinished sentences, grammatical errors, breaths, um and ahs, coughs et al. Roslyn believed this would encourage the audience to accept that what they were witnessing was indeed 'real life'. The material was nonetheless edited, not to remove or smooth out the textures of the voices, but to drive the material towards a more linear endpoint in the story i.e. the main character's preparation for a boxing world title. This linear spine within the overall narrative, allowed for greater flexibility with vocal aesthetics and a high degree of latitude within each monologic or dialogic section of the material. As with hyperrealist theatre, the texts for both *We Are Yet To Ascertain...* and *I'm Your Man* were organised

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<sup>23</sup> Premiered at Arts House in 2010; it was Melbourne Workers' Theatre's final show before disbanding.

according to aesthetic values in order to create a theatrical version of ‘realness’ for the audience.

The dialogue in the ‘Epic Hyperrealist’ plays, such as *St Kilda Tales* or *The Wall*, is constructed in a similar way to *Roulette*. There is a focus on action, which is similarly disguised, resisted, stretched and distorted. But these latter plays include a more complex, multi-persona narrative structure within a non-representational construct. As with Chekhovian structure, these plays do not privilege any one persona. The dialogic sequences in *St Kilda Tales* and *The Wall* are organised within a matrix according to thematic and rhythmic design, which unfolds in real-time (unlike Chekhov’s plays). The dramaturgical structure was designed to constantly shift the action, creating a ‘rhythm of alternating slackness and static electricity... breaking through expectations of the well-organised play...’ (Murphet 2001, 16).

The following excerpt is from *St Kilda Tales*.

OLIVIA Where's the beach?

PAN Why are you goin for a swim?

OLIVIA I love the beach at night.

PAN Yeah so do I. I like it anytime.

OLIVIA Yeah but at night there’s nobody around to disturb you... that’s the whole point.

PAN Oh yeah.

OLIVIA It's soothing.

*Silence.*

PAN Know any songs?

OLIVIA No why?

PAN Just thought you could sing something... send me to sleep.

OLIVIA Sorry. I've forgotten them all. I don't know any jokes either.

PAN You're not much fun.

OLIVIA So it's fun that you want?

PAN I don't know. I don't know anything (Cortese 2001, 46).

These latter plays, as with *Roulette*, utilise textual shifts in the dialogue to open up cracks in narrative authority and to ultimately disintegrate it. The action and dialogue are out of alignment and progress down an uncertain and difficult path. The personas are rubbed in the wrong direction; they are overwhelmed by unconscious impulses, which bring into being unexpected consequences. As with *Roulette*, the epic hyperrealist plays have no external story or plot. The audience occupy the same concrete reality as the performers, 'sharing an as yet only partly defined space' (Wren 2011, 64). This theatre beyond representation enters a crucial phase where the boundary between the everyday theatre and the audience becomes interchangeable and blurred. This new dimension to theatre shifts the ground from traditional dramatic theatre, where, according to Lehmann, it becomes more about 'presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information' (2006, 85).

Most audiences come to the theatre expecting a fictional stage arena. If the success or otherwise of a theatre event is measured by audience response, then any prior knowledge of the event becomes significant. In the everyday our prior knowledge of the way a person behaves, their particular mannerisms, characteristics, affectations and foibles, will similarly affect our opinion of them. In theatre, and in real life, it helps to understand the

context and parameters of the performance; we are more likely to accept what we are already familiar with. In a process defined by Goffman as ‘anticipatory socialisation’, we are already ‘schooled in the reality that is just coming to be real for us’ (1963, 79). Few critics would argue that the plays of Shakespeare possess little or no drama; one reason for this is that we are well schooled in Shakespearean notions of dramatic action. In the case of contemporary theatre texts, critics’ views of what is dramatic or even theatrical can vary widely. The reason for this, in my experience, is that the performance codes of much new writing, including hyperrealism, have not yet embedded themselves broadly enough within the critical audience, rendering the ‘dramatic’ content invisible on the page and/or in performance.

Much of what transpires in the relationship between performer and audience is dependent upon the expectation of the latter. In the work of Ranters or other contemporary theatre makers, like Richard Maxwell or Oriza Hirata, which seek to emulate the feel of everyday discourse, the audience consists of literate festival goers who are primarily familiar with the theatrical codes they are about to witness. In Jerome Bel’s *The Show Must Go On*<sup>24</sup>, for example, the dancers simulate everyday postures and gestures in a way that is consciously contrived as performance. The intention is to confront the audience’s desire to be entertained at all costs while rejecting classical dance aesthetics. But the audience that attend these festival shows are mostly familiar with the aesthetic domains being presented; rather than being confronted, the danger is the audiences will enjoy the fact that their knowledge and aesthetic awareness of new forms is being validated. It has the potential to ingrain a new form of cultural snobbery.

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<sup>24</sup> Premiered at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg, 2001.

Moving beyond representation is nothing particularly new in itself. Since the 1960's performance art has shifted away from representational language towards an engagement with the intricate verbal manoeuvres people use in everyday situations to mediate their thoughts and feelings. Yoko Ono, in a work at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, requested that visitors to her exhibition 'draw an imaginary map... then go walking on an actual street according to the map' (Goldberg 1979, 124). The everyday in this context represents a multiplicity of meanings and inferences, an understated assertion of performance. There are many examples of spectacle or public site-specific theatre where the construction of the narrative includes audience response, such as Lone Twin's *To The Dogs*<sup>25</sup>, where the performers ride around a city on a bike and talk to people, or *Small Metal Objects* by Back to Back, where members of the public were interviewed by performers.

A recent work by Not Yet It's Difficult called *The Olympic Training Squad*<sup>26</sup>, required performers to run a dedicated circuit through a city, and incorporated audience response to the event. This movement of theatre from organised theatrical constructs into everyday life is being progressively advanced through the use of digital technology in contemporary art practice and with the tendency of theatre makers to cross-over into other artistic disciplines, such as Live Art, where audience interactivity is at the heart of the work.

While the narrative content in Ranters productions only rarely includes verbal responses from the audience, my plays/texts are constructed to allow a moment-to-moment reconfiguring of the dramaturgy. The instability of the narrative patterns, the creation of

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<sup>25</sup> Premiered at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels in 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Premiered at Expo 2000 in Hanover.

diegetic fissures, breakages in dialogic response, the lack of history or character information in the content, is a way of dissembling the audience to encourage them to ask questions of the performance content. My plays do not supply narrative affirmation; rather by creating ontological uncertainty, the text requires the actor to make decisions by choosing actions that correlate with their own emotional and psychological perspective. The role of silence, pauses, disruptions of physical dynamics, the use of repetition, and the sustained durational presence of the performers are a way of enabling the audience to activate an invented response to what they experience. According to Lehmann, a performance ‘with a low density of signs aims to provoke the spectator’s imagination’ (2006, 90).

Richard Maxwell’s plays demonstrate a similar objective to dissemble narrative and story construction. In his play *House*<sup>27</sup>, the causal relationship between scenes is scrambled; conversations are begun around a topic then soon abandoned; at the extreme end, characters are murdered without obvious repercussions. Maxwell’s plays share similar characteristics to a plot in Commedia; events/scenes move from one point to the next, ‘but not as a series of psychological consequences... the action continues as if nothing has happened’ (Rudlin 1994, 35-57). The absence of causal plot in Maxwell’s plays forces the audience to supply their own rationale, provide an internal logic of their own. This is further aided by the writer’s refusal ‘to permit the actor to prioritise the fictional scenario over the reality of the performance’ (Gorman 2011, 182). The structure of Maxwell’s plays (absence of causal and narrative coherence) together with his use of the dialogue (inclusion of pauses, ellipses, grammatical errors, illogical argument et al) creates an uncertain space

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<sup>27</sup> Premiered at the Ontological Theatre, New York City in 1998.

between the fictional character and the material presence of the actor. As with the *Roulette* plays, this uncertain space focuses the spotlight on the live interactivity of the performers.

With the development of my ‘Neo-Hyperrealist’ plays/texts, *Holiday*, *Affection* and *Intimacy*, the narrative, story and dramatic action have been removed (as stated earlier). These plays were not constructed with action or objectives in mind. The dialogue represents an interaction devoid of agenda. The lack of objectives and actions in the dialogue results in the non-existence of plot and story. It employs what Lehman refers to as a ‘dwindling of the dramatic impulse’ (Eckersal & Patterson 2011, 7). My ‘Neo-Hyperrealist’ plays take this proposition further by removing the dramatic impulse entirely from the text and production. The dialogues have been stripped of nuance; they do not reflect natural speech, nor are they formalised utterances. They are spoken dialogues devoid of a social register (which has been stripped away), as opposed to *Roulette* or *Features of Blown Youth*. Nor do the texts possess narrative patterns, nuance or rhythmic variations to suggest character or gender. The dialogues employ a flat, unadorned employment of language. As with the ‘Epic Hyperrealist’ plays, the dialogic sequences have a theme-based juxtapositional organisation. There are no naturalistic segues between sequences. The conversations in *Holiday*, *Affection* or *Intimacy* begin around a particular theme, but then abruptly end or wind down. Conversation flows laterally from one subject to the next without any logical coherence; topics include; taking pets to the vet, Chinese medicine, the nature of performance in the everyday, poetry, architecture, roller-coaster rides, travelling and so on, but devoid of narrative unity. The plays are structured so that at any moment they could stop; the text allows for dramatic annihilation, or what Eckersall and Patterson describe most effectively as ‘dramaturgical collapse’ (2011, 7). The text, in

these latter plays, goes further in exposing traditional theatrical language as a constructed convention that immunises its audience against profound engagement. As Elinor Fuchs puts it, theatre and literary language ‘are being seen as “signs” organised into “codes”’ (1996, 171).

The ‘Neo-Hyperrealist’ plays also utilise a greater deployment of intertextuality, such as occurs in *Holiday*, where there are quotes from Hafiz and Ernst Jandl, alongside references to pop culture, Hinduism and Mexican filmmaking. The use of songs, as mentioned previously, further breaks narrative hegemony, while revealing hidden content in the concrete relationship between the performers, which is not elucidated in the text.

In my plays with Ranters, the text exists purely in theatrical relationship to everything else that occurs onstage. As the ‘Neo-Hyperrealist’ plays are non-representational, there is no attempt to represent a reality beyond the material presence of the space the performers occupy. This is reflected in the dialogue, which at no point refers to a fictive space in proximity to the space being performed in i.e. the text does not refer to a space ‘down the road’ or ‘that shop nearby that sells apricots’. The fictive spaces mentioned are not localised to this degree; they are stripped of specific details so that they can be positioned in a city anywhere in the world. In other words, the audience have no way of knowing whether these spaces or locations are real or not. There is also no information about the characters that can be construed as fictional. Past events are described, but are devoid of information pertaining to the lives of the personas/characters. We only know their names, which the performers are instructed to replace with their own names if they prefer to do so.

Yet as these plays progress, reality as it is perceived becomes increasingly tenuous. The following excerpt from *Holiday* provides a clear indication of the textual quality of the dialogue.

PAUL She lead us into the lounge room. The furniture. It was all the same colour. And very spaced apart.

ARNO You're dreaming aren't you?

*Silence.*

PAUL We were invited to sit down. The woman offered us a drink... it was greenish... I took off my shoes. And I go and lie down. My friend comes and lies down next to me The woman starts talking. Or singing... something... I can't remember. She just keeps singing... or talking...

*Silence.*

PAUL What are you looking at?

ARNO Just your face

*Silence (Cortese 2009, 27).*

The obliteration of narrative, story and action in these plays takes our experiment with theatre further than my previous plays/texts. The space is then opened for the audience to infuse the dialogues with their own narrative frame. The boundaries in narrative, dramatic and causal logic are fragmented and dissolved; there is a 'collapse of boundaries' that distinguishes post-modern theatre, but in the case of the 'Neo-Hyperrealist' plays, the removal of the desire to perform and fictionalise creates a space that is filled with the audience's expectation (Fuchs 1996, 44). These texts resist

completion, as a whole, and with its parts, providing instead what Lehmann calls the ‘basic motifs of activating theatre’ (2006, 90). The creation of a meditative, relaxed ambience creates an open invitation to the audience to reflect, fantasise and invent their own narrative that infuses the original text with their own meanings and significance.

In the particular section of *Holiday* quoted above, the performer playing Paul is describing a meeting he had with a woman on a beach, which may or may not be real. Having constructed a metonymic space with a gentle, fluid ambience, the performers now demolish the ‘real’ by suggesting that one of the performers is in fact ‘dreaming’. It posits the question, which is underpinned throughout the play: is the ‘real’ just as illusory as fiction? Is the suggestion here that the material reality of the space and the performers is in fact no less illusory than a fictive space or persona? The play’s phenomenological method creates an underlying tension between the audience’s expectation of what is occurring and the disintegration of the action that beckons during the silence. This tension is compounded by the ontological ambiguity that presents itself as the play progresses. The development of a material space and persona presence is blurred within a real-unreal dichotomy; what is real or not is brought into doubt.

The critique of my ‘Neo-Hyperrealist’ plays has been generally enthusiastic; *Holiday* won numerous awards both in Australia and overseas. *Holiday* and *Intimacy* in particular have toured internationally more than any previous works with Ranters. At face value this seems surprising, as these plays are more aesthetically experimental. The stripping away of performance codes allowed for a greater degree of intimacy, or personal connection with the audience, and this seems to have contributed to the accessibility of these plays. Cameron Woodhead, writing in *The Age* found that the play captures the ‘solecisms and

banal affectations that afflict speech, but also the effortless randomness - the Brownian motion' and that the dialogue 'rises to the condition of music' (Woodhead 2007). In *Real Time*, John Bailey, wrote, 'This is theatre of the moment, in which no word exists before it is uttered, no action before it is performed. The relationship between these two is a process, not a product of the past' (2007, 81). Reviewing *Intimacy* at Noorderzon Festival (Netherlands) in Moose, Piet Van Kampen wrote: 'How they portray the silence in a conversation! With just the right facial expressions and perfect body language... It's been years since I have seen so perfect a production performed' (2012). It appears that the overriding desire for contemporary audiences that come and see Ranters' shows is the experience of authenticity and intimacy, a sense that they are part of the creative dynamic that unfolds amongst them.

In this new variant of everyday theatre, what Eckersall and Patterson describe as a 'new alternative-dramatic paradigm', the removal of the action/dramatic imperative offers the audience the temporal space to reflect on their own internal stories (2011, 7). The text is designed to slow down time, to create fragile and ephemeral spaces between performers and audience. These momentary spaces are filled by the audience's awareness of their own tenuous performances within the entire field of human interaction. This new everyday theatre takes the audience beyond the boundaries of self-imposed exile within the domain of purpose-built venues and into the streets and buildings we inhabit daily, and beyond that into our own imaginary lives.

## **5 - Rehearsal and development process: How is the text enacted?**

When an actor/performer begins a rehearsal process, they very often begin with a simple question: what is my character? The question seems utterly critical to the rendition of a successful production of a play, classic or contemporary. Yet the notion of character is a theatrical convention, which has altered considerably over many centuries. In my experience working with student and professional actors, character is often defined and categorised with a few reductive sentences, such as; my character is a person who loves money, or my character is motivated by jealousy. According to Tolstoy defining ‘character’ in this way is a mistake.

People are like rivers: they all contain the same water everywhere, yet each river at times will be narrow, swift, broad, smooth-flowing, clear, cold, muddy, warm. So it is with people. Each man carries within himself the germs of all human qualities (Cited in Stanislavski 1968, 15).

Similarly Strindberg castigates the use of ‘character’ in his preface to *Miss Julie*. ‘In the course of time the word character has assumed manifold meanings. It must have originally signified the dominating trait of the soul-complex... Later it became the middle-class term for automaton, one whose nature had become fixed’ (1955, 64). In reality, the scripted character is just words on a page, it cannot hope to constitute a person’s life, but if scripted in such a way, can permit the actor to complement the dialogue with action and psychological depth.

While most theatre makers utilise various notions of character, in the work of Ranters Theatre, character is avoided entirely. My early *Roulette* plays employ

characterisation in the text at a minimal level; the dialogue is nuanced and particularised according to specific character voices, there is no back-story information about who the characters are. This minimal use of character was gradually eliminated from the ‘Epic Hyperrealist’ and ‘Neo-Hyperrealist’ plays/texts that followed. However the actors did not assume a character in order to perform the text. They were asked to present themselves; the text became an exploration of self. This focus on the self, and questioning the self, in relation to performative habits, has been a cornerstone of my work with Ranters. It also bridges the concrete truth of the performed reality on stage, with the material presence of the actor. This consistent alignment between the material space and actor is a relatively new phenomenon in theatre.

In Brecht’s theatre the emphasis on the stage reality, was not reconciled by his use of characterisation, where an actor is required to ‘master their character by paying critical attention to its manifold utterances (Brecht 1986, 198). As Auslander points out, there is a contradiction at the heart of Brecht’s theories on staged performance. ‘The dilemma for a Brechtian performance is that, for all of Brecht’s emphasis on rationality and the undermining of theatrical illusion, the actor must convincingly portray something that she is not’ (1997, 33). For Grotowski, characters in theatre serve to examine and reveal the inner mechanisms of the self. The theatre becomes a place that reveals the hidden agendas within everyday encounters, ‘the language of gestures, mumblings, sounds, intonations, picked up in the street’ (52, 1975). In Grotowski’s theatre, the self is placed at the forefront in order to perform an exorcism of hidden motives, but not at the expense of character. According to Auslander, character for Grotowski is ‘is primarily a means of self-examination and a screen behind which that process can occur safely (1997, 34).

Although Grotowski radically redefines the concept of character, it is still a critical component of his theatre. In my work with Ranters, character is seen as a veil to hide what is more essential to the theatre we are making, such as the unconscious forces that lie within the actor. The focus on character can often come at the expense of the action. External considerations, such as costume, or physical blocking, can override an actor's commitment to spontaneity. Character can often be used as an excuse to avoid doing anything that makes the actor uncomfortable, or fearful; the result is a tacit form of 'normalisation' of human behaviour. A refusal to engage in behaviour considered abnormal or aberrant is a way of creating restrictions around what an actor may or may not do. It allows the actor to control how they might expose themselves in front of an audience, instead of being open and vulnerable to the possibilities that present themselves to her/him. For this reason Jean Renoir said 'to understand one's character one must have no preconceived ideas' (Brook 1993, 72).

Within the everyday the performer and audience react to the circumstances as they play out in front of them. Most people are content to behave without restricting themselves to notions of character. Whether on stage or within the everyday, the actors' actions and reactions determine how they are to be perceived by their audience. The audience is given a glimpse into the actors', as well as their own, psyches. There are many ways in which the conventions of staging text-based theatre, or theatre where 'characters' speak lines, are set in contradiction to the way text functions in the everyday (see performance text/verbatim conversations). From my observations of the everyday, people's responses to what happens in front of them are generally instinctive, utilising a complex interplay of conscious and unconscious mechanisms. People react to circumstances as they encounter them, often in

ways that undermine every effort they have made to direct and control their reactions to those we are engaged with. For example, in a café, I witnessed a young couple have an argument, even though they seemed happy to meet each other a few minutes earlier. After the argument, they spent considerable time ‘making up’ for their disagreement, only to have another more tempestuous argument towards the end of the meeting. Shortly afterwards, I witnessed the same couple amicably holding hands as they walked down the street. The words people speak are in response to an immense set of forces that they are unable to fully grasp. Words in the everyday are imbued within complex behaviours, and often appear to be in direct contradiction to what is occurring in any given moment. On and off-stage, people ‘create an unconscious and elaborate labyrinth of side steps and manoeuvres with which to hide their feelings and thoughts from others’ (Cortese 2005, ix).

The French use of the word *personage* and the Italian use of *persona*, rather than character, allows for the suggestion that what the audience witnesses on stage is a performed reality. In Ranters’ process, the essential focus for the actor should be on what is occurring in the totality of any given moment. It is the indefinable ‘action’, what Artaud refers to as the artist ‘signalling through the flames’ (1971, 6), emanating from the other actor that shapes how a person might react. As has previously been stated, an actor in a Ranters production is required to present him/herself. Each actor is asked to confront her/his own habitual codes of performance within the everyday, to unveil her/his own performative tendencies in order to present a stripped-back version of the self. This is not to suggest that the self is a discrete unit, but rather to try and unpack and question the socialised norms comprising the behaviour of self from a more essential version of self.

The body, or self, as Auslander suggests, ‘is not an organic, undifferentiated presence’ (1997, 35).

The Canadian company PME –Art, like many contemporary theatre makers working with post dramatic forms, have adopted a similar approach to character. The impulse to construct character via technical preparation and the exploration of psychological motivations can be used to hide qualities that are perhaps more vital to theatre. According to Jacob Wren, it can be argued that this impulse distances the actor ‘from what is most immediate, to defuse the intimacy and potential for conflict and in doing so undermine what really is at stake’ (2011, 65). The artistic director of Pan Pan, Gavin Quin, similarly requires his actors to shed characterisation, and employ tasks to access the core of an encounter. The aim of the task, in association with a segment of text, is designed to create a ‘spontaneity that seeks the quality of improvisation or unpredictability to achieve realness as opposed to rehearsed repetition’ (Ruiz 2011, 129). In the work of NYID, actors similarly engage tasks, which accumulate to form a body of actions, but these in no way suggest character, or psychological motivation. In their 2004 show, *Blowback*<sup>28</sup>, roles are listed as ‘The Actor Playing Scott’ and ‘The Actor Playing Charlene’ and so on. There is a conscious recognition throughout the text that the roles are theatrical constructions, open to manipulation and diverse interpretation, rather than fixed psychological characters. The text in NYID’s productions is used to suggest, provoke, inspire actions and reactions; it can only be understood in conjunction with the physical presence of the actors. Their work reflects a repudiation of the literary enunciatory theatre that dominates much mainstage production.

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<sup>28</sup> Premiered St Kilda, Melbourne 2004.

In much conventional text-based theatre I have witnessed as an audience, the text is understood literally and seen to engender the entirety of what happens, which seems to contradict the way text is signified in the everyday, as in David Williamson's *Don Parties On*<sup>29</sup>, or Tim Winton's *Rising Water*<sup>30</sup>. The theatrical experience is supposed to revolve around the literal meaning of the text, which very often negates many other complex behaviours that occur alongside and simultaneous with the text.

During rehearsals, it is not uncommon for plays to be read around a table on the first day, where decisions are made about the 'action' of the text, based on this initial 'reading' of the play. Characterisation is also often established relatively early, unfortunately also based on round-table analysis, which negates and undermines the use of physical actions and responses. Usually after these initial and hasty decisions are made, plays are rehearsed for four weeks, which is a relatively short time by European standards, before production.

There is also an expectation that an actor knows what the other actors' lines will be before rehearsal as they are given the entire script. Many directors have decided to do away with this convention, notably Ken Loach and Woody Allen among others in film, and theatre directors like Tim Etchells and Stefan Kaegi. In the Elizabethan theatre, the actors were only given their own lines plus the cue lines from the other characters, a process known as cue scripting (Tucker 2002, 37). It has been argued that this made the actors listen more acutely, but it was also necessitated by the prohibitive cost of employing copyists as well as the costs associated with rehearsal time. And in an era with no copyright law, it prevented disgruntled actors from absconding with the scripts.

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<sup>29</sup> Premiered at Melbourne Theatre Company in 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Premiered at Black Swan State Theatre Company in Perth, 2011.

The notion that an actor should receive the entire play was also not a convention at the time. The concept of having an actor know what was going to happen to them in the story may have been seen as absurd; after all in life we seldom have the same privilege. The Globe Theatre was, and still is, an intimate performance venue; the audience is proximate to the stage, requiring a high level of veracity from the actors.

The critical question for me as theatre writer is how speech functions in relation to everything else that occurs on stage. A contemporary audience does not experience theatre in the same way as audiences past. The frame has changed. So if we choose not to construct theatre texts from ‘old recipes’ as Brecht stated (1986, 183), how might the text elicit the richness and diversity of complex behaviours as presented in the everyday?

All forms of acting have a very direct relationship to the everyday, whether they occur in a formal theatre environment or in any other form of organised theatre. What occurs between people in ‘real’ life is a significant barometer by which we determine the plausibility, emotional veracity or even at times the quality of what we see before us as a constructed, enacted event. According to Goffman, ‘All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify’ (1969, 78). In many cases the line between fiction and the everyday is so blurred, determining when a person is ‘acting’ or not is difficult to discern even for a trained eye.

The challenge for an actor performing one of my plays is to create the conditions or processes that enable her or him to react to live situations without any conscious impediment, to be genuinely surprised, upset, angry to behave towards another actor in a way that is entirely fluid, without a reflective intervention. An actor in the everyday does not ‘see’ themselves in the way an outside observer does, and so does not cogitate their

behaviour while they are doing it. An actor in a Ranters show attempts to mirror this same condition, which is an extremely difficult task to achieve, as actors have already prepared the scene and the text they are about to deliver; for the most part, they have unconsciously worked out ‘actions’ to play (Stanislavski 1980, 13-16). In my experience of actors performing in my plays, an awareness of ‘action’ actually makes them more self-conscious and less able to give themselves over to the immediacy of what is occurring right in front of them.

In my work with Ranters Theatre, the rehearsal period is not designed to control what might occur, but rather to allow the actor to strip away the conscious mechanisms they naturally put into play in order to mediate their behaviour. Everyday life might teach us to learn from mistakes, rather than plunge into the same maelstrom night after night, but this is precisely what a Ranters actor needs to do. Given that the text I write is known in advance, the critical question is what enables an actor to lose control? How does an actor embrace what Artaud calls the ‘frail moving source forms never attain’ (1971, 6).

The Ranters performance process puts in place a number of circumstances to enable the actor/performer to react instinctively to what’s in front of them, rather than make conscious considerations. An actor in a Ranters show will have learned their lines prior to rehearsal, the rehearsal process focuses on elements that can’t be controlled in advance, i.e. on the behavioural minutiae unfolding moment to moment, which each actor needs to respond to unconsciously. The result is an unmediated action. The director assists the actors in ensuring that their responses are genuinely free of conscious interference and are not reliant on performative habits, such as affecting emotion, acting in isolation, declaiming, or creating controlled patterns of behaviour. These performative habits also

include those from real-life that are used to modulate everyday behaviour. In this context, what we call ‘character’, the qualities and actions that determine who we are, is merely a substitute term for the accumulation of performative habits over time (Goffman 1969, 80-81). Ranters’ actors are required to dispel with notions of ‘character’ in order to avoid veiled discourse with each other. For this reason, Ranters also work non-representationally, with full-awareness of audience; there is no pretence at creating a fiction. The space is concrete, the audience exists; the relationship between audience, space and performer is one that is free of illusory representations (Cortese 2005, ix-x)

Most theatre processes and methodologies spend considerable time discovering what elements are beyond the control of the actor. In classic Stanislavski, the actor discovers an ‘objective’ and they play an ‘action’ in order to achieve it (1968, 46). By focusing on the objective and action, attention is taken off the line of dialogue. In many cases actors discover something dynamic and fluid between them, only to realise that it can only work once and that the next time they meet they have to try something different. Attempting to duplicate what worked the previous night is always a trap; the actor has become conscious of what happened. Many actors try and lock down their performance through technical preparation where they repeatedly practice engaging in a particular emotional state to enable her/him to draw upon that same emotional state at the required moment in performance, only to realise that emotion has been tempered by their awareness of it, as though they might rehearse crying for a funeral the day before.

The danger with working with actions is that while consciousness might be removed from the line, it is directed towards the task. The action or the task now becomes ‘readable’ to a discerning audience. Literate audiences, such as those you might find in the

international festival circuits that Ranters perform to, can more readily read an actor 'playing the action'. This visibility undermines the theatrical impact as it renders the performed behaviour predictable. For this reason, an actor working for Ranters is asked to dispense with utilising actions.

The one thing that an actor cannot control in a scene, as in the everyday, is how another actor might behave. For this reason the Ranters performance process jettisons focus on the text, as well as 'actions' (playing an action can be used as a get out of gaol card, when the actor has lost sense of what they are doing), and instead requires the actor to confer the attention on the opposing actor(s). Allowing the actor to react to the immediacy of how the other actor is affecting him/her assists the actor to dispel the consciousness of speaking prepared lines of dialogue. The manner in which a text is delivered, as well as the meaning the actors and audience derive from the text, has little to do with any literal interpretation of the text. Rather it is wholly to do with what the line is 'doing' in the context of the performance. The meaning of any line can be utterly transformed by a Ranters actor by simply changing what the actor is 'doing' with the text.

The Ranters' process is designed to allow the actor to be open and vulnerable to transformation; the actors affect change in each other. This sounds simple, but in reality is complex and extremely difficult to achieve. It goes against the actors' natural inclinations, which is to protect themselves from revealing what they feel and think. While working on the floor during rehearsal, a Ranters actor must unlearn social constraints that have conditioned their behaviour since childhood. Rather than protect and veil their emotional response, the actor has to overcome the interference of their consciousness and trust, not only the external eye of the director, but also the other actors. They must learn to lose

control in the moment to the point that the ‘scene’ appears to be unfolding for the first time; the result is the particular hyperrealist aesthetic. The intention is to reveal what is invisible within the real (Cortese 2009, iv).

In my experience actors betray themselves when they consciously monitor their behaviour, and thereby not achieve what is termed ‘emotional truth’. Peter Brook defines this process as the actor learning ‘how to lie truthfully’ (1968, 131). The emotions need to be real, even if the circumstances are invented. Seasoned detectives talk of trusting ‘gut instinct’ when ascertaining whether an interviewee is telling the truth (Keppel & Birnes 2003, xxiii). But even the layperson is very good at working out when an actor is lying or not; it is extremely difficult, for instance, for an actor to imitate emotion. The audience places their attention on those elements of the performance that they know are hard to fake, or cannot be ‘readily manipulated, thus enabling ourselves to judge the reliability of the more misrepresentable cues in the performance’ (Goffman 1969, 66). For a Ranters actor, the key is to discover an unmediated spontaneity that responds to a direct encounter of the other actors, and the audience.

Each production is developed over a three to four week period before entering a six to eight week rehearsal stage. The length of development and rehearsal enables the actors to work cohesively as an ensemble. The development is used to construct concepts, and methods of working, and for more recent work, such as *Intimacy*, to develop thematic content for the text. The actors are required to know their lines before the commencement of rehearsal. This allows the actor more time to focus on each other’s presence. While the dialogue is known beforehand, the actors improvise, often paraphrasing the text, in order to develop a concrete relationship with each other. The improvisations are designed to refine

the actor's reactive skills, to draw out unconscious forces that are often in counterpoint to the written text. In the early 'Intimate Hyperrealist' and 'Epic Hyperrealist' plays, the actors played with objectives in order to draw out hidden conflict in the text. This conflict was often unexpected, or acted out of alignment with the literal content of the dialogue. The narrative content in the *Roulette* plays, or the multiple lines of action in plays like *St Kilda Tales*, or *The Wall*, draw the actors towards an emotional end point. But with the 'Neo-Hyperrealist' plays, such as *Holiday* or *Intimacy*, there is no drama or conflict inherent in the text. The actors engage each other, and the audience, in a relaxed state. While they perform themselves, they utilise intertextual content that shifts the audience's experience of performed reality, suggesting a 'situated, relational, subjectivity' (Eckersall & Patterson, 2011, 8). The actors are neither fictional, nor non-fictional, operating between a fluid and definable space. The actors express an authentic, everyday spontaneity, while simultaneously expressing an awareness that what they are performing is theatrically constructed. While acting themselves, they are at once several, having adopted multiple personas; the actors are tangible yet hybridised personas. As Eckersall and Patterson state, 'The performer is a shifting, often multiple presence' (2011, 8). This outcome is the result of rigorous rehearsal that details, layer upon layer, the miniscule happenings that occur between the actors, which slowly coalesce to form a visible yet transient, relationship. By the time the play is ready to be performed, the actors' senses have been refined; they are super-alert, spontaneous and open to each other, but with a relaxed attitude.

Discovering ways to be spontaneous is nothing new. David Garrick, the great eighteenth century actor who transformed the English stage, was the enemy of formalism. He hated the reduction of characterisations to formulaic narratives, such as 'tragic struts,

elaborate gestures, chanting declamations’ (Denning 1996, 117). But the conventions by which we determine ‘truth’ on stage or in film, or even in the everyday varies widely. Many directors, for example, that came out of the actor’s studio began to disparage the ‘method’, which David Mamet compares to preparing for a lecture rather than for a scene. ‘The Method got it wrong... It is beside the point to have (an actor) undergo the supposed trials of the character upon the stage. The actor has his own trials... they don’t have to be superadded; they exist’ (1998, 22). The audience of the Internet age has become increasingly aware of the camera, its ability to ‘close in’ on the action. The audience is now more able than ever to read and interpret human behaviour as it expresses itself physically and verbally. How an audience defines spontaneity changes and evolves over time.

Having worked with Ranters for the past twenty-two years, I have come to understand that an actor cannot discover spontaneous reactions by reducing their awareness of what is occurring within and around them. Rather what is required is a super-awareness of what takes place in any given moment. It is this super-awareness, which directors and methodologists often call ‘presence’ (Read 1993, 61) such as being ‘present to the moment’, which permits the actor to respond to the labyrinthine, multiplicity of unconscious and conscious mechanisms that are at play at any one time. While many directors talk about actions and objectives (Mamet 1998, 84), in everyday theatre this is not something that is so easily reducible to singular impulses. The vast complexity inherent in any given moment is something a Ranters actor has to grapple with; it ensures that their art will always be one of continuous discovery. Engaging

theatre occurs when this act of discovery is shared with the audience, allowing them to glimpse and engage with an act of continuous creation.

## **6 - Representation and Audience relationship: How do audiences read the text in performance?**

While Chekhov was a major influence on my writing methodology, Brecht's theories on performance have exerted an influence over the way my plays are constructed in relationship to the audience. Brecht wrote and theorized extensively on the theatre; his *Verfremdungseffekt* calls for an 'audience that is relaxed and follows the action without strain' (Benjamin 1968, 147). According to Grotowski, Brecht never attempted to create his own particular methodology of performance; rather he focused on what worked. In regard to the *Verfremdungseffekt*, 'this was not really a method. It was rather a kind of aesthetic duty demanded of the actor, for Brecht did not actually ask himself: "How can this be done?"' (Grotowski 1975, 173). What impresses me most about Brecht's plays is that they tell a clear story; Brecht doesn't let aesthetic consistency get in his way. Brecht was prolific, and employed a wide range of theatrical languages and skills in his plays in order to best convey his message. But how has Brecht contributed to my own exploration in non-representational theatre and the everyday?

Brecht understood, perhaps better than anybody, that any adherence to strict methodology can only demean the theatre. 'When Brecht talks of actors understanding their function, he never imagined that all could be achieved by analysis and discussion... The quality of the work... comes entirely from the creativity of the working climate' (Brook 1980, 86). He realised that theatre *cannot* represent life, and therefore should never attempt to do so. In Brecht's plays, 'the flow of events is now the object of a stage narrative' (Szondi 1987, 71).

Theatre can only ever ‘appear’ to be theatrical. Audiences are soon able to adapt to and accept new theatrical languages; it doesn’t take long for forms of theatre to become stale and conventional. ‘If an actor stands on a bare stage beside a placard reminding us that this is a theatre, then in basic Brecht we do not fall into an illusion, we watch as adults – and judge’ (Brook 1980, 88). Brecht was very aware the theatre needed to evolve. Each generation of theatregoers sees performance through a different prism; the audience require the theatre to be reinvigorated in order to be affected by it. ‘It is the inaccurate way in which happenings between human beings are represented that restricts our pleasure in the theatre. The reason: we and our forebears have a different relationship to what is being shown’ (Brecht 1986, 183).

Brecht realised that our ability to suspend disbelief had been diminished by a twentieth century rational inquiry into the way we function as social beings. It is not enough to pretend that the theatre production we are looking at is a representation of the real, when we know it is not. Brecht goes on to say, ‘we have to think of ourselves as children of a scientific age’ (1986, 163). He argued that theatre should relinquish any attempt at this pretence of self-denial; it should claim its own unique powers and use whatever properties it has at its disposal.

Much has been made of Brecht’s innovations, particularly his use of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, but Brecht fits firmly within the tradition of dramatic narrative. Brecht’s plays are essentially reliant on *story*. There is no real break with classic dramatic conventions, he merely uses whatever lies at his disposal to maximise the theatrical effect. Brecht’s theatre ‘constituted a renewal and completion of classical dramaturgy... the fable

(story) remained the sine qua non for him' (Lehmann 2006, 33). The theatre that emerged since the 1960s could be defined as 'post-Brechtian theatre' (Lehmann 2006, 33).

To my mind, Brecht's most radical idea was to accept that the theatrical space was simply that, a theatrical space; one that cannot be divided from the space beyond the stage. Once the stage arena is revealed as a concrete space, all mystery is stripped away. The line between the performance space and beyond it becomes blurred. When does the performance begin and end? When the actors announce it so? Brecht's theatre goes beyond representation; the actors know they are consciously performing. The performance can be anywhere, in factories, schools, street corners; the actors are simply doing their job with full awareness of the presence of their audience. From there it is only a small, but significant, jump towards an idea of performance that insinuates itself within the consciousness of the everyday.

It is easy to underestimate the profound shift in performance aesthetics that Brecht engendered by dissolving the sacred line between the actors and the audience. As a writer of contemporary postdramatic theatre, it is difficult to measure or even imagine how audiences experienced this shift in the past, how it was experienced, and how it evolved within specific cultural milieus. Viewing videos of famous past productions can only give me a glimpse into what the experience of audiences might have been. Having watched DVDs of *Paradise Now*<sup>31</sup> by the Living Theatre; Pina Bausch and the Wuppertal Dance Theater's *Rite of Spring*<sup>32</sup> and *Café Müller*<sup>33</sup>; Tadeusz Kantor's *Dead Class*<sup>34</sup> and Peter

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<sup>31</sup> Premiered in New York, 1968.

<sup>32</sup> Premiered at Tanztheater Wuppertal, in Wuppertal in 1975.

<sup>33</sup> Premiered at Tanztheater Wuppertal, in Wuppertal in 1978.

<sup>34</sup> Premiered in Warsaw at the Cricot 2 Theatre in 1975.

Brook's *Conference of The Birds*<sup>35</sup>, I asked myself: can we really understand how these shows were received by their audiences for the first time? It raises the question: is a work of performance possible to assess in hindsight? Performance always exists within an evolutionary frame, not merely in terms of its aesthetic processes, but also in the way the audience receives it. But can you measure this via video or film? How an audience receives or engages a theatrical event changes over time. Theatre, according to Brecht, should not be 'constructed according to the old recipes' (1986, 183). A book can be readily contemporised during the act of reading, but performance is compromised by what it offers within the immediacy of its reception as a live event. Even then it is difficult to measure its effects. It is bound by temporal and cultural specificity. Performances are often deemed great when they stretch and expand our cultural awareness, provide an insight into something in a way we have never experienced before, but how do we measure that in an audience from a previous era? The same applies to TV and film. What was called cinema verite, utilising naturalistic acting, in the 1950s and 60s can look mannered or stilted today, as in Cassavetes' 1959 film, *Shadows*. This is especially so of the films influenced by Method training from The Actors Studio, such as Kazan's 1954 film, *On the Waterfront*.

What is perhaps more interesting, and part of an ongoing study, is the investigation into the effects of the digital revolution on everyday human behaviour itself. How much has our interface with the proliferation of media made all of us aware of the spectacle we create within our lives? Are we becoming increasingly aware of a performative side to our consciousness that finds a way of 'playing' out with the everyday? In turn, does an awareness of everydayness in performance also coincide with an increasingly voyeuristic

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<sup>35</sup> Premiered at the 1979 Avignon Festival.

consciousness? Does this awareness bring about a more ‘outward’ form of behaviour, or does it result in behaviour that seeks to avoid scrutiny and find moments of private space within the public? In *The Social Context of Non Verbal Behaviour*, a landmark study of human interaction, Philippot, Coats and Feldman argue that television shows have had a significant influence on the way children and adults interact with each other. Acted, or representational, behaviour in sitcoms has in turn been unconsciously mimicked in real life. There is evidence to suggest that both children and adults regard emotional displays by characters on television as normal, and are not aware that emotional states and expressiveness depicted in television drama ‘exaggerates, overgeneralises, and misrepresents’ (Philippot 1999, 161). In real life, people tend to encode emotional displays within a complex and sophisticated array of gestures and facial expressions. These subtleties are very often lost in television, where instead characters ‘do very little dissembling and masking of emotions’ (Philippot 1999, 163).

But how has the pervasiveness of mass media changed the way we view the theatre? This question is important for anyone making contemporary theatre. Practitioners need to ask themselves complex questions about how the audience ‘reads’ behaviour in light of our constant exposure to digital media. This is not to suggest that the audience response should determine theatrical content, but my own experience in making theatre has taught me that the success of a show can only be measured in relation to those who are watching it live. If the audience is not engaged, then the work has failed. A work of performance exists only in its reception by an audience; it is an enacting of a relationship between people, between performers, between members of an audience.

Helen Cole's *We See Fireworks*<sup>36</sup>, grapples with the way audience perspective has evolved over time. It consists of an archive of audio recordings of people talking about their memories of performative moments in theatres, fetish clubs, churches, car parks and public spaces. What comes to light (literally given the audio recordings are activated to coincide with a light bulb flaring up) is the capacity of performance to profoundly affect the people who have experienced it. This kind of work is a far cry from the proliferation of large-scale theatrical spectacle that has emerged since the 60s, a development that has coincided with the advent and proliferation of TV and film production. Companies like Welfare State International and Bread and Puppet Theatre presented spectacle that was often inspired by social themes that took place within the everyday environment, such as Welfare State's *Parliament in Flames*<sup>37</sup> and Bread and Puppet Theatre's *Scenes of Vermont*<sup>38</sup> but are conceived as conscious performances designed around scale. Much public spectacle, such as the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2012 London Olympic Games, are also designed for a televised audience. Spectacle within theatre venues became de rigueur during the 1970s and 80s and began to wane in the 90's. Companies such as Theatre de Soleil<sup>39</sup>, Dumb Type<sup>40</sup> or Societas Raffaello Sanzio<sup>41</sup> create theatrical visions that can only be conceived and executed within a performance space. But coinciding with these productions, there was a move in the early 1990's towards more intimate venues. These productions required a different style of performance that engaged with the changes brought about in human behaviour from a generation of people who have grown up

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<sup>36</sup> Performed at the Spill Festival in 2011.

<sup>37</sup> First performed by Welfare State International in 1981.

<sup>38</sup> First performed in New York, 1968.

<sup>39</sup> Founded in 1959 in Paris, France.

<sup>40</sup> Founded in 1984 in Kyoto, Japan.

<sup>41</sup> Founded in 1981 in Cesena, Italy.

viewing digital media. Not only is digital media used extensively with the shows themselves, such as Van Hove's *Opening Night*<sup>42</sup> where video projections are used during the performance to show close-ups on the live action that counterpoint or offer a different perspective on the live action seen from a distance. In Gob Squad's *Kitchen, You've never had it so Good*<sup>43</sup>, alternative narratives of past events are offered to the audience as a way of shifting dramaturgical control over content.

As with much theatre that emerged in the early 90's, Ranters desired to reposition theatrical language by presenting it in intimate environments and limiting audience capacities. The audience for our 'Intimate Hyperrealist' productions, such as *Roulette*, were limited to around one hundred people per night. The performance arena was close to the front row. The intimate proximity created between audience and performer in these plays simulated the closeness of the camera. As the audience was drawn closer towards the bodies of the performers, the text has had to adapt itself. The texts that I write for Ranters Theatre is experienced, as it is in digital media, only in relationship to what is seen. Even in the case of the early *Roulette* plays, while written for a situational context, the text was designed to open up a live response in the actors. Little or no underlying textual content needed to be explained, as the audience was close enough to read the action. The words are to be seen as prime movers for action (Moose 2012). As the audience was so close to the action, it became clear to me as a writer that a representational context was getting in the way of the immediacy of the action. The closeness of the audience to the presence of the actor was at odds with the fictional frame being presented; there was a clear relationship to 'the presentness of performance and its refusal of representation' (Auslander 1997, 55).

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<sup>42</sup> Premiered with Toneelgroep in Amsterdam, Netherlands, in 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Premiered at the Volksbühne in Berlin, Germany in 2007.

After presenting these plays, it occurred to me to go further; why not allow the audience and the performer to share the same space and time? As Lehmann points out, in the new post dramatic theatre the distance between the audience and the performer is ‘structurally shaken’ (Crawley & White 2011, 64).

A critical aspect of my work has been the creation of texts that suggest ‘liveness’. As I have previously indicated in the section entitled ‘The Genesis of Ranters Theatre’, the notion of what constitutes ‘live’ performance has been hotly debated. Phelan argues that live performance creates a unique, unrepeatable experience that ‘plunges into visibility... and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and unconsciousness where it eludes regulation and control’ (1993, 148). Auslander, as has been shown, argues that live theatre can only be seen in relation to mediatised representations, that ‘the live can exist only within an economy of reproduction’ (1999, 54). As I have already stated my objections to Auslander’s analysis, I won’t do so again here, except to further point out that much of the development of postdramatic, not just hyperrealist theatre aesthetics, has been to highlight the live element of performance. This stress on ‘liveness’ within a form of postdramatic aesthetics has evolved considerably since Auslander wrote his analysis. His work refers to liveness as a concept, rather than particular forms of contemporary theatre, which privilege spontaneity, immediacy and rawness, and ‘liveness’ as a fundamental part of their *raison d’être*. As Read states, the two essential ingredients for theatre to occur relate to ‘its liveness and the audience/performer act of spectation’ (2008, 85). Nicola Ruiz also suggests that postdramatic work in particular, places the focus on audience experience, while ‘highlighting the liveness of performance: the unique and unrepeatable encounter between audience and performers’ (2011, 126).

In my texts for *Ranters*, the audience experience a relationship that develops between the actors, which is improvised ‘live’ even though the text is fixed. This construction of ‘liveness’, at the expense of more formal and technical performance aesthetics, is designed to highlight what is essential and unrepeatable, a manifesting of the real, in the exchange between audience and performers. Over the years my performance texts have progressively shifted the emphasis towards greater liveness, more immediacy and unpredictability.

The reduction and disappearance of conscious narrative, story, characterisation, as has been discussed earlier, together with the removal of the fictional frame (non-representational space, time, persona), gives the audience increased control over the performance dramaturgy. The plays/texts I write aim to occupy a space, which, according to Lehmann, draws ‘the level of the real explicitly into a co-player’ (Crawley & White 2001, 129). The audience engage the material presence of the actors in a space; the experience is shared, which is unambiguously real and spontaneous. The performances, in their relationship to audience, are specifically designed to draw out phenomenological responses to the liveness of the performance.

My experience of everyday activity also greatly contributed to my aesthetic shift in the way the text was presented to, and framed by, the audience. When viewing the everyday, the audience requires only limited knowledge of a person under observation in public in order to be engaged; the ‘narrative’ context is mostly imagined. As a practitioner I have often asked myself; why can’t this be so in theatre? In the everyday our awareness of time and space shifts and distorts depending on a range of circumstances. The viewer is affected by and gives impetus to external circumstances that prompt a phenomenological response in order to convert a particular space into a passage, or transform a nameless

occurrence into a significant event. The everyday audient provides spaces and events with form and meaning by a ‘poetic geography’ that is conferred ‘on top of the geography of the literal’ (de Certeau 1988. 105). In the city of the everyday, the audient casts a discourse onto places and events to create a realm of play; the city becomes inhabited by stories and legends, which in turn create spaces that are believable (de Certeau 1988, 106).

In multi-culturalised cities like Melbourne, multiple languages sit alongside and overlap with each other. Sometimes this diversity results in genuine cross-cultural interplay within theatrical productions. At other times there appears to be a reticence to engage with cultures that are too alien, as though Melbourne consists of an archipelago of tiny islands in isolation from each other. In my twenty years as a theatre maker in Melbourne, I have witnessed only a very narrow mainstage presentation/representation of the multiple cultures that surround us; the theatre tends to resort to passive acceptance of dominant cultural stereotypes. According to prominent theatre director Lee Lewis, a person’s cultural difference is perceived ‘relative to the national ideal from the point of view of that national position’ (Lewis, 2007, 8). The dominant cultural hegemony fills the vacuum left by theatre makers’ inability to embrace cultural diversity and minority status.

When observing the everyday in Melbourne, I am conscious of being part of a polylingual landscape, with multiple cultural and personalised linguistic tropes that defy and resist my attempts to capture them in any form of theatrical representation. The act of ‘becoming an audient’, taking myself out of the ‘performance’, changes not just my relationship to what is performed, but also how it is performed. In representational or non-representational theatre on a stage, a narrative is implied, whether or not it is inherent in the work itself; the audience projects a narrative of their own imagining by virtue of their

relationship to what they are witnessing. In a Ranters production, the audience accepts their role as one that requires a consciousness of removal from the performance arena; it is this consciousness, rather than a physical relationship, that creates a form of *Verfremdungseffekt*; a mental space, one that is relatively relaxed, for the audience to read narrative content. The audience is then able to order, re-order, imagine and re-imagine what they see in front of them. It is in this mental space of ‘becoming audient’, where a specific relationship is created between the audience and performer that gives birth to the ‘dramatic narrative’ within my texts.

My experience of festival and theatre literate audiences is that they are now so well attuned to ‘reading’ the complexity of human behaviour, theatre needs to continually adapt in order to optimise its relationship to its audience. Can the theatre text be seen or understood in isolationist terms anymore, as a kind of poetics of the physical that articulates the unseen, unknowable, yet is outside the influence of other art forms or mediums, such as film and the Internet? What has the camera and digital media in general, taught the audience to ‘read’ in a glance, a gesture, a miniscule expression in the face, a manifesting of the physical in relationship to the spoken text?

In my ‘Epic’ and ‘Neo-Hyperrealist’ work, the fictional frame, the narrative content, characterisation, representation, theatrical and acting conventions, to name a few, are removed in order to allow the audience greater freedom in discovering and projecting their own narrative of the performance (Dimasi 2010). This aesthetic development was gradual, one Ranters shared with our audiences who returned, show after show, to see our work. For Ranters, the audient and the performer have always been considered active constituents, inseparable from what is defined as theatre. The act of theatre making occurs in the space

between the actors and the audience. The ‘Epic Hyperrealist’ productions, such as *St Kilda Tales* and *The Wall*, were large-scale, with six to ten performers on stage. While the action unfolding on stage was continuous, incorporating simultaneity in text and physical action, the stage activity was choreographed, often in conjunction with lighting and stage effects, in a way to draw the audience’s attention from one mini-event to another. *St Kilda Tales* in particular incorporated numerous energised movement sequences, which were contrasted by still or quiet encounters. This drawing of the audience’s eye, suggested by the text, enabled the director to privilege a particular narrative pathway, but the simultaneous action still enabled a multiple reading at any one point. The dialogic content is episodic and lacks a teleological narrative, but gives rise to a series of happenings, events, actions between the performers, which replace ‘coherence and cohesion with an aesthetics of mismatch’ (Frazao 2011, 21). Everyday life is captured and presented within the context of performance, allowing the audience to frame the live action from a relaxed perspective. Performance language is contextualised within the parameters of an everyday reality, but the audience is invited to watch, they share the space; they are not voyeurs watching a social drama. The multiple perspectives, and stripping away of narrative content, provide a space for the audience to construct a network of his/her own internal narratives. As Brook suggests: ‘The less one gives the imagination, the happier it is, because it... enjoys playing games’ (1993, 27).

The later ‘Neo Hyperrealist’ texts, such as *Holiday*, *Affection* and *Intimacy*, were designed to give the audience an even greater role in the construction of the dramaturgy. These texts occupy a peculiar space between fiction and non-fiction, of performance and its denial. The focus is on what James Tyson, former Artistic Director of the Chapter Arts

Centre, called ‘the ultra-thin lines between representation and emptiness’ (2010, 1). The audience are close to the action; they are situated within the same world, acknowledged by the performers as complicit in the action that unfolds before them. But the audience’s phenomenological relationship to what is real is called into question as the play progresses. In *Holiday*, the space, the actors in it, and presumably the audience, are part of something chimerical and intangible. The dramatic tension in *Holiday* exists in the audience already; they alternate between doubt and clarity in their attempt to grapple with their tenuous relationship to reality. As Eckersall and Patterson point out, the drama in *Holiday* arises ‘from a lack of coherent reality’ (2011, 7).

*Intimacy* and *Affection* also play with this tension, though they are more consciously presentational. The actors acknowledge playing a role in these works. In *Intimacy*, a projection of the actors’ faces is accompanied by a caption with their personas’ names, although when switching between roles the actors make no attempt to change their behaviour. As with *Holiday*, the actors are playing themselves. According to Nilsson-Pollas’s discussion of *Intimacy* (presented at the 2010 Melbourne International Arts Festival), in *Real Time* magazine, ‘Ranters engages the audience in the process of theatrical meaning-making until the ordinary becomes something else that both reflects what it emerged from and transcends it’ (2010, 6). The danger presented by Ranters’ approach to theatre making is that by providing the audiences with the opportunity to project their own narratives, there is a highly variable response in what people experience. To quote Martin Ball, who reviewed the same show for *The Age*, ‘Intimacy treads a fine line between creating an exquisite space of understanding for the audience, and a sense that this emperor has no clothes (2010, 16). With the removal of narrative content and the

reduction of aesthetic signs, *Intimacy* relies on what the audience is willing to bring to the performance, making its reception vulnerable to a wide variety of interpretations.

The audience in the later plays co-habit the space with the performers; they are not just acknowledged, as with the earlier plays, they are engaged in the same uncertainties unfolding before them. They are drawn into the same intangible zone between the real and unreal. My performance texts appear to be at an interesting crossroads, a point where the shared space between performer and a watching/listening audience can alter, where the audience can be actively brought into the space of the action, or remain ‘consciously removed’. If I have reached the boundary between these two possibilities, then my texts can either continue to play within this space, or reach towards a new paradigm with the audience. One option is that I explore the possibility that my plays will engage the contribution of texts from the audience. This can be either in the form of live, unscripted interaction, documentary text, or third person narration. As a writer, it is these last two possibilities that most interest me, a possibility I have explored with my novel ‘The Dream Life of Butterflies’.

**7 – The Everyday and The Novel: How is the everyday presented in the novel, referencing its relationship to performance creation and the development of theatre texts?**

In some societies with a tradition of oral story telling, it is often left to elders or the chief to tell a story that in some way elucidates the spiritual and environmental complexities of a particular social group. After extensive investigations into the social and political structures of South American societies, French anthropologist and ethnographer Pierre Clastres concluded that in many instances the selection of the chief is decided on the basis of who is the best speaker.

Only a good orator can become chief... The Indians place a high value on his words: talent as a speaker is both a condition and instrument of political power. There are many tribes in which every day, either at dawn or sunset, the chief must gratify the people of his group with an edifying discourse (1977, 21-23).

The story is a way of celebrating, like the dance or rite, what the tribe represents. There are many diverse examples, such as Homer's epics, or the fairy tales compiled by Italo Calvino in *Italian Folktales*, where stories were memorised and retold by successive generations, before being written down. One only has to think of various writers from the Sufi tradition, perhaps best illustrated by *The Thousand and One Nights* (Haddawy 1990, xi). The composers of these tales were not afraid to expose political tyranny, or show explicit sexuality or heretical religious beliefs (McWilliam/Boccaccio 1972, 24-25). Through telling and retelling, stories, in particular fairytales, were edited; they became more concise

and dramatic; irrelevant details were removed, others were added to bring the story up to date or make it more relevant to a particular community. The story was like myth, dynamic, part of a process of perpetual evolution and wholly dependant on the community that sustained it (Calvino 1980, xxvii). The stories were designed to evoke laughter or tears; their focus was on popular needs, the petty corruption of a local politician; the mysticism of life, hunger, disease, sex and death. It was this tradition that was inherited by such distinct writers as Marguerite de Nevarre or the Brothers Grimm.

The narrative drama has a similar structure to stories from the oral tradition. What strikes me when reading a story from *The Decameron*, *Grimm's Selected Tales*, Calvino's *Italian Folktales*, or *The Arabian Nights*, is the consistent structure with which the story is told. There is invariably a clear set-up, where the central problem is articulated and then acted upon, before reaching a conclusion or resolution. The dialogues in these stories are imbued with dramatic action. According to Goffman, everyday speech is also organised around the same dramatic principles. Conversations are structured as mini-dramas 'ordinary social intercourse is itself put together as a scene is put together, by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies' (1969, 78). When reading stories from the oral tradition, they seem to me to both reflect and distort the everyday; magical and mysterious content is revealed within the mundane. But what is the relationship between everyday conversation and storytelling? How does this effect the way dialogue is presented in dramatic plays for the stage? As Turner put it, 'Life is as much an imitation of art as the reverse' (1982, 72). What interests me from the point of view of performance making is the way storytelling affects the way people engage each other, both in theatre and the everyday.

The focus on everyday activity has been theorised extensively through the twentieth century; from the Chicago School of Sociology to Burke and Goffman, from the Mass Observation Movement in the UK, to theorists like Artaud and the Situationists. The sixties witnessed the rise of more vibrant, polemical generalizations concerning the discourse for a better society, with a degree of utopian hedonism envisioned by Situationist writers such as Debord, Vaneigem, Constant *et al.* More recently, artists have encouraged a more democratic approach, emphasizing the importance of not intervening within the everyday, pursuing instead the unobtrusive contemplation of events, places and occurrences so that they may reveal hidden qualities and unintended transformations. Blau claims that ‘we stage our lives, in or out of the theatre, in accordance with the description available of the perceptual process itself’ (1992, 52). Similarly, Magritte, in an article on his painting *La Condition Humaine*, states: ‘we need a design before we can properly discern its form, let alone derive pleasure from its perception. It is culture, convention and cognition that make that design that allows it to be perceived as beauty’ (Schama 1995, 12).

Especially important has been the work of Lefebvre and de Certeau. Their critiques deconstructed the primacy of conventional forms of representation, such as the book, theatre and painting (which the more extremist Situationists regarded as hyped up commodities designed to conceal their modes of exploitation), and supplanted them with continuous, creative acts of engagement in the field of everyday life. As Goffman put it, ‘we all act better than we know how’ (1969, 64). Private and public spheres for human interaction would be dissolved; the city environment could be used to inscribe acts of desire and visceral need. ‘Homo Ludens impinges on his environment; he interrupts, changes, leaves trace of his presence everywhere’ (Andreotti & Costa 1996, 86). De

Certeau attempts to create a language out of footsteps and gestures. ‘Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects... the trajectories it “speaks”’ (1988, 99). The emphasis on spoken language has been decentred, both in the way we ‘read’ the everyday, as well as in theatrical/novelistic representation or presentation. What can be considered a ‘narrative’ has expanded to include a complex, living array of human acts and contexts that defy ready categorisation, yet in totality can be understood to compose a coherent theatre of the everyday. According to de Certeau:

All modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping in through proportions, sequences, and intensities, which vary according to the time, the path taken and the walker. These enunciatory operations are of an unlimited diversity (1988, 99).

Any engagement with reality can be called a narrative; enabling us to create a localised, contemporary version of the Situationist *dérive*, or the drug-crazed, aimless wanderings of the Sufi’s from the court of Hasan-i Sabbah (Wilson 1988, 47-8), or Thomas de Quincey’s opiated search for a girl he briefly met on a street corner as described in his *Confessions*. In the realm of the book, the articulation of human acts has long gained supremacy, or at least has an equal footing with dialogue. The book’s ability to transcend time and space, to take the reader wherever it chooses, has placed the emphasis on the poetry of human actions. The central character, or narrator, is forever on the move, inventing and creating new spaces for the reader to engage or imagine; spaces that fill the gaps and silences of our torpid endurance of the everyday. It is this ‘articulation of human acts’ that has had a significant impact on my own development everyday theatre, as well as my novel.

The narrative as ‘journey’, habitually cast as an accrual of heroic actions, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* through to Homer’s *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid* Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and continuing with Somadeva’s more humanised, picaresque *Kathasaritsagara*, or Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* is central to the Western and Eastern literary/performative tradition. Modernists such as Hamsun, Machado de Assis, Joyce, Proust, and Sartre recast the peripatetic narrator within the psycho-geographical frame of the industrial city. Here the anti-heroic protagonist contends with events more visceral and ordinary than their classical forbears. Rejecting linear unity of action, the radical subjectivity of modernism was a eulogy for the poeticisation of everyday experience. Benjamin heard the call, prescribing ‘the art of straying’ through the labyrinthine streets of Paris in the manner of a Baudelairean flaneur. The reader/viewer could observe and enjoy tableaux vivants, as though ‘through a pair of opera glasses’ (Benjamin 1968, 173.) Nietzsche too had longed for a form of existence, in everyday life, as well as in writing and performance, which inspired the confluence of body and mind in explicit, dynamic experiences (Nietzsche 1979, 40).

As I have stated in my introduction, my novel, ‘The Dream Life of Butterflies’, represents a contemporary, subjective narration based on observed and imagined interactions between various characters within specific sites in Melbourne. The novel is written in the first person, narrated by a young man named Leo. The main protagonist is his school friend Pete, who becomes intimately involved with the novel’s antagonist, an older woman called Vanessa. The novel reflects the humour, hidden anxieties, fantasies, boredom, pleasure and sorrow that arise when the central protagonist and the antagonist try to exceed their limitations. Throughout the novel, I have attempted to create scenarios

where the central characters articulate an everyday reality, one that is largely devoid of grand dramas, but rather focuses on the minutiae of day-to-day physical engagement and conversation.

The characters in the novel are impelled through a semi-real topography driven by the need to release themselves from the constraints of performance; they choose to reject conventional forms of behaviour and discover their subjective, spontaneous selves, unaffected by the consciousness of being witnessed; a character unmasked. As Victor Turner points out, ‘The so-called normal may be more of a game, played in masks (personae), with a script, than certain ways of behaving without a mask, that are culturally defined as abnormal, aberrant, eccentric, or way-out’ (1982, 47). The landscape represented in the novel is based on reality but occasionally tilts towards the imaginary. For example, the names of cafes and various businesses are invented, as is the existence of various streets, tunnels or locations and depictions of graffiti. Thus narrated, the city becomes a representation of desire. This echoes the way the Russian installation artist Ilya Kabakov describes the potential of a city as a ‘multitude of projects, realised ones, half-realised ones, and not realised at all’ (2005, 44).

The language in the novel attempts to mirror the patterns and nuances of everyday speech. I aim to engage the multiple layers of performance that lurk behind the ordinary, mundane surfaces prescribed by social convention. In so doing, a narrative is composed from ordinary incidents, encounters and events. As Schopenhauer famously stated, ‘the task of the novelist is not to narrate great events but to make small ones interesting’ (1970, 165).

While writing the novel, I became increasingly aware of the distinct differences between creating a work of fiction as opposed to a performance text. In the novel occurrences are described and transmitted to the reader's imagination. It enables a world with open-ended parameters, with unlimited scope in terms of location and characters. A performance text requires a concrete space, with a limit on the numbers of actors dictated by theatrical economy. Scenes in plays are usually much longer, more sustained; contemporary plays are often non-representational and unfold in real-time. The novel permitted me to explore scenarios where the characters move freely between spaces. They similarly traverse time in an instant. The lack of physical and temporal limitations gave me the autonomy to work without considering the physical restraints normally conditioned by the stage arena. The everyday infiltrated all aspects of the novel, from descriptions of behaviour in the street, in bars, bedrooms, underground tunnels, cars or classrooms, which focus on ordinary, sometimes banal, encounters. The dialogue did not follow any thematic line or trajectory, but rather reflected the subconscious intent of the characters.

Although the everyday content in the novel is deliberately banal or prosaic, there are times when the setting is dramatically counterpointed with the dialogic content, such as the scene through the underground tunnels, which depicts otherworldly surroundings, or the beach scene, which describes the wreck of an ironclad warship that juts out of the sea. In these scenes, the dialogue reflects an everyday, conversational discourse, in contrast to the devastating forces of nature, or the labyrinthine immensity of the graffitied walls below the surface. In both these cases, a character in the novel is overwhelmed by their phobias.

The novel does not depict epic events or catastrophic dramas. Politics and world events do not intersect with the novel, except as headlines in a newspaper, or a comment overheard on TV. The novel does not follow a classic plot line, but rather follows the development of the relationship between the three main characters; until the novel's conclusion, there are few 'significant' events described. The descriptions and dialogue in the novel consists of flat, unadorned prose; an everyday language that attempts to pinpoint behavioural and psychological occurrences. As with my plays, the novel impacts through an accumulation of detail, rather than via a series of dramatic events. The reader is invited to engage the invisible agendas and impulses, the underlying objectives in the main characters. The content throughout the novel focuses on everyday mini-rituals, ordinary encounters and situations that invite the reader to infuse their imaginative response within the spaces of the narrative. The characters, led by the narrator Leo, traverse a wide array of everyday sites and situations, such as streetscapes, houses, the Melbourne Cemetery, the Victoria Market, bars, cafes, the school library, classrooms, corridors, alleyways, the beach et al, (many of these are detailed in my methods section). Before writing the novel I recorded behaviour in a variety of settings, which were included in the content of the novel.

The focus of the dialogue in the novel is on ordinary, daily expressivity. As with my hyperrealist plays, dialogue in the novel is nuanced, emulating the nuance, rhythms, ellipses, non-sequiturs, repetitions and fragmentation of everyday speech. Dialogues are interrupted, or half-completed, though, unlike my plays, avoid simultaneity. In many instances in the novel, the characters are inarticulate; their speech meanders and is disconnected to an overarching theme. Unlike my plays, the dialogues are not structured

around objectives. Rather the characters behave in a way that is more unconscious and ambivalent; their physical actions are unmediated and impulsive. They react spontaneously to the micro-events around them.

I have not contextualised the character's speech within a particular socio-economic register, but have attempted to create a more neutral vernacular, which places the characters outside a specific social milieu. This approach emphasises the fictive frame, reminding the reader that while the dialogue and narrative is hyperreal, it is nonetheless a construction, occupying, to quote David Shields, an uneasy space 'between the real and the imaginary' (2010, 72). The dialogue is speakable; mimics the everyday dialogue that I overheard during my process of recording encounters between people in Melbourne's CBD.

As with my hyperrealist plays, the dialogic content of the novel is intertextual. I have included references from popular culture and there are traces of recorded conversations, which have been altered or modified to fit the context of the novel, and to de-identify them. The novel includes numerous descriptions of ordinary people, encounters, advertising slogans and graffiti images; an array of vernacular and pop culture language recalibrated from my recordings of every life in the street. This is illustrated by the following quote from p.8 of 'The Dream Life of Butterflies'.

'See these stencils?' Pete said. 'They've been there for over ten years. The guy who did 'em's called Bunny. Total legend.'

'Does he still do this shit?' I asked.

‘No, I don’t know what happened to him, probably just gave up, holds some job like every other cockhead.’ As a final thought he added, ‘Maybe he’s dead.’

‘Why would he be dead?’ Tony got to his feet, grinning.

‘All I’m saying is no one knows what happened to him. Maybe they got to him.’ Without elaborating who *they* were, Pete sat down and stared ahead, hands wedged under his jeans.

This scene is typical of the vast majority of incidents in the novel, which describe prosaic encounters within everyday settings; the scenes often linger in torpidity, time is filled with waiting, by a latent desire to enact upon the world, which is stymied by the characters’ lack of motivation. Pete and Leo very often engage in conversation without having a clear awareness of why they are talking to each other, apart from a basic desire to connect as friends. Their dialogue is often counterpointed by evocative images within the city environment, sometimes having a sinister or ironic overtone, which contrasts with the banality or emotional intensity of the scene, as indicated by the following passages, from P.5 and P. 16 respectively.

‘So what!’ Pete screamed back at him. ‘She’s fucking beautiful. She’s the most beautiful fucking girl on the planet.’

There was a long silence. A couple of suits walked past, their faces inscrutable. Not even the jolting stench of the alleyway seemed to bother them.

‘Zoe’s not coming,’ Pete announced. ‘Let’s go to the Almeda’s.’ He turned to Vanessa. ‘You’re coming with us I hope?’

‘Sure, why not?’ she said, then ruffled her hair, as though preparing herself for the inevitable hazards that now lay ahead.

We climbed the stairs at Princes Bridge. Rows of lamps flickered and lit up, resembling huge luminous blisters.

As with the everyday, the dialogue in the novel does not follow a clear causal logic. Conversations between the main characters vary widely in terms of structure and avoid thematic content; they are constructed, as with the hyperrealist plays, from an imagined physical reaction that gives expression to unconscious mechanisms within the characters’ psyches. The dialogue provokes minor, behavioural actions between the characters, but only ever represents a small fraction of the narrative content. I have attempted to provide narrative space to allow the reader to imagine the psychological consequences, which are often alluded to, but are not made explicit.

In writing the novel I became aware that the inclusion of the narrative surround was also possible within a performance context. ‘The Dream Life of Butterflies’ is a novel that lends itself to adaptation as a performance text. To date, my performance texts have little or no description; directions and description in theatre texts (and film) are designed to be clear and actionable. There is rarely a need to resort to heightened language or poetical expression when indicating a physical action. The differences between dialogic content in a novel, as opposed to a play text are complex. While writing the novel, I became aware that the dialogic content of any one scene had to be understood purely on the page in relation to the setting, whereas dialogue in my plays and performance texts is

largely understood in relation to an unconscious action being played by the actors saying the lines within a concrete space. The physical setting in the theatre I create is mostly imagined; the emphasis for the dialogue is to affect change in the character being talked to. In the novel the dialogue is supported by a description of the environment and events, which also affects change in the characters. It occurred to me while writing the novel, that I could utilise both dialogue, and the first person or third person description of the physical context in the body of the performance text. The switching between dialogue and narrative sequences offers the potential for a new form of hyperreal dramaturgy that emphasises that an act of fiction is taking place in front of the audience.

The inclusion of overt narration, descriptions of past or current events, spaces, environments, contexts or settings, alongside hyperreal dialogue has the potential to take my performance writing into new and exciting terrain, which serves as a new way of sharing with the audience the act of text creation. A theatre text that consciously bridges an aesthetic of realness with the act of fiction making, suggests this possibility is also apparent in the way we can live our lives. It has the potential to confront the audience with the possibility of ‘fiction-making’ within the field of everyday encounters. As Philippe Sollers puts it, a theatre that occupies the space between the real and fiction offers the audience ‘the detailed, concrete, precise, and compromising life of thought; or in other words a continuous creation, a metaphysics of action’ (1983, 91).

If the novel were to form the basis of a performance text, it would require judicious editing and adaptation of the narrative and dialogic sequences. The dialogue would need to be stripped of narrative content, in order to imbue it with action and subtext. The narrative descriptions would also need to be pared back, and utilised only in order to

support encounters between characters. I would not incorporate passages that provided narrative back-story, preferring instead to leave spaces between encounters that activated the audience's dramaturgical imagination.

The incorporation of fictive narration and hyperreal dialogue has been successfully attempted before. In his play, *Five Days in March*, Toshiki Okada<sup>44</sup>, incorporates first person description of the events unfolding in the drama, before switching back to a dialogic mode of delivery. As with my own hyperrealist plays, Okada utilises a form of fragmented vernacular within everyday dialogue, but also allows for a reflective space within the text, where characters comment on the action, or describe the physical context of their environment.

In writing the novel, I became increasingly aware of the differences required in constructing language in relation to playwrighting. As a writing medium, theatre dialogue tends to be more economical as much content/meaning is imparted through action and behaviour. The dialogue in a novel can afford to be more discursive given the words are not working in relationship to physical content. A play, of course, is also usually received in one sitting within an audience environment, which creates a very particular social context, with its own sets of conditions and effects, that impact on its reception. In many respects, the 'The Dream Life of Butterflies' conforms more to filmic structure with its economical set-up, early introduction of protagonist and antagonist and quasi-dramatic conclusion. The scenes are generally concise, and are designed to advance the story, even if they have an everyday, ambulatory quality. It is not an experimental novel in the same way that my performance text clearly *is* experimental (no identifiable plot, its

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<sup>44</sup> Prolific Japanese playwright and director who founded the theatre company chelfitsch, which was founded 1997.

postdramatic structure, multiple characters, combinations of original text with verbatim recordings, non-linear narrative, lack of character development, lack of dramatic arc). It is these differences in structure, as well as language, dialogue and characterisation that brought into stark focus the essential and most pertinent aspects of creating performance language. Writing the novel enabled me to renew and recalibrate my focus on the everyday and, in so doing, discover new ways in which the field of day-to-day human interaction might serve as a template for a performance text. The description of buildings, spaces and settings, the narrative surround, enabled a more direct and visceral response by the characters to their immediate physical environment. Rather than restrain myself in terms of what is physically achievable on a professional stage, the novel permitted the free reign of my imagination; there was no restriction in terms of the physical space occupied by the characters.

The following passage, adapted from text on pp. 84-5, illustrates how I might rework ‘The Dream Life of Butterflies’ as a performance text.

LEO     Who are you like? You mum or your dad?

VANESSA     They’re both dead.

*Pete moves a grate on the ground.*

VANESSA     I thought it would be hard to move.

PETE     People move it all the time.

*Pete gets down on his stomach. He slides down the trap door. He looks up at the others, smiling.*

VANESSA     I can’t go down there. I’ll get my clothes dirty.

PETE This is your last chance. I got you a special invitation. The guys down here don't like strangers coming down.

VANESSA Anyone would think we were going to someone's house.

LEO It is someone's house.

VANESSA You mean someone lives down there?

LEO Yeah, a lot of people do.

VANESSA I suppose I have no choice now do I? I should feel privileged.

*Vanessa crouches down on her tummy. She slides backwards into the trap door, until her head disappears.*

*Underneath the stage is pitched in darkness. Pete flicks on a switch. Lights reveal the length of an enormous cavern, the walls spray painted with spectacular graffiti.*

It is this freedom, to allow the characters to traverse time and space, enter into real and imaginary fields and contexts, which most inspires me heading into my next phase of performance writing. The inclusion of novelistic narrative description of spaces and environments in a performance text, offers a new hyperreal theatre between the real and the fictive, where the narrated spaces activate the audience's imagination, and can be counterpointed with digitalised imagery and dialogue based encounters between actors on a concrete stage. 'The Dream Life of Butterflies' has the potential to describe a different pathway for my performance writing, offering a theatre space where 'the poles of fiction and nonfiction are constantly bouncing their force fields back and forth between each other' (Shields 2010, 69). Writing the novel, has once again demonstrated to me the

necessity of stepping outside the bounds of your aesthetic comfort zones, in order to discover a fresh, alternate, and more invigorating pathway for performance writing and text creation.

## **8 – Introduction: The Everyday – Methods**

In this section I describe my observations of a variety of everyday interactions within specific locations and environments that occurred within the city of Melbourne between March 2007 and July 2012. The central focus of my observations was to discover the ways in which the everyday might be used as a source to gather material, or inform content, for a theatre text and/or performance and novel.

My methodology entailed the peripatetic exploration of Melbourne by foot, bicycle and public transport. I visited specific spaces, environments and sites, such as shops, malls, laneways, libraries, parks, cathedrals, cemeteries, performance arenas, museums, galleries, trains, cafés, and nightclubs in order to observe a wide variety of everyday human interaction. The city, culturally diverse and expansive, was explored as though it were a multi-narrative playground, to be discovered, imagined and engaged with for the purpose of providing me with material in order to challenge and inform my dramaturgical perspective in the creation of hyperrealist performance texts, as well as novelistic dialogue and situations. I wanted to observe behaviour in diverse contexts, such as work environments, private and social spaces, in order to capture the widest possible gamut of human behaviour and emotion. Through my observations I wanted to note the presence or absence of dramatic action and/or conflict, especially considering that my own work consciously strips conflict from the content. I was also interested in discovering material for a theatrical or novelistic setting in everyday situations between real people that are generally not perceived as having theatrical or literary value, such as two people sitting in a café eating but not speaking, or two parents watching a child in a playground, or a woman running with a dog. While everyday situations and events might not have obvious

theatrical or literary possibilities at first sight, I found that in the vast majorities of situations, even the simplest exchanges and incidents between people revealed content that I found useful in the creation of a performance/novelistic text. This sometimes required substantial manipulation, alteration, re-contextualising, re-sequencing or re-juxtaposition of the original material in order to create a context that I believe would be interesting for an audience/reader.

My aim was not to be faithful to the original material, but rather to use the everyday to assist with the construction of my own performance text/novel that I believed, as a professional writer and theatre practitioner, had theatrical/literary value. In other words, how might the everyday be used to create a performance text or a novel that would enhance the hyperrealist aesthetics of these works, and also be interesting, insightful, engaging, for an audience of a Ranters Theatre show or a reader of my plays/novels?

Some spaces were more formal, such as the State Library or National Gallery of Victoria; others were casual, such as bars and nightclubs. I visited confined spaces, like lifts and offices, as well as open, expansive environments such as playgrounds and The Royal Botanic Gardens. Sometimes my visits were planned, at other times I just happened to be passing. On some occasions my observations in particular sites came to nothing, as there were too few people to observe, or they provided me with material I thought was not useful for the creation of a performance text and novel, as they included content that was too closely associated with the site i.e. they stated the content of the physical action. Most of my observations in any one site were recorded in one sitting. The only exceptions to this were behaviour witnessed in theatres, cinemas, lifts, boutique stores, laneways, public toilets, cafes, bars and nightclubs and public transport. While all

environments were of interest to me, I tried to desist from writing up behaviour in places that duplicated each other, such as different types of shops, or different places of worship, or parks and gardens. Some I decided against for practical or personal reasons. For instance, I intended to visit a strip club but decided I would be too conspicuous if I visited one with a notebook or a laptop.

My relationship to what I consider interesting is contingent on my own experience and practice as a theatre maker and writer. My observations of human activity have been prejudiced by my dramaturgical aims. Clearly my view is subjective and conditioned by my own aesthetic viewpoint. In this respect, my methodology is conversant with Bourdieu's ideas in relation to taste and culture. While I set out to reinvestigate and rejuvenate my own aesthetic values, I did not seek to jettison them. My observations of behavioural and verbal expression were governed by my own cultural, social, political, sexual disposition.

According to Bourdieu, social relations are steered by a 'system of mutually reinforcing and infinitely redundant signs of which the body is the bearer' (1984, 241). My individual responses to these observed signs (physicality, facial expressivity, human speech) are a reflection of my own cultural conditioning, which mostly occurs in childhood. It is my response to these signs that 'unconsciously registered are the basis of antipathies or sympathies' (Bourdieu 1984, 241).

I do not see my particular sympathies and positionality as problematic; as a writer of creative works, I regard my own particular disposition as having provided me with a dramaturgical insight or perspective on the everyday, which is different, from others. It is precisely this difference, be it from a male Italo-Australian cultural heritage, which

informs my personal dramaturgical/poetic sensibility and makes a creative production I have written engaging for others. As an instance of this, my own experiences at the receiving end of racial prejudice (physical and verbal bullying from peers and teachers) as a child growing up in Tasmania, has honed my observation skills through years of social exclusion, which has in turn influenced my decision to become a professional writer. This experience has also helped shape my view that people tend to desire inclusion in social dynamics, but readily resort to protecting what they have gained on a social scale by sidelining and excluding others who appear to challenge their values.

While acknowledging my positionality and cultural disposition, I aimed to engage the field with a view to being as open minded and non-judgemental as possible. I viewed the everyday as a field of discovery, to provide me with ideas, material, inspiration that I could not find elsewhere. My observations were influenced by a desire to inform the hyperrealist and everyday aesthetics of my work, but I tried not to preclude the unexpected, or anything that defied my aesthetic. Hyperrealist theatre might be an attempt to bring the audience closer to an expression of the way people live and go about their lives, but it is still appropriated and consumed as a constructed product. According to Bourdieu, ‘A cultural product... is a constituted taste, a taste which has been raised from the vague semi-existence of half-formulated or unformulated experience... or unconscious desire, to the full reality of the finished product’ (1984, 231). No matter how much I might like to challenge aesthetic norms within theatre practice, I acknowledge that my own aesthetic is nonetheless conditioned by cultural and social privilege.

I acknowledge also that my observations did not adhere to the strict verbatim principle of recording the *exact* behaviour of a person’s speech or acts. I tried as much as

possible to include half-finished utterances, inarticulate verbal sounds, stutters etcetera, but for the most part I tried to keep to the basic sense of the text. I chose, from an array of interactions and occurrences, what I believed was interesting, revealing or insightful. And while I always tried to be as discreet as possible, I was aware that my presence in the field, as a middle-aged male, with an Italian cultural background, affected the people I observed in ways I could not (and did not) foresee. Nor did I record the minutiae of people's actions, but rather a general attitude, or mode of behaviour that I concluded was useful for my aims. For the purposes of creating a hyperreal performance text, I do not need to mirror every utterance or sound; rather the content only needs to provide a semblance of realness in order to allow actors or reader to integrate my suggestions with their own choices. The physical scenarios/actions are left to the determination of the actors and directors to accept, modify or ignore. Also, audiences are able to relax and accept what they witness as real conversation, which is an illusion created by hyperrealist aesthetics, even if it is not. The texts are constructed for a particular theatrical context, which allows me to explore a variety and depth in content, not normally experienced in the field of the everyday.

I was particularly interested in recording conversations that did not state the content of the action, or engage the physical task they were doing. For example, the conversations in boutique stores were mostly about the items the customers were looking at, whether they appealed or not. I was interested in conversations and interactions that were not about shopping. I was looking for verbal material that was driven by something unexpected or unconscious. This would be more useful in a non-representational theatrical context where I would be deprived of setting, and could re-contextualise the

verbal content. The use of text that avoids stating the physical action allows the actor to interpret the text according to his/her own needs. It also means the text does not replicate what we already see, which is not something I find engaging in a performance.

My observations were typed into a laptop computer, or written into a notebook, on site. For the purposes of my poetics, it was essential that my role as writer/witness remained as unobtrusive as possible. For this reason I recorded all my observations directly onto a laptop. A person writing by hand into a notebook or pad is more likely to be regarded as an observer, or at least as a writer, whereas a person with a laptop is more likely to be seen as someone working at their convenience. The editing and rewriting process was also more efficient and less time consuming. I used the same methodology when recording the verbatim conversations for the play and novel, including the setting and behaviour of the various characters.

It should also be noted that ‘The Fear of Being Watched’ is a non-representational text, which means any allusion to the original sites where the conversations were recorded would not be visible or apparent to an audience. The text does not prescribe how it should be performed; the texts can be restructured in any sequence, then spoken in consecutive or simultaneous order, or can give rise to alternate dialogues and actions that do not appear in the original. The text can be seen as a play, or as a provocation for a performance.

The following spaces represent a sample of the spaces and observations I recorded.

## 9 – The Everyday – Methods

### Boutique Stores

There are an innumerable variety of niche markets that the boutique store caters for. Ostensibly when you're in a boutique store, you have to pretend to shop; it's difficult to maintain a presence in one otherwise without feeling ill at ease. It is important that you dress as though you have the capacity to buy whatever you desire. On the few occasions I lingered longer than I should have, I was always asked if I needed any help.

This space was chosen for its ubiquity, but also its lack of theatricality. Boutique shops are rarely considered as a setting for performance due to the lack of possibility for dramatic tension, nor does it often appear to inspire conversation beyond the subject of shopping for any considerable length of time. I profess to have no interest in buying clothes myself, and have little patience for shopping. My dramaturgical interest lay in ways people might disrupt or shift the dynamic of the space they were in.

I recorded the following dialogues in boutique stores in June 16, 2009, which I chose due to the absence of any direct relationship to shopping, which accorded with my own agenda. I was interested in conversations that did not state the content of, or comment on, the action. The following is an excerpt from 'The Fear of Being Watched' p. 23.

*Inside a clothes shop in a Melbourne laneway.*

LARGE WOMAN IN LONG DRESS (*She is feeling under her armpit*) I think I got a lump.

The woman spoke to another woman her own age, possibly a friend, without any prior conversation. I enjoyed the unexpected quality of the subject; it also indicated the

woman might have been thinking about her ‘lump’ for some time. Perhaps trying on clothes had made her self-conscious? Or looking at clothes she liked made her feel more relaxed and open.

The following is also from ‘The Fear of Being Watched’ p. 23.

*GUY IN SINGLET goes up to GIRL WITH PIERCED NAVEL who is standing outside the same clothes shop*

GUY IN SINGLET      That was great the other day...

GIRL WITH PIERCED NAVEL      That was so funny.

GUY IN SINGLET      What was going on..?

GIRL WITH PIERCED NAVEL      I know.

GUY IN SINGLET      I loved it.

GIRL WITH PIERCED NAVEL      Yeah it was so funny.

GUY IN SINGLET      You gonna hang round or..?

GIRL WITH PIERCED NAVEL      No I’m fine.

GUY IN SINGLET      Great.

This conversation took place outside the same store. As with the previous conversation, I wanted a text that didn’t state the content of the action. With the context removed, it becomes unclear what the characters’ relationship to each other is. It is also unclear what they are referring to, which allows the actor to have freedom of interpretation. Combined with a clear action, the meaning of the text would alter. Was the text about something they witnessed together, which had little or significant consequence? Was it referring to an intimate encounter? Was the event they witnessed

funny, or strange, or is the Girl saying this to disguise her feelings for some undisclosed reason? As a text it opens up questions for the actor, allows them to be actively engaged in the text. The following is from the 'Fear of Being Watched' p. 82.

*Two young woman in a clothes shop in Centre Place*

WOMAN 1 Are you going on holiday?

WOMAN 2 Yeah Mexico.

WOMAN 1 Yeah?

WOMAN 2 Going with a few girlfriends from work. They want to go to the beaches but I'm not so into that. They're all very conservative.

WOMAN 1 When you going?

WOMAN 2 Soon. Couple of months.

WOMAN 1 That's exciting. You're lucky.

WOMAN 2 Yeah.

WOMAN 1 Wish I was going.

WOMAN 2 What's this music we're listening to?

WOMAN 1 I know.

WOMAN 2 What is it?

WOMAN 1 I'm ignoring it.

WOMAN 2 I don't have enough patience.

WOMAN 2 Who was that girl before?

WOMAN 1 Anna?

WOMAN 2 Yeah.

WOMAN 1 She's a masseuse.

- WOMAN 2     Yeah?
- WOMAN 1     She gave me a massage last week.
- WOMAN 2     Any good?
- WOMAN 1     Oh great.
- WOMAN 2     Did she get the knots?
- WOMAN 1     Oh yeah right in.
- WOMAN 2     She looks a bit haggled. Maybe she doesn't eat enough.

The relationship is unclear, though I assumed they were friends, perhaps colleagues. The readiness of Woman 2 to cast judgements on others creates room for provocation, as well as humour. Woman 1 does not appear to play along. Why does Woman 2 do this? Is it to gain allegiance? Assert status? Show that she assumes Woman 1 thinks in the same way she does, and therefore a way of letting her know that she approves of her, or wants approval herself? In the context of performance, I would remove any drama or judgement around her comments; they should simply be uttered as a 'live' response, nor commented on in action or via vocal tonality by Woman 1. This places more responsibility on the audience to provide the narrative context and moral dilemma. Woman 2 makes seven judgements in total, though the one about the 'music' is indicated in context and qualified by the statement that she doesn't 'have enough patience'.

### **The Bourke Street Mall**

The mall was an obvious place to observe human interaction, as it presented opportunities for people to wait and gain a respite from other activities. It was also

centrally located. As with a purpose-built stage, the Bourke Street Mall gives off a sense of being a watched space, one where people are relatively familiar, relaxed and enjoined in casual, informal conversation and behaviours. I was interested to see how waiting, inactivity, or lack of obvious determination, might result in more lateral, unconscious displays of verbal/physical behaviour. I was interested to discover whether recorded conversations and activities from the mall might be readily transplanted to the stage.

I recorded the following dialogue in the Bourke Street Mall in November 29 2008, which I included in ‘The Fear of Being Watched’ p. 19.

STUDENT 1 The place is full of weirdos.

STUDENT 2 There’s this woman who walks up and down my street who’s like that. Everyone says she’s mentally disturbed but I’m not sure. I’m sure she’s disturbed but she still gives me the creeps. (*Silence*) I gotta get a job.

STUDENT 1 How come?

STUDENT 2 Need the money.

STUDENT 3 Good on you.

STUDENT 1 What are you going to do?

STUDENT 2 I don’t know. Whatever.

STUDENT 1 I know what you mean. (*Silence*) I wouldn’t do certain things no matter how much you paid me.

STUDENT 2 Depends on your situation doesn’t it.

STUDENT 1 What do you mean?

STUDENT 2 People do all kinds of things if they need the money.

STUDENT 1 Not me.

STUDENT 3 It's easy to say so isn't it?

STUDENT 1 I know what I'd do and what I wouldn't do.

STUDENT 3 How?

STUDENT 1 Cause I just would.

STUDENT 3 That's impossible.

STUDENT 1 Why?

STUDENT 3 Cause it is.

STUDENT 1 I know myself.

*STUDENT 1 goes and buys himself and STUDENT 3 a bottle of water.*

STUDENT 3 What's this?

STUDENT 1 I thought you wanted a drink.

STUDENT 3 Oh OK.

The three students are all male, though this is not clear once their gender has been stripped from the context. The same might be said if their identity was numbered, instead of being foregrounded as Student. What I found intriguing about this dialogue was that it was structured around a spontaneous argument, which implied cost of living pressures, and a social awareness. It begins with a judgement, an attempt to separate themselves from the others in the mall, which includes an observation of an older woman, whom they see in a less than favourable light. Yet it is this judgment that leads Student 2 to reflect on his own situation; without context this enables the actor to determine why this is the case. What causes Student 1 to reflect on his own financial predicament? What is his predicament exactly? Having stated his position, it leads to an argument about the length one might need to go to obtain money. Perhaps Student 1 is worse off than the

others? Student 3 seems to come to the aid of Student 1 towards the end of the scene. But what prompts this course of action? Does he agree with Student 1's argument, or does he feel that Student 2 is overly defensive, or assertive? Might the actors playing these roles make choices based on action, as opposed to literal content? These are questions that actors have to answer for themselves. De-contextualised, these lines defy ontological certainty; rather the actors must intercede and create clarity by deciding on the personal circumstances of these personas. The lines provide clues only, it is up to the actors to fill in the gaps. It is precisely this openness, this opportunity for playing the lines that make them so vital as texts for everyday theatre. If there is a drawback, it relates to the texts being predisposed to a linear progression of an argument, which fortunately is not resolved, allowing room for the audience to draw their own conclusions.

### **Melbourne's Laneways**

The laneways vary significantly; some like Centre Place or Manchester Lane or Hosier Lane are crammed with cafes and shops; others in the old Irish section, like Guilford Lane or Flannigan Lane, where there once used to be mechanics garages or shops, have now given way to derelict buildings or apartments. The laneways of Melbourne's CBD are generally seen as giving life to the city; they offer a diversion from the ordered, chessboard grid layout of the main streets. It seems the city's designers wanted to make it as orderly and simple as possible. Without the lanes, Melbourne would lack much of its vitality. The streets are generally wide and exposed; the laneways offer a respite from this, and create a series of closed worlds, where only those who 'know' the city well, can discover its hidden treasures. The laneways can transport you into a series of mini-

adventures, the sun is blocked out, the buildings tower overhead, and you lose yourself in an interior prism, a café or clothes shop, a shop selling toys, or bric-a-brac, or books, or hand-made paper products and sealing wax. The entire city can be almost traversed just using the laneways. It is the alternative city; no law firms, department stores, banks, junk food outlets; the laneways cater for niche products, a shop that sells puppets, or maps, others sell clothes by local designers. Everyone mingles in the laneways; well-heeled people rub up against teenage skaters and emos, suits with punks and hipster students. There's a sense that in the laneways people are sharing a culture that they value, away from the glare of the city burghers and the bustle of economic imperatives. Pretensions are less evident, interaction more casual, the general vibe is relaxed, pressures of the future are shut away temporarily, lives can be reinvented. The laneways are an inter-relating network of sites that offer adventures and experiences, unique mini-environments that allow for a more genuine, unfettered level of human interaction, without which the rest of the CBD would wither and ossify.

While I did not record any conversations within the laneways themselves, I was interested in observing and noting down human activity within these sites primarily as a stage for behaviours of young people that were illicit, hidden, or secretive, or not possible within the glare of the main city thoroughfares, such as doing graffiti, smoking drugs, or skateboarding. It was mainly gathering behavioural material suitable for my novel, as I was too conspicuous to record conversations. I wandered Melbourne's laneways throughout my PhD period, taking copious notes. The first parts of my novel are situated in a laneways area north of the city, around Sutherland Street and McLean Alley; the content is taken directly from a group of university students I observed doing graffiti and smoking joints.

The alleyways content occupies the first 11 pages of the novel, alleyways reoccur on pp. 17, 43-44, and informs the tunnel section from pp. 83-87, which depicts graffiti I had observed in AC/DC Lane and Duckboard Place.

The section below is from the first two pages of the novel.

My real life began after class. A group of us twelfth graders had taken to wandering the city alleyways around Sutherland Street. I can see my friend Pete now, searching the sandstone walls of the warehouses for the best spot to do his graffiti. The piece itself rarely took him more than a few seconds...

I looked around at all the busted windows, the buckled sheets of corrugated iron nailed up where the doors had once been, and further along where a row of decrepit printers and foundry workshops spewed out fumes and clattered non-stop. I laughed, and shouted back, 'Sure let's do it.'

Sometimes a grim look would cross his face; he'd gesture for us to leave him alone, with his bag of spray cans and stencils. We used to wait for him a little further along, in this vacant lot, surrounded by cars and weeds, sitting on a concrete slab that had jacked away from the back wall...

Now and then, a couple would mosey on up McLean Alley, or around the cobbled walkway on Flanigan. I used to watch them enviously, wondering what they got up to around there, whether it was just kissing or something more.

The laneways inspired a sense of adventure in the novel, creating a meandering, aimless, wandering, intrepid quality to the movement of the characters. My aesthetic here was consciously influenced by Debord's concept of the *derive*, as a way of 'opening

one's consciousness to the unconsciousness of urban space' (Marcus 1990, 127), which was in turn inspired by Baudelaire's notion of the *flaneur*, as 'the man of leisure can indulge in perambulations' (Benjamin 1968, 172). The laneways create a sense that the characters are outsiders, enjoining in illicit activity, such as drug taking and graffitiing, who choose to separate themselves from the city crowds. The laneways also create focused, stage-like environments to investigate relationships, which, in the case of the tunnel section, become claustrophobic and impose a clear rupture between the main characters.

### **The State Library**

People's behaviour in the Library is not too dissimilar to that in a church or cathedral. There is no loud talking, in fact there's almost no talking at all; or eating or drinking, or running, or any behaviour that might cause someone a disturbance. It is not so much the objects or the building itself, though they are partly responsible, that are held sacred, rather what the Library represents; free and equal public access to knowledge and ideas. The public library is in fact the most serene and enduring achievement of the post-enlightenment. It's an achievement that is quietly acknowledged by the public that swarm through it's doors each day; from politicians and business people, to students, scholars, workers, the homeless; everyone makes use of the library and are given equal care and consideration. Its values are sacrosanct, and unchanging, built on the abiding principle that everyone is entitled to free and equal access to knowledge. They are principles that people who use the Library, read from its collection, look at photos and exhibits, research on computers seem to acknowledge and understand intuitively.

But given that the Library is an intensely limited space for human interaction, does this produce more covert forms of contact? Contact with others is limited to whispers, glances, and sometimes stares. Sometimes stares can linger longer than what is normally possible; there's a sense of feeling safe and protected in the Library. Risks can be taken, without fear of anyone expressing their annoyance or frustration too overtly. I witnessed numerous glances, eyes following each other, stares held in accompaniment with suggestive smiles. Do people go there for this express purpose, or is it another symptom of what becomes substituted when human behaviour is restricted? Is it simply that books, equality, knowledge, the allure of mystery held within the Library's immense collection are an age-old aphrodisiac?

The Library features on pp. 46-7 of the novel, from which I provide a small excerpt. Although the novel depicts the school library, my observations were actually made in the State Library between April 7 and 12, 2010.

We need to rethink our end of year trip,' Pete said, as he turned the pages.

'I've ditched the Amazon. I'm thinking Africa is the place to go.'

We decided to wag art class, and spent the next couple of hours drooling over deserts, citadels, ruins of the ancient Carthaginians, sunny beaches in Madagascar, spoke in covert undertones about remote, inaccessible regions or cities with exotic sounding names, like Dar es Salaam or Ouagadougou. Pete was particularly obsessed with Marrakesh and made a colour photocopy of a picture of musicians and fire breathers dancing in Jemaa el-Fnaa.

In this instance the library becomes a space where the two main characters, Leo and Pete can indulge their escapist fantasies, motivated by a desire to get away from school, the expected conformity of their future lives. The library becomes a space of rebellion; a site that offers an imaginary, albeit romanticised, response to the conventional expectations placed on the characters by their parents and teachers, and to a lesser extent, their peers.

While I was not interested in recording, or attempting to record actual conversations, within the Library (the ambience amplified a sense of intruding on a private space), I was interested in observing behaviour; the solitary readers, the clusters of students, the surreptitious gestures and whispers made between friends. The strict codes of behaviour that apply to people using a Library created the possibility, at least within fiction, of defying those codes, i.e. Leo's attempt to steal his favourite book, or signalling internal desires, such as the desire to travel to remote African locations, or a more general yearning to get away from his family home. Reading is also critical to Leo's character; he is depicted reading *Don Quixote* alone in his room, a work that is not on his curriculum, which offers a further indication of his desire to venture out into the world.

### **St Patrick's Cathedral**

The Cathedral is a strange place to observe people. Although cavernous, and busy on the weekday that I visit, the Cathedral is an intensely private space. It is indiscreet to watch people, or to write down observations, or to make any noise whatsoever. The space seems to be governed by very strict, if unspoken or even unwritten, rules. You cannot speak loudly, or behave in any way that is likely to draw attention to yourself; there is no

running, or eating or drinking. Certain parts of the Cathedral are off limits. Taking photos is strictly prohibited. You cannot disturb anyone by going up to a stranger and saying ‘hello’ or ‘what brings you here?’ You are supposed to observe the basic tenet that people are in the Cathedral because they do not want to be disturbed.

I visited St Patrick’s Cathedral in October 12 2009 and made a series of observations that I then utilised in my novel and performance text. The following excerpt is from ‘The Dream Life of Butterflies’ pp.63-4.

Once inside I could see that parts of the roof and the stucco walls had collapsed; rain poured through the openings, ran in courses through the fissures in the marble floor of the vestibule and in the altar, where weeds and vines had taken root. There were still the remnants of candles lying on the floor, and a couple of candelabra that lay on their sides, squashed and bent, along with some plastic Madonnas, their faces grimacing through the dirt. On the back wall, behind the altar, I could just make out some tiny frescoes.

Pete saw me looking at them.

‘Aren’t they incredible,’ he said. ‘It’s the Stations of the Cross.’

I went up and had a look. It was true; the faces of Christ were all the same, blissful and oblivious to the scene round him. But I had no interest in religious iconography. I turned away and went towards the door.

The following excerpt is from ‘The Fear of Being Watched’ pp. 15-16, which was inspired by my observations in the cathedral.

MARA It was raining the whole day.

SIMON That's right... we went to the cathedral instead.

MARA The cathedral is so beautiful.

PAUL I went to a cathedral recently and sat behind this Swedish couple and just listened to them.

MARA You eavesdropped?

PAUL I couldn't understand a word they said but because it was in a cathedral every sound seemed incredible... seemed necessary...

SIMON They have extraordinary acoustics.

PAUL The whole thing.

SIMON I always want a shout when I'm in a cathedral.

PAUL And sing.

SIMON Yeah sing at the top of my voice.

I did not wish to record conversations on my laptop, as I thought this would be inappropriate inside the Cathedral, however I noted my observations outside the Cathedral, while they were still fresh in my mind. The ambience that I discovered inside the Cathedral influenced an important scene in the novel, as well as the performance text. The novel excerpt above does not happen in a church or cathedral, as I could not imagine any reason why my young protagonists would enter a cathedral, a place they would regard as oppressive. However, I tried to capture something of the Cathedral's ambience within the chapel at the Cemetery. The chapel is an invention, as I wanted to find an enclosed space, one that could evoke a spiritual dimension, which depicted artwork that Pete could compare to religious narrative iconography, in this case to the Stations of the Cross. It demonstrates another aspect of Pete's personality; that his artistic vision is in conflict with

obvious commercial values. There are higher, more esoteric motivations at play within his artistic psyche. Pete is a free spirit who continuously surprises us. His artistic objective is to capture a quality within the everyday that he believes lies dormant within visible surfaces, but cannot be commodified, such as graffiti, or religious frescoes.

The excerpt from ‘The Fear of Being Watched’ is a more literal reflection of my observations within the Cathedral. The mutterings of the Swedish tourists give rise to the characters’ internal feelings of joy. The ambience and architecture, combined with the unintelligibility of the tourists’ speech, evoke a sense of the sacred. The effect of the space on the characters presents a desire to free themselves from the social constraints of the everyday, which in this case manifests as wanting to sing out loud. I was not interested in exploring the significance of a religious space, or a space imbued with spiritual value, but more a quiet space, a space that allowed people to sit with themselves, to experience self-awareness.

The visit to the Cathedral also allowed me to perceive of ways a theatre space, as a quiet space for self-reflection and awareness, might come into being. Like a park or the Botanical Gardens, the Cathedral, offered the potential (once a level of anxiety around protocols had abated) for a space that allowed open, unencumbered contemplation devoid of obvious dramatic agendas. It is the expectation that something must happen in a space, that mitigates against the particular hyperrealist aesthetic I want to achieve with my practice.

### **Cafés, Bars and Nightclubs**

The cafe in Brunswick I visited attracts a mixed crowd. On a subtle level, one can observe an enormous variety of behaviours that distinguish one individual from another. People are happy to sit alone, work on pet projects, send text messages; the coffee is drunk slowly, to draw out the time allowed sitting at the table. The drinking of the coffee does not appear to be the central focus. What is more important is the indulging of the ambience, the desire to converse with other regulars, to meet strangers, to relish time where you can be yourself, or a persona that you wish others to see, without having to attend to the whims of others.

Unlike the cafe, the bar environment tends to promote conformity from its clientele. Bars are for sharing work experiences, a sense of commonality; a culture exists that precedes you. People in bars generally do not look like they have somewhere to go; this is not suggested by what people wear, but their attitude; they are there to stay until the agenda that is being pursued has been exhausted. The emphasis is on sharing an experience with friends and acquaintances; it's true that on my two visits to Rue Babelons there appeared to be only one person drinking alone.

In cafés one can think, read, work on a laptop; a bar tends to promote a level of outward social engagement. People go to bars after work, as opposed to cafes, which tend to thrive in working hours. Individualism is less pronounced in bars, and is often accompanied by a moderated loss of control due to the affects of alcohol. Spaces in bars are less individuated, are more fluid; people will cross from one group to another, conversations are more likely to start up between strangers; people you have never met before will sit at your table, buy you a drink. In cafes people tend to keep their social spaces separate.

The nightclub appears to promote very similar behaviour to a bar, only more pronounced. Individual spaces are even more fluid, and easily obliterated. Conversations are often rendered inaudible. The presentation of values and individualism possible in a café is unlikely to prosper in a nightclub pumping loud music, where many of the patrons are drunk or high on drugs, where bodies are bumping into each other, are oblivious to each other's presence, yet moving and responding to a common beat.

The journey from cafés to bars to nightclubs can be drawn as a trajectory from supreme individual expressivity, to its opposite: the breakdown of individual space and identity as it is subsumed by the pulse and rhythms of the crowd.

My observations of behaviour in cafés took place throughout my PhD research period. My observations of nightclubs took place on two occasions, in September 5 2008 and May 19 2009. My observations of bars took place on two occasions also, April 6 2009 and November 23 2010.

There is a long sequence set in a bar, which begins on p. 17 of 'The Dream Life of Butterflies' with the following passage:

The Almeida's was in Hosier Lane. Pete led us to a steel door with Turd Klass written on it in bright red paint. A shutter snapped open. Dark cavernous eyes considered us a moment. The door swung out. We headed up the stairs to the entrance of the bar where a Goth-girl with a black chopstick skewered in her hair was reading a book on a barstool. Her skinny frame sprang open the instant she saw Pete.

The sequence ends on p. 22.

There are several sequences in the novel that are set in cafes, on pp. 2, 35-8, 42 and 49. There are no sequences set in nightclubs in the novel, although the fictional Almeida bar also seconds as a nightclub in the novel.

The following passages were recorded in cafes and bars in cafés in August 2008, which I have excerpted from ‘The Fear of Being Watched’ from pp. 5-6. There are further recordings of conversations in a bar on pp. 77-81, which were recoded in June 2011.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN AT UNIVERSITY CAFE    Why does anyone want to vote?

MIDDLE-AGED FEMALE LECTURER    Just to get rid of them?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN AT UNIVERSITY CAFE    Why?

MIDDLE-AGED FEMALE LECTURER    You don’t want to register your protest?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN AT UNIVERSITY CAFE    Like what? (*Silence*)  
They’re all idiots?

*Students at a Melbourne University bar.*

YOUNG STUDENT 1    Would you like a beer if I have one?

YOUNG STUDENT 2    Later. Not now.

YOUNG STUDENT 1    I might go get one.

*YOUNG GUY 1 IN BAR approaches YOUNG GUY 2 IN BAR.*

YOUNG GUY 1 IN BAR    Spotted any talent?

YOUNG GUY 2 IN BAR    Why?

*YOUNG GUY 1 IN BAR smiles. YOUNG GUY 2 IN BAR stares back.*  
*YOUNG GUY 1 IN BAR leaves and goes and sits by himself. Two other guys*  
*converse in the bar.*

I chose bars, cafes and nightclubs as locations for my observations as I was interested in noting how people express behaviour and speech within casual, social environments. Cafés are perfect environments for eavesdropping, and recording personal conversations between people. The conversations are leisurely, and meander from the superficial to the deeply personal, and generally avoid conflict. Crucially, for the development of my aesthetic practice, they are not driven by any visible dramatic pattern. It is relatively easy to record a café conversation, and drop it into an entirely different context, as my research indicated that the verbal exchanges that take place in café's rarely include mention of the situational context. This is not to say the café environment does not affect *what* is said and *how* it is said, but that the lack of visible connectivity to the site makes it relatively easy to drop the recorded conversations into any context that is deemed necessary.

The recording of conversations in bars and nightclubs was considerably more difficult due to noise factors, which meant that I resorted to recording conversations in these sites during early hours when there were fewer customers. This meant that I was less likely to record drunken conversation, though for my observations of behaviour, I visited a nightclub and bar in the early morning hours. I was interested in observing people lose control over their physical and verbal behaviour.

As theatre requires actors to take risks, to make physical and verbal offers that are sometimes extreme, or unlikely to happen within the day-to-day context of the actors'

lives, my observations of people's lack of self-censoring and inhibition that took place when they were affected by alcohol, helped to inform my improvisations. I regularly asked the actors to play physical actions, or use tactics, which pushed their verbal expressivity into more extreme, personal or confrontational territory. During these improvisations, I also reminded that actors to not problematise the work; despite the personal, confronting nature of the conversation, I did not want actors to dramatize, or interpret the content.

## **10 - Conclusion**

According to Artaud ‘if there is one truly infernal and damned thing left today, it is our artistic dallying with forms’ (1971, 6). Artaud sought to uncover something essential behind human actions, what lies beneath the masks that we use to suppress our thoughts and actions. This occurs when the performer exercises their free will. Through free-floating acts of desire, super-awareness energises the performer’s involvement and informs what they do; it reframes how performers and audience engage each other. Theatre becomes banal when it is turned into a narrative focused on stating the surface content of the text or the body. In everyday theatre, our internal instruments cannot be constrained, and it is these that all forms of theatre aim to release to their full potential.

During my observations of the everyday, as documented in the section ‘The Everyday - Methods’, I became aware that people’s behaviour was affected by their surrounding environment, such as the interior of a lift, a cathedral, or café. These spaces appear governed by behavioural rules, while also positioning the observed/observers in a particular physical relationship to each other. This is also the case in traditional theatre spaces where conventions determine what and how roles are performed. My observations of the everyday made me acutely aware of the restraints so often placed on theatrical concepts such as ‘character’, representation and the performance of actions/objectives. I began to ask myself: whom do theatre makers think they are representing when creating ‘characters’? Even in much hyperrealist theatre, theatrical characters exist within a narrower frame of behavioural exhibition than people in the everyday field.

Within the everyday, performance arises as a constant struggle of asserting the self within the social domain that places constraints on individual expression (Lefebvre 1991,

139). Every person and environment imposes a particular brand of civilising influence, requires specific performative protocols/conventions that are measured during everyday interaction (Lefebvre 1991, 57-59). As with an actor on stage, the performer within the everyday endures the fear of being unmasked, of hidden agendas and desires being revealed. Everyday interactions must appear natural and unrehearsed. An individual in the everyday is usually expected to keep their thoughts private; signs of vulnerability should be kept at bay. The individual is required to take responsibility for their impulses. The everyday environment, as with conventional theatre, is governed by learned rules and protocols that ensure anarchic impulses are contained within clear parameters (Certeau 1988, 110).

Yet the field of the everyday is filled with exceptions. On continuous display is the over-riding desire of people to connect with each other in profound ways, an instinctive and all pervading spirit that ‘jolts the audience’ and nullifies social restrictions that stymie genuine contact (Read 1993, 61-2). I witnessed numerous occasions where performative expectations dissolved, where behavioural patterns broke down to reveal situations and qualities of being that were hitherto invisible (Read 1993, 63). The variability in notions of ‘character’ is far more extreme in the everyday, than what is typically presented within theatres. Everyday interactions provided me with a constant provocation: How can my observations of the everyday inform my own practice and methodology for text and performance creation?

The complex, meticulous manifestations of human ‘action’ and language that I observed in the everyday environment have consistently shifted and affected my practice and methodology over a twenty-two-year period, but most especially during the period of

my PhD research. My performance texts have shifted further away any semblance of narration, representation of character or structured action; the texts have become increasingly intertextual and dramaturgically open. My later texts provide the audience with greater leeway in framing and ‘reading’ the performance. While an actor is trained to deal with the presence of the audience (Stanislavsky 1968, 184), to enable the performance to be unaffected by the presence of others external to the scene, the evolution of my own work with Ranters has been towards a greater awareness and connection with audience, rather than a denial of it. This awareness, especially pronounced since 2007, has also resulted in the removal of traditional performance codes such as ‘character’ as a written and enacted construct, theatrical representation, as well as dramatic action/trajectories, conflict, plot, story and linear narrative.

A major influence on my work was the naturalistic plays of Anton Chekhov, such as *The Seagull*, with their juxtapositional structures, lateral narrative digressions, and apparent lack of linear action or trajectories. Brecht’s theory of the *Verfremdungseffekt* was also an influence on the development of my text creation (the absence of the fictional frame) and their staged presentations. Brecht’s productions utilised the theatrical stage as a concrete space; the stage ceased to be representational or articulated as a separate space from that occupied by the audience, governed by separate rules of performance. Brecht’s innovative ideas set in motion a process of stripping away theatrical conventions, which was especially rigorous in the sixties and seventies. It was during this intense period of performance experimentation, when theatrical signifiers were being questioned and dissolved, that postdramatic aesthetics emerged. Concurrent with this development was a sociological analysis focusing on role-playing and the adoption of public personas, as

evinced in the work of Erving Goffman. It was also during this time that critical theory, as espoused by philosophers such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and Situationist writers such as Guy Debord and Constant, focused on the everyday as a realm of performance. Everyday theatre has now become de rigueur with a number of contemporary companies/practitioners in Australia and Europe, such as NYID, Back to Back, Richard Maxwell, Toshiki Okada and Philippe Quesne.

In my own practice, the focus on everyday aesthetics and hyperrealist performance writing has blurred the lines between the stage and the audience, the fictive and the real; the texts create the conditions for ontological uncertainty. Theatrical language in my plays has moved from a focus on the spoken text towards a matrix of visual/verbal content. The everyday theatre that I practice, acknowledges the influence of digital media and technologies that have brought the audience closer to what is performed. The use of everyday language patterns in my hyperrealist texts, such as nuance, concatenation, simultaneity, conversational rhythmic structures, unstable narrative sequences, diegetic fissures, interruptions in dialogue, while dispensing with plot, story and teleological character objectives, invite the audience to construct their own dramaturgy.

In performance, my plays require the performers to reject a conventional approach to rehearsal. The evolution of my everyday aesthetics, the stripping away of conventional performance codes, challenges the actors to create the theatrical conditions that facilitate he/she to react to a live situation, without resorting to conscious techniques or structures, such as narrative trajectory, causal logic, actions/objectives or characterisation. As with everyday interaction, an actor in a Ranters' performance needs to trust their unconscious response mechanisms in order to engage the work at its optimum level. In order to achieve

this, the Ranters' development and production phase employs a long rehearsal process that allows the performers to free themselves of conscious restraints, within the parameters of what's required for the text. The director's role is to create a process that supports the performers to free themselves of performative habits, to engage each other with focused tasks and responses, in order to reveal unmediated action and subtext.

The performers in the later Ranters' productions are required to engage each other as themselves. In the earlier Ranters' productions, the actors were asked to situate themselves within a conflict scenario within a situational frame. As my writing evolved, the situation, or representational frame, was removed. In the later plays, character objectives, which propel the conflict, were also removed. The later work then enabled the actors to present themselves in a relaxed state, as themselves, but via multiple, or hybridised personas. The work sits between fiction and non-fiction, between a fluid and concrete space. The emphasis in these later plays is less on a constructed linear dramaturgy; instead they deliver a fragmented, non-linear sequencing of text that gives the audience a greater responsibility in dramaturgical composition. This dissembling of narrative and dramaturgical structures provides the performers with a clearer platform to focus on the moment-to-moment minutiae of actions that take place between them.

In Ranters' productions, the fulcrum of performative experience has always revolved around the audience, but our everyday aesthetic has continually evolved towards the audience and performers occupying a shared space, no longer as witnesses, but increasingly as active constituents. In the 'Epic Hyperrealist' productions, the audience takes on the role of the camera; they direct their own gaze, following simultaneous actions according to their own will. As with Eisenstein's montage sequences 'when the separate

pieces produce, in juxtaposition the synthesis of one's theme' (1986, 33), the audience in these productions reconstitutes the manifold aspects of what they witness as performance. In the later 'Neo-Hyperrealist' productions, the everyday aesthetics are refined and resynthesised; text and actions can be read, understood and appreciated by the audience with a reflective and engaged level of consciousness, which alters their relationship to what they see. The everyday content in the later plays reveals hidden agendas and subtextual content that would otherwise not present itself and remain invisible within the everyday field. This same content, recontextualised and manipulated, while suggesting and inspiring new texts and actions, now offers itself as a 'reading' with the potential for profound implications for the viewer. It can lead to the audience questioning and challenging the way they are perceived, and following that, creating the conditions to free themselves from self-conscious introspection.

Everyday aesthetics informs all my writing, and prompts me to question the limits of what theatre can be. The sheer diversity and universal scale of everyday activity and interaction invites me to question my practice, to measure and recalibrate my methodology and processes for writing theatre texts/plays in relationship to it. What is experienced as believable, or readable in theatre practice is determined in large measure by our experience of everyday theatre in our lives.

My research into everydayness was further developed through writing my novel, 'The Dream Life of Butterflies'. The novel was inspired by my peripatetic wanderings around inner city Melbourne observing everyday interaction. The novel aimed to place the focus on the poetry of human actions. The action takes place within a semi-imagined topography, where the central three characters push each other to their limits. As with my

plays, the novel explores the minutiae of spontaneous activity, with the intention of revealing needs and desires that secrete themselves beneath the multiple layers of social conformity. The dialogic content is also nuanced, affected by the rhythms, cadences, register and ellipses present in everyday speech, with intertextual references to popular culture, sounds and recorded conversations.

The novel gave me scope to explore content not possible within the concrete parameters of the theatrical stage. The lack of temporal and spatial limits permitted an infiltration of everyday sites, a mixture of the weird and the banal, such as bars, tunnels, cars, a cemetery, classrooms and bedrooms, which manage to impinge themselves on the unconscious trajectories of the characters. In writing the novel, I became aware of its potential for adaptation as a performance text. The inclusion of the narrative surround, the description of sites, people and ambiances, in conjunction with dialogue, offered the potential for a new direction in my hyperrealist performance writing that highlights the act of fiction making in the presence of the audience. This act of sharing text creation with the audience has the potential to place them at the heart of the action; even more than my ‘Neo-Hyperreal’ plays, the dramaturgy becomes a shared responsibility. In ‘The Dream Life of Butterflies,’ I not only constructed and discovered new methods for writing fiction, but also laid the foundations for a new form of performance writing that advances my previous experimentations.

Everyday theatre offers modes of contemplation, where ordinary, banal, but sometimes extraordinary, occurrences have the potential to reveal a narrative singularity, a point where the forms of storytelling breakdown and unexpected possibilities are realised. It is within the multiple, diverse plains of everyday theatre, which do not privilege any

particular forms of expression or activity, and which can occur with unlimited diversity, where moments of profound revelation are offered to the audience. Events that are volatile or explosive, might sit alongside those that are quiet and inconspicuous. Occasions where the underlying subtext reveals itself might suddenly morph into text where the hidden agendas are nascent, barely emerging, or unformed, or not there at all.

Everyday theatre engages at the optimum level when it permits the conditions for the unconscious to flow freely through the audience, when thought and action become entwined. Everyday theatre offers experience in all its totality, an inexhaustible field of performative interactions between people. The peripatetic observation of the minutiae of daily expression, so often ignored or regarded with indifference, can become an infinite reservoir of raw material. Random conversations between strangers on a train, the obscure gestures people use to greet each other in public places, the way a person might turn away their eyes in embarrassment, or laugh at some obscure recognition, or peer through a shop window or wait for a friend in a bar: these simple meetings and events, which at first sight seem insignificant, mundane, or even abject, can arouse profound curiosity in the mind of the audience. Volatile or serene exchanges can alternately give birth to each other, change their appearance once again or dissolve into nothing. Organised meetings and gatherings between people of like mind can sometimes collapse into unpredictable and spontaneous disorder, sometimes violence.

Rather than ignore the theatrical potential of these events, our engagement as an audience of the everyday elicits and intensifies a need for a theatrical exchange to take place. Every interaction or activity has its own inimitable use of verbal language, its own temperature and colour, its particular rhythms and cadence, a physical, emotional, rational

and unconscious expression all its own; it is part of an interactive, ever-changing drama that is in turn recontextualised and reframed by its inclusion as everyday theatre, which in turn unfurls into an ever expanding horizon of meanings and unconscious responses. The new everyday theatre offers the potential for the audience/performer relationship to transform, where both are at once observer and performer in a labyrinthine dance of perpetually moving bodies. The performer/observer in everyday theatre must occupy the empty space that separates them from the plane of the ordinary, and a utopia of transcendent experience. It is within the realm of everyday theatre that perceptions can be released from their confines, where the audience can glimpse the un-nameable.

# **Hyperrealism and The Everyday in Creative Practice**

## **Exegesis**

Raimondo Cortese



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**PhD – Hyperrealism and The Everyday  
in Creative Practice:  
Exegesis, Play, Novel.**

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*The Fear of Being Watched is a one-scene event that takes place in real-time. The performance space should be non-representational. Each persona is recorded from observations of real human interaction within Melbourne, which also includes, wherever possible, their physical behaviour. Interspersed with these are a series of domestic dialogues between Michael, Mara and Simon, which I have written in a way that mirrors the natural discourse of the recorded dialogues. A series of monologues also attempt to mirror natural speech, in the form of direct address to audience.*

*TALL WOMAN laughs, then stops and then laughs again.*

TALL WOMAN     It's so funny.

*She laughs. Long silence. MALE LAWYER goes and sits next to FEMALE LAWYER. It is clear they've had an argument. Silence.*

FEMALE LAWYER We can still be friends.

MALE LAWYER    Yeah no it's good.

FEMALE LAWYER Yeah it's better...

MALE LAWYER    No it'll broaden us... as people.

*Silence.*

FEMALE LAWYER We can be real with each other.

MALE LAWYER    Yes I'm grateful.

FEMALE LAWYER No it's good.

MALE LAWYER    You get it?

FEMALE LAWYER Yes.

*They laugh.*

*WEARY MOTHER and DAUGHTER in a café in the CBD.*

WEARY MOTHER Get something to eat.

DAUGHTER Don't say that.

*WEARY MOTHER goes to the counter and comes back with a packet of nuts.*

DAUGHTER You know I don't like nuts.

*DAUGHTER takes an ipod from her bag and turns it on.*

*TWO STUDENTS outside library.*

FEMALE STUDENT 1 I wouldn't mind going for a swim.

FEMALE STUDENT 2 Are you gonna go?

FEMALE STUDENT 1 What?

FEMALE STUDENT 2 Are you going to?

FEMALE STUDENT 1 I thought you were?

FEMALE STUDENT 2 I can't be bothered.

*Silence.*

YOUNG MAN ON MOBILE IN THE STREET Why should I compromise?

*YOUNG MAN ON MOBILE laughs and walks off. Silence. A group of people in Federation square.*

*GREY-HAIRED MAN and WOMAN at a café with TEENAGERS at a separate table.*

GREY HAIRED MAN Spotted this quirky little place. Sort of tucked away down this little alley-way.

ORDERLY LOOKING WOMAN Yeah?

*Silence.*

TEENAGE GIRL 1 What does omnipotent mean?

TEENAGE GIRL 2 Oh yes...

*Silence.*

GREY HAired MAN I've had my eye on this place for a few days. They've got crabs on the menu.

ORDERLY LOOKING WOMAN Right.

GREY HAired MAN Been craving crabs for ages now.

*Silence. TEENAGE GIRL 2 laughs.*

TEENAGE GIRL 1 We should do some shopping.

TEENAGE GIRL 2 Yeah.

TEENAGE GIRL 1 Get you something special?

TEENAGE GIRL 2 Yeah.

TEENAGE GIRL 1 A treat.

TEENAGE GIRL 2 Yeah.

TEENAGE GIRL 1 What can we get you?

TEENAGE GIRL 2 I don't know.

TEENAGE GIRL 1 Anything you need?

TEENAGE GIRL 2 Dunno.

*Silence.*

GREY HAired MAN I wouldn't mind having some crabs.

*Silence.*

STEVE I don't know what's happening to me. I read the paper today and I might as well have been skimming over gravel in the driveway. All these words... the way things are written... are said... none of it has any effect on me. Nothing tangible... nothing to hold on to... nothing surprises me. Did it ever? If I was younger would I now be surprised to come across the kind of crap that you read on twitter? Was I just pretending back then? I don't know. Every phrase... every nuance... feels like I've heard it a thousand times before. The words just float in front of me.

'Monument'... 'sat upon'... 'coagulate'... 'joss stick'... 'Dalmatian'...  
'nervous system'... 'peripheral nervous system'... 'row your boat'.  
When I was little I used to hide under a blanket and read books with a  
torch until my eyes stung from exhaustion. I'd go through two or three  
books a week like that. How did words lose their all their vitality? From  
being able to incite my imagination with boundless wonder to now just  
looking like animal scratchings? Bird shit? I feel the fault must lie with  
me. How did I let it get to this stage? When did I start ignoring them?  
Taking them for granted? When did the words die for me? Stories...  
narratives... the way things are told... have I just heard it all too many  
times? I don't remember. But it's not just the words that are fading. I'm  
having the same problem with images too. Words... pictures... the  
construction of images... I see them everywhere... on windows... in  
magazines... on trams... covering the sides of buildings... framed the  
same way... to please my eye... but my eye has grown too accustomed  
to it all and so now images just come and they go. Is it only designed to  
impress the young..? the forgetful..? or does it respond to something else  
I don't know about? Is there a part of me that's not working properly?  
That is now extinct? I have to remind myself... it's against the laws of  
nature to endure.

*GREY HAired MAN leaves and sits by himself. OLD GREEK LADY takes some  
biscuits and cheese out of her bag and begins eating.*

*On the grass outside the State Library of Victoria. A woman is talking to her toddler.*

WOMAN IN LIBRARY SING NURSERY RHYMES                      I'll sing you a song  
that's not very long. Hey ho hey ho... stop.

*In Swanston Street, two friends talk.*

MALE FRIEND      *(To FEMALE FRIEND)* Can I borrow your phone?

FEMALE FRIEND    I don't have one.

MALE FRIEND      You don't have a phone?

FEMALE FRIEND    No.

MALE FRIEND      Just gotta make a quick call.

FEMALE FRIEND    I don't have one.

MALE FRIEND      Doesn't matter.

FEMALE FRIEND    I don't have a phone.

MALE FRIEND      Yeah.

FEMALE FRIEND    There's a pay phone over there.

*A SPORTY GIRL proceeds to do some exercises at a bus stop.*

*At the University Café, two academics are talking at a table.*

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN AT UNIVERSITY CAFE    Who do you think's going to win the French elections? He's an idiot that bloke they've got. A real idiot.

*Silence.*

MIDDLE-AGED MAN AT UNIVERSITY CAFE    Why does anyone want to vote?

MIDDLE-AGED FEMALE LECTURER    Just to get rid of them?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN AT UNIVERSITY CAFE    Why?

MIDDLE-AGED FEMALE LECTURER    You don't want to register your protest?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN AT UNIVERSITY CAFE    Like what? *(Silence)* They're all idiots?

*Students at a Melbourne University bar.*

YOUNG STUDENT 1      Would you like a beer if I have one?

YOUNG STUDENT 2      Later. Not now.

YOUNG STUDENT 1      I might go get one.

*YOUNG GUY 1 IN BAR approaches YOUNG GUY 2 IN BAR.*

YOUNG GUY 1 IN BAR Spotted any talent?

YOUNG GUY 2 IN BAR Why?

*YOUNG GUY 1 IN BAR smiles. YOUNG GUY 2 IN BAR stares back.*

*YOUNG GUY 1 IN BAR leaves and goes and sits by himself. Two other guys converse in the bar.*

BOY WITH BLACK HAIR How you going?

BOY WITH FAIR HAIR Good.

BOY WITH BLACK HAIR You from round here?

BOY WITH FAIR HAIR No. Canada.

BOY WITH BLACK HAIR Really?

BOY WITH FAIR HAIR Yeah.

BOY WITH BLACK HAIR What you doing here?

BOY WITH FAIR HAIR Just checking it out.

BOY WITH BLACK HAIR Right.

BOY WITH FAIR HAIR Wanna go up the Top End.

BOY WITH BLACK HAIR Yeah that'd be good.

BOY WITH FAIR HAIR You been up there?

BOY WITH BLACK HAIR No. Meant to be good though.

BOY WITH FAIR HAIR *(To GIRL WITH BLONDE HAIR)* What's the matter?

SARA There was a party at my friend's house the other night. I got into a bit of trouble. Well nothing was said. Maybe I'm just imagining that I'm in trouble. I pinched this man's face. Sort of tweaked his ear. I didn't know who he was and I haven't seen him since. It wasn't really a party... more of a gathering. A friend of mine invited me... Peter... he said I'm having

some people over and I think you would like them. It was true I did like them. There was really nothing to not like. They were very engaging people... very friendly... sort of people you can talk to quite easily on a broad range of subjects. I wore my brown leather jacket. It doesn't have many pockets. Has a nice sheen. Suits me I think... at least a couple of my friends have made some positive comments. Mainly on the colour. And when I looked in my wardrobe for something to go with it and I found this split cream brocade silk skirt... which I can honestly say I've never seen before... it's just not the sort of thing I'd wear... not in a pink fit. Someone must have put it in my wardrobe... as a surprise. A surprise joke or something. I can think of a few friends of mine who might conceive of something like that. My friends are very thoughtful... but their humour is left of centre. I'm not being paranoid. I don't really care about it... just that you'd have to beat me over the head to get me to wear something like that. You'd have to knock me out. My friends know my taste very well. They often borrow my clothes. And quite a few have stayed with me over the years... and because you never know... I let them keep the key. Sara stayed with me for four months last year after her husband threatened to kill himself... and she kept the key... so it was probably her. It's the sort of thing she'd do. Or at least put someone else up to it. But when I saw it I decided to put it on... together with my leather jacket. It was a terrible combination. I can't think of an analogy... just unnatural. But Peter thought I looked terrific. Everyone did. They made very positive... very sincere comments. We all got on so well. Conversation flowed from one subject to the other so naturally. There was a volcanologist in the room and he talked a lot. Inspired us all.

Everyone was so open. We laughed at things... taboo things. Shocking things even when I think about it. I don't think I've ever talked before about the things we talked about that night... or since for that matter. It all seemed to make us closer... to know each other more easily. It was a riot. There was one group laughing louder than everyone else... this threesome... made up of two men and a woman. The woman and the man on her left laughed in short shrill bursts... the other man almost bellowed... really emptied his lungs. His nostrils flared like an ox. They were sitting on a couch positioned in the centre of the lounge-room... a perfect position to watch the night progress. One of the men... the one who bellowed all the time... looked at my skirt. He made some very charming comments about the life cycle of silk worms. He went on to interpolate some deeper significance regarding the tone of my skin. He said I was... graceful... full of ambivalent delight. At least that's how I interpreted what he said. So I leaned over and pinched his face. First his nose... then his ear. I squeezed him properly... not just a little nip. Meaning I tried to take a part of him away between my fingers. I must have felt he needed it. He laughed it off. They all did. We all had a good laugh together. Then I sat next to them and we kept chatting as before. Of course the way they saw me had now changed but they carried on as though nothing had happened. I thought they were very considerate.

*A woman and a teenager talk at a tram stop.*

OLD WOMEN AT TRAM STOP You should be careful with skin.

TEENAGE GIRL AT TRAM STOP I've got cream.

OLD WOMEN AT TRAM STOP I'm suspicious of cream. (*Silence.*) Hats are good too.

FAT MAN IN SUIT *eats a biscuit in the Botanical Gardens.*

*In a restaurant off Little Bourke Street.*

VIETNAMESE COOK IN PHO RESTAURANT You're more open when you're young. (*Silence. To FEMALE CUSTOMER 1.*) I didn't like pork until I try it.

FEMALE CUSTOMER 1 Me too.

VIETNAMESE COOK IN PHO RESTAURANT I didn't you know.

FEMALE CUSTOMER 1 It's funny?

FEMALE CUSTOMER 2 (*FEMALE CUSTOMER 1*) You used to wear all that weird stuff.

FEMALE CUSTOMER 1 So did you.

FEMALE CUSTOMER 2 That's going a bit far.

FEMALE CUSTOMER 1 (*To VIETNAMESE COOK IN PHO RESTAURANT*) She used to introduce me to all these things I would never do.

FEMALE CUSTOMER 2 (*To VIETNAMESE COOK IN PHO RESTAURANT*) She's lying.

*They laugh.*

*On the train.*

GIRL ON TRAIN 1 Very ballsy.

GIRL ON TRAIN 2 Sometimes it's the only way.

GIRL ON TRAIN 3 I went to school with this guy who was like that.

*They laugh.*

GIRL ON TRAIN 2 What about those people who take their dogs for a walk with those plastic bags?

GIRL ON TRAIN 3 My dog's very naughty.

GIRL ON TRAIN 2 What kind of dog you got?

GIRL ON TRAIN 3 A mongrel.

GIRL ON TRAIN 1 How are your cats?

GIRL ON TRAIN 2 Good.

GIRL ON TRAIN 3 It's not hard to look after cats.

*Silence.*

*At a café in the CBD.*

WOMAN AT CAFÉ DRINKING SMOOTHIE You have to have patience with relationships I think. And you also have to know when to say 'no... sorry'.

WOMAN AT CAFÉ EATING CAKE Marriage... it's not a lottery.

WOMAN AT CAFÉ DRINKING SMOOTHIE No.

WOMAN AT CAFÉ EATING CAKE I've never heard anyone say that before.

WOMAN AT CAFÉ DRINKING SMOOTHIE No. No you need patience.

WOMAN AT CAFÉ EATING CAKE That's right.

*Silence.*

FIONA I don't know what this conversation should be about? I don't want to talk about myself. That's one thing I don't want to do. It's always ridiculous to talk about yourself. It's humiliating. But I don't know what to share with you. What? That life is difficult? Yes well we know that things are complicated. Yes there are complicated things we could talk about... all night I guess. Actually I don't like the sound of my own voice. I literally don't like the sound of it. Whenever I talk about anything... I start hearing myself... I hear my own voice... and it gets in the way. I begin to realise that what I talk about... the things I say... they lose all meaning as I articulate them. It happens all the time... halfway through a sentence...

I lose the impetus to finish it. I hear the sounds I make and the words start to fade away. I realise I never know what I'm talking about. But I don't think anybody else does either. All these conversations... all these speeches you hear all the time... it's all bluff... people saying things because they have the temerity to push it through... to see where it might go... to see the effect it might have. It's a confidence trick.

*Two women at an auction in Docklands.*

OLD WOMAN AT AN AUCTION How's Kieren going?

YOUNG WOMAN AT AN AUCTION Good... he's doing this bike riding thing.

OLD WOMAN AT AN AUCTION But you're pretty similar.

YOUNG WOMAN AT AN AUCTION We sort of compliment each other.

*Silence.*

OLD WOMAN AT AN AUCTION How long have I known him?

YOUNG WOMAN AT AN AUCTION Years... years.

OLD WOMAN AT AN AUCTION You're lucky.

YOUNG WOMAN AT AN AUCTION Yeah.

*Silence.*

*MICHAEL, MARA and SIMON are sitting. They wear neat, casual clothes.*

*The space is non-representational.*

SIMON You hungry?

MICHAEL Not really.

SIMON You sure?

MICHAEL Yep.

*Silence.*

MARA Can I give you a kiss?

MICHAEL I don't know.

*Silence.*

MARA I feel like a treat.

MICHAEL Yeah?

MARA But I just don't know what. *(Silence)* Something fun.

MICHAEL Yes I know what you mean.

*Silence.*

MARA If I was going to buy a cigar... what would be a good one?

MICHAEL I don't know... maybe a Romeo y Julietta.

MARA Are they any good?

MICHAEL I like them. *(Silence)* You don't have many things.

MARA No.

SIMON We've been meaning to get some pot plants though haven't we?

MARA Yeah.

SIMON Just to brighten things up a bit.

*Silence.*

SIMON I saw this Chinese mask down the road. That would probably look quite good on the wall.

MICHAEL Yeah.

SIMON They were asking a lot for it. It was only made from papier-mâché... it wasn't made from something special... but they want quite a lot for it.

MICHAEL How much?

MARA Then again when a place is empty it makes it look bigger.

SIMON You've seen the mask I'm talking about haven't you?

MARA Yeah.

SIMON It's not worth what they're asking.

MARA I don't know. I made a piggy bank at school once and that took me god knows how long. I painted it with spots. And it had a little tuft of hair and paws. It took me forever.

SIMON And then you just smashed it.

MARA Hmm... with my fists.

*Silence.*

SIMON How much money did you have in there?

MARA A lot. I had a lot of money.

*Silence.*

MICHAEL How long have you been here?

MARA Simon.

SIMON I don't know... a long time.

MICHAEL Have you ever thought of moving?

MARA Simon.

SIMON He's speaking to you too.

MARA No... I don't want to move.

SIMON What about you Michael?

MICHAEL I move quite a lot.

SIMON Is that hard?

MICHAEL Not really. I don't have too many possessions.

SIMON Have you got a few mates that can help you?

MICHAEL What with?

SIMON With moving..? if you need a hand?

MICHAEL Yeah sure.

SIMON That's a bonus. I reckon moving house is one of the worst things in the world.

MICHAEL I don't have much furniture.

SIMON That's what's hard... getting tables and dressers through the doorways.

*Silence.*

MICHAEL What do you do with yourself? You work?

MARA Not exactly.

MICHAEL That's lucky.

MARA I'm studying.

MICHAEL Yeah?

MARA Hmm.

*Silence.*

MICHAEL What are you studying?

MARA I don't know how to describe it. Painting. A form of painting.

MICHAEL Oh yeah.

MARA I'm not very good.

MICHAEL Why do you say that?

MARA You should see what I come up with.

MICHAEL I bet you're very good... you just don't realise it.

MARA How would you know?

SIMON You're much better than what you say Mara.

MARA It's annoying when people make things up like that. *(Silence)* It's something I enjoy. That's all. That's why I do it. But it's a bloody expensive business. I usually get covered in paint. Don't I Simon..? top to bottom.

SIMON You're a mess.

MARA Splotches everywhere.

SIMON It's great.

MARA I'm going to have an exhibition.

MICHAEL Whereabouts?

MARA I'm not at that point yet. *(Silence)* Where do you live Michael?

MICHAEL At the moment?

MARA Yeah.

MICHAEL Just staying with friends.

SIMON You looking for somewhere?

MICHAEL Yeah.

MARA How long are you going to do that for?

MICHAEL Until they kick me out probably.

SIMON Is that likely?

MICHAEL Dunno. We don't really talk about it.

MARA We've travelled around a lot... especially in Europe... so we know what it's like.

SIMON We weren't exactly crashing out on people's couches though.

MICHAEL No?

SIMON No it was pretty comfortable.

MARA What about Barcelona?

SIMON We went to see Durruti's grave.

MICHAEL Yeah.

SIMON The anarchist leader.

MICHAEL OK.

SIMON An amazing man.

MICHAEL He's dead is he?

MARA It was raining the whole day.

SIMON That's right... we went to the cathedral instead.

MARA           The cathedral is so beautiful.

MICHAEL       I went to a cathedral recently and sat behind this Swedish couple and just listened to them.

MARA           You eavesdropped?

MICHAEL       I couldn't understand a word they said but because it was in a cathedral every sound seemed incredible... seemed necessary...

SIMON          They have extraordinary acoustics.

MICHAEL       The whole thing.

SIMON          I always want a shout when I'm in a cathedral.

MICHAEL       And sing.

SIMON          Yeah sing at the top of my voice.

*Silence.*

MARA           I ate my first sea urchin the other day.

SIMON          In a restaurant?

MARA           No at home. I collected them at a beach. I prepared them in this special sauce.

SIMON          You weren't worried about the pollution?

MARA           Should I be?

SIMON          Just that they're scavengers. So they pick things up.

MICHAEL       Like mussels.

SIMON          Yeah like mussels. You have to be careful.

MARA           I only had one or two. My friend only had one or two.

SIMON          That's the thing, though... you only need one to get quite sick apparently.

MARA           It was just one off thing really... you can't eat more than one anyway  
it's so intense... the taste... like a wave... a wave of seawater crashing  
into your tongue. It's so strong. You wouldn't want more than one.

MICHAEL       It's like when you go surfing.

MARA           Hmm.

*Silence.*

*Two girls in Myer.*

GROOVY GIRL IN MYER   Mum sent me these awful pyjamas the other day.

GIRL WITH MULTIPLE PIERCINGS    Yeah?

GROOVY GIRL IN MYER    Really bad.

GIRL WITH MULTIPLE PIERCINGS    *(She laughs)* Your mother.

*Silence.*

STEVE           I love watching animals. I love nature programs. I'm addicted to  
Attenborough. If I ever go to a new city... going to the zoo is always on  
my itinerary. The second place I go is the cemetery. I find them  
peaceful... uplifting... they reassure me that there are no limits to  
people's compassion. Whereas zoos are cruel. The whole idea of locking  
animals up as a spectacle is so obviously cruel... I mean they always seem  
to be scared... or bored out of their brains... or slightly mad... like  
they're psychologically damaged or something... but still I like to go  
there... I love watching them. In a funny way you can sense what they're  
thinking. Like you can share something with them on their level. You can  
just be with them... stare into their eyes... like the meerkats... they seem  
quite normal after a while... their whole way of keeping a look out and  
darting about as though there's some enormous eagle about to swoop  
down on them... I can completely relate to it after a while. It doesn't

seem all that unusual. Even the reptiles. Just sitting there... hibernating... or whatever they're doing. It's huge relief just sitting with them. It always calms me. Just watching them. You can't exactly stare at a person like that. I'd love to be able to stare at a person like that. I'm sure if they paid people to sit around naked in a zoo... you'd get plenty of people who'd do it. And I don't see that there's anything wrong with that providing you were paid well. Couldn't be worse than a lot of things. To just watch a person live... to hang out and be themselves. To watch people in their own space... breathing... eating... shitting... fucking... sleeping... doing whatever they do and they'd be so used to people watching them it wouldn't affect them anymore. They'd be quite happy with that I think. But they'd have to be paid well. And fed well.

*At Brunetti's in Swanston Street.*

*BUSINESS MAN AT CAFÉ takes out a cigar and lights it. He smiles at GIRL IN WHITE BLOUSE. BUSINESS MAN AT CAFÉ exhales a huge puff. Two women look at him disapprovingly.*

WOMAN AT CAFÉ WITH SMALL CHILD      *(To WOMAN WITH WHITE CAP)*

He's thoughtful.

*SPORTY WOMAN IN PINK SHORTS puts on some lipstick.*

FEMALE PACKPAKER 1    What about those mountains?

FEMALE BACKPAKER 2    Yeah

FEMALE PACKPAKER 1    How do you think what created them?

FEMALE BACKPAKER 2    Could've been volcanic.

FEMALE PACKPAKER 1    Probably geomorphic pressure.

*Silence.*

CALLUM I've got quite a few interesting friends... and I think that's because I'm not judgemental. I mean I'm much more judgemental of myself than I am of others. Providing people are not violent... or selfish... or arrogant... or rude and abrasive... or bitchy and petty that sort of thing... or cruel and emotionally twisted... aggressive... steal things... are detached and disinterested... noncommittal types... that sort of thing.

*At Supermarket on Bourke Street.*

*DEAF CHECK-OUT MAN IN SUPERMARKET talks to YOUNG FEMALE CUSTOMER.*

DEAF CHECK-OUT MAN IN SUPERMARKET How's the new job then?

YOUNG FEMALE CUSTOMER Good. Ok.

DEAF CHECK-OUT MAN IN SUPERMARKET You still working with Terry, then?

YOUNG FEMALE CUSTOMER No he's gone.

DEAF CHECK-OUT MAN IN SUPERMARKET He was nice. I liked him.

YOUNG FEMALE CUSTOMER Yeah he was.

DEAF CHECK-OUT MAN IN SUPERMARKET Who's there now?

YOUNG FEMALE CUSTOMER Harry's still there.

DEAF CHECK-OUT MAN IN SUPERMARKET I don't like him.

YOUNG FEMALE CUSTOMER No..?

DEAF CHECK-OUT MAN IN SUPERMARKET Don't like him.

YOUNG FEMALE CUSTOMER Yeah.

DEAF CHECK-OUT MAN IN SUPERMARKET You alright then?

YOUNG FEMALE CUSTOMER Yeah.

DEAF CHECK-OUT MAN IN SUPERMARKET See ya then.

YOUNG FEMALE CUSTOMER Bye.

In the Bourke Street Mall.

STUDENT 1 The place is full of weirdos.

STUDENT 2 There's this woman who walks up and down my street who's like that.

Everyone says she's mentally disturbed but I'm not sure. I'm sure she's disturbed but she still gives me the creeps. *(Silence)* I gotta get a job.

STUDENT 1 How come?

STUDENT 2 Need the money.

STUDENT 3 Good on you.

STUDENT 2 What are you going to do?

STUDENT 1 I don't know. Whatever.

STUDENT 2 I know what you mean. *(Silence)* I wouldn't do certain things no matter how much you paid me.

STUDENT 1 Depends on your situation doesn't it.

STUDENT 2 What do you mean?

STUDENT 1 People do all kinds of things if they need the money.

STUDENT 2 Not me.

STUDENT 3 It's easy to say so isn't it?

STUDENT 2 I know what I'd do and what I wouldn't do.

STUDENT 3 How?

STUDENT 2 Cause I just would.

STUDENT 1 That's impossible.

STUDENT 2 Why?

STUDENT 1 Cause it is.

STUDENT 2 I know myself.

*STUDENT 1 goes and buys himself and STUDENT 3 a bottle of water.*

STUDENT 3 What's this?

STUDENT 1 I thought you wanted a drink.

STUDENT 3 Oh OK.

*At The Flinders Street Train Station.*

*JUNKIE IN OLD GREY TROUSERS picks up a can of coke and skulls it.*

CHILD I'd like a bonfire!

MOTHER I know what you mean.

*Silence.*

*Sitting by the Yarra*

YOUNG WOMAN I'm sure everything'll turn out fine.

YOUNG WOMAN Thanks.

YOUNG WOMAN You're a lovely person.

YOUNG WOMAN Thank you.

YOUNG WOMAN I just try and be friendly. Doesn't matter how horrible someone is  
you can always find a way to keeps your spirits up.

*A MAN IN NEW YORK CAP walks towards BUSINESS MAN.*

BUSINESS MAN How's it going?

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP What's up?

BUSINESS MAN Day off.

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP Nice.

BUSINESS MAN Yeah it's alright

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP Ok.

BUSINESS MAN Yeah.

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP You enjoy the game?

BUSINESS MAN Yeah I reckon.

*Long silence.*

BUSINESS MAN They say don't they...

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP Yeah.

BUSINESS MAN ...twenty minutes a day... you're a million dollars. That's all you need. Twenty minutes.

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP Yeah exercise and... a good diet... sleep's important... what else..?

BUSINESS MAN I don't know.

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP Sleep... exercise... diet... and there's one other thing.

BUSINESS MAN I don't know.

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP A good hard...

*MAN IN NEW YORK CAP gestures crudely.*

BUSINESS MAN *(He laughs)* Shit yeah. Good old-fashioned remedies.

*Long silence.*

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP Hey! Good man.

*BUSINESS MAN smiles. Silence.*

BUSINESS MAN *(About hat)* Where you get these things?

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP Internet.

BUSINESS MAN Yeah?

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP Yeah there's this site... you can get em.

BUSINESS MAN Oh it's amazing.

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP Yeah.

BUSINESS MAN Amazing what you can get.

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP Yeah you can get anything. This site... they get anything for you?

BUSINESS MAN Yeah?

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP You pay for it on the credit card and they just send it to you.

BUSINESS MAN It's amazing stuff.

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP This is original stuff.

BUSINESS MAN Yeah.

MAN IN NEW YORK CAP From New York.

BUSINESS MAN Yeah... you can get anything.

*Inside a Clothes shop in a Melbourne laneway*

LARGE WOMAN IN LONG DRESS *(She is feeling under her armpit)* I think I got a lump.

*Silence.*

SARA The last dream I had this green spaniel comes bolting out of nowhere... yapping in some crazy electronic language... blip plop lip dip lop blop... it's obviously a computer dog... and then it pounces on me and just as it's about to ram its paws into me I turn to marbles... hundreds of marbles flying in all directions... down the gutter and across the road and into the grass and the computer dog jumps about and starts chasing me down and then I realise I haven't turned into marbles at all... it's eyeballs... I've turned into hundreds and hundreds of eyeballs. And I can see through all of them. All at once... I can see in all directions.

*GUY IN SINGLET goes up to GIRL WITH PIERCED NAVEL who is standing outside the clothes shop.*

GUY IN SINGLET That was great the other day...

GIRL WITH PIERCED NAVEL That was so funny.

GUY IN SINGLET What was going on..?

GIRL WITH PIERCED NAVEL I know.

GUY IN SINGLET I loved it.

GIRL WITH PIERCED NAVEL Yeah it was so funny.

GUY IN SINGLET You gonna hang round or..?

GIRL WITH PIERCED NAVEL No I'm fine.

GUY IN SINGLET Great.

*GIRL WITH PIERCED NAVEL smiles then goes and joins GIRL WITH LARGE EYEBROWS and GIRL WITH SWIRLING TATTOO. GUY IN SINGLET stands by himself then leaves and joins GUY IN JEANS WITH HOLES IN THEM. GUY IN JEANS WITH HOLES IN THEM offers him a cigarette. They smoke in silence. YOUNG EMO GIRL is eating from a noodle box nearby and sits next to a YOUNG EMO GUY.*

YOUNG EMO GIRL You ever been scuba diving

YOUNG EMO GUY No.

YOUNG EMO GIRL It's something else.

*Silence.*

SARA This morning I was on the tram and I noticed blood on my top.

*Silence.*

*GIRL WITH SWIRLING TATTOO sings.*

*YOUNG EMO GIRL smiles at her. YOUNG EMO GUY joins GIRL WITH SWIRLING TATTOO in the song.*

YOUNG EMO GUY } sings.

*GIRL WITH SWIRLING TATTOO} sings.*

*They laugh. MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN JEANS and MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN PINK CARDIGAN are drinking cappuccinos nearby.*

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN JEANS I feel so old.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN PINK CARDIGAN Don't be silly.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN JEANS I can't believe how old I am. I've never wanted to grow old... now it's happened.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN PINK CARDIGAN It's a stupid way to talk.

*Silence.*

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN JEANS     It was stupid of me not to go to university.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN PINK CARDIGAN     You've had a wonderful life.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN JEANS     I'm not saying I haven't.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN PINK CARDIGAN     You've had a great time. I  
wouldn't complain.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN JEANS     I should have finished law that's all.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN PINK CARDIGAN     Well when your children  
grow up a bit more you can. It's not over.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN JEANS     I know.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN PINK CARDIGAN     It's not over until the referee  
blows the whistle.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN JEANS     I'm not saying that.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN PINK CARDIGAN     You've got a great life.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN JEANS     I know.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN PINK CARDIGAN     That's right.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN JEANS     I'm not complaining.

*On the train.*

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL A couple of the girls were having dinner the other  
night and one of them... she's a heroin addict... you know seventeen and  
she's going through these withdrawals at the moment...

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT Yeah...

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL ...this other girl picks up a plate and smashes it on  
the table and tells her I wish you would stop fucking shaking.

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT Yeah...

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL It's amazing that kind of honesty...

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT It's great.

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL I said that to the girl. I told her what you did then  
was honest. She looked at me and burst into tears.

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT Really?

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL Yeah.

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT That's something I draw the line at...  
heroin.

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL Oh yeah.

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT I just see so many of these people...

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL Yeah.

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT They're so desperate.

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL I respect the need to escape you know... the idea  
of you know... more the spiritual quest. I think everybody has that.

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT Yeah.

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL What's funny about that?

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT Oh you know.

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL No I know. I don't mean...

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT I just don't like drugs.

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL Well if you abuse them... it's like anything isn't it.

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT That's true.

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL It's like junk food.

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT It's just the same thing... it's just sugar.

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL And they make just as much money out of it.

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT More. More when you think about it.

MAN IN SUIT WITH PONY TAIL It's just about what you abuse. And if you don't  
respect your body... it's like any machine... it breaks down.

WOMAN IN BLUE BLOUSE AND SUIT Well drugs... they just don't agree with me.

*Silence. STREET BUSKER WITH LONG HAIR plays his guitar and sings on the footpath in Russell Street.*

*Silence.*

MICHAEL What do you do with yourself?

SIMON I'm a vet.

MICHAEL I've always wanted a dog.

SIMON Yeah?

MICHAEL An Alsatian. I like big dogs.

SIMON You should get one then.

MARA I don't know why people have those kind of dogs... those... what are they called Simon..?

SIMON Pekinese.

MARA I mean they're cute but there are cuter things... and they don't afford any of the other advantages a dog might offer. You know?

MICHAEL Yeah... no I'm listening.

MARA Did you damage your nail?

MICHAEL Yeah this bloke stepped on it.

MARA Why?

MICHAEL It was an accident.

*MARA takes his hand.*

MICHAEL It was ages ago.

*MARA sucks on his finger.*

MICHAEL Never healed properly.

*She lets his hand go. She winces at the taste.*

MARA Have you been eating oranges?

MICHAEL Yeah... I had a mandarin.

*SIMON goes over and takes MICHAEL'S finger and sniffs it.*

SIMON We have some mandarins if you want one?

MICHAEL No I'm alright.

*Silence.*

SIMON They can do some damage.

MICHAEL What?

SIMON Pekinese. They're vicious.

MARA Are they?

SIMON They're a lot bigger than rats and rats can be vicious. *(Silence)* People are the worst. Cruel. Trust me. You wouldn't believe the way people treat their pets. Left in boxes.

MICHAEL Really?

SIMON By the door. After Christmas. Some kiddie's present. By the fucking door. Half starved. They think I'm some sort of charity. It actually costs me quite a lot of money to put them down. I have to inject them with pentobarbital and it's not cheap. Costs me about ten dollars every time I do it.

MARA It adds up.

SIMON That's right.

MARA I saw this guy once at a train station kick this pigeon and this old man went over to him and pushed him off the platform. People cheered.

MICHAEL Can't you just drown them?

SIMON Have you ever actually tried to do that? They scratch you to pieces.

MARA Not everyone has the same understanding of animals as you do Simon.

SIMON        Everyone's got opinions. The way some people carry on. They read a tiny article in the paper and apart from that know absolutely nothing... but that doesn't stop them being an expert.

MARA         You can often get a good perspective from the news.

SIMON        There's a shitload of experts going around. Just not much expertise when you need it.

*Silence.*

MARA         What should I do now?

*Silence*

SIMON        I thought Michael might want to kick a ball in the park.

MARA         Ask him.

SIMON        We can get something to eat on the way.

MICHAEL     I'm not hungry.

MARA         I don't know what I can do for you.

MICHAEL     You don't have to do anything.

*Silence.*

MARA         Are you tired?

MICHAEL     No.

MARA         If you want you can go lie down. We can make you a little bed up. You can sleep here.

MICHAEL     No.

MARA         I bet that's tempting.

MICHAEL     No... I'm OK. *(Silence)* I used to have a budgie. Tweetie. Tweetie bird. She was a beautiful bird.

*Silence.*

MARA         Can I give you a kiss?

MICHAEL    OK.

MARA        Didn't I already ask that?

SIMON        Yeah you did.

*They laugh.*

MARA        I did... didn't I?

MICHAEL     Dunno.

*Silence.*

SIMON        It's been so beautiful lately... but then suddenly it can get cold without  
any warning at all.

MICHAEL     I like the wind though.

SIMON        Churning everything up.

MICHAEL     It sends people a bit wild.

SIMON        Like the full moon.

MICHAEL     More so.

MARA        The worst thing is not knowing what to wear when you get up in the  
morning.

SIMON        I know.

MARA        I hate being cold... I get anxious... so I always over compensate by  
wearing too many clothes.

MICHAEL     At least you can take them off.

MARA        Yes but then you have to carry them around everywhere.

SIMON        You look good in jumpers.

MARA        Do I?

SIMON        Yes.

MICHAEL     Most people don't.

SIMON        That's right.

MICHAEL Most people look bulky and cumbersome and very unnatural. (*Silence*)  
Freedom is hard to take advantage of.

MARA What?

SIMON That's a very interesting thing to say. You're right Michael. It's apathy.  
It pervades everything.

MARA You're always talking about that. He always goes on about apathy.

SIMON It bugs me that's why.

MICHAEL Do you have any kids?

MARA No. (*Silence*) Simon wants to keep waiting.

SIMON I don't see any need to rush that's all.

MARA Do you think I should wait?

MICHAEL Kids?

MARA What do you think?

SIMON How could Michael possibly know a thing like that?

MARA I thought he might have an idea.

SIMON How? He doesn't know anything about us.

MARA Based on his intuition.

MICHAEL I suppose...

MARA Based on his sense of...

SIMON What?

MARA I was going to say survival.

MICHAEL Sometimes when you know nothing about a person it can help you be  
objective.

MARA Going in blind?

MICHAEL Hm?

MARA I like the sound of that.

MICHAEL I'm more talking about being objective.

MARA What do you think then?

MICHAEL About having kids?

MARA Should I or shouldn't I?

MICHAEL I dunno.

MARA I don't have that many friends. I know quite a few people... when I go to a party it's not like I sit on my own in the corner (*To SIMON*) like that friend of yours... what's her name?

SIMON Jenny?

MARA Jenny. There's always a fair share of people I know well enough to have a chat to... unlike Jenny. But that's not the same as having a proper conversation.

MICHAEL You seem to do alright.

MARA You think so?

MICHAEL Yeah.

MARA He walks into a room and he has a commanding presence... it's actually true... I know you might not think so but he can hold a conversation for hours on almost any subject. He's got a very big mind. An engaging mind. Whereas in-depth conversation skills are something I struggle with. I have to psyche myself up. And on top of that I have to really trust the person I'm talking to. He's not at all like that. He'll talk to anyone who comes along. He's not discriminating at all. Even if someone was completely revolting... revolting in every way... he'd still find them interesting to talk to. He'd still make the effort.

MICHAEL That's unusual.

MARA           He's one of those vets who talk to animals. A cat whisperer. He's in a quiet mood at the moment but ordinarily you should see him. A real chatterbox.

MICHAEL       I have to be in the mood myself.

MARA           Everybody has to be.

MICHAEL       Yes talking to people... facing the world everyday... it's easier not to sometimes... to divorce yourself... but it's not really possible is it?

MARA           Yes I'm the same.

SIMON          The need to exert yourself?

MARA           Too much pressure. Sometimes it's easier to say no isn't it?

MICHAEL       Yep.

MARA           You can do other things to get attention... you don't have to speak... like dancing. Dancing can be very effective in the right environment. Or buying a gift for someone. That can say so much.

SIMON          I don't like getting gifts.

MARA           We rely on words too much don't we?

MICHAEL       I prefer not to talk.

MARA           Me too.

MICHAEL       There's this old guy who lives in the underpass in Degraives Street... you know the one?

MARA           No I don't think so.

SIMON          Yes you do... Degraives Street.

MARA           I know Degraives Street but I don't know of any underpass.

MICHAEL       I don't know his name... I call him Roger. He makes up sounds. Shishibishabooshibi... sounds like a mixture of Arabic and Mandarin. We sit for ages sometimes... having this nonsensical conversation.

MARA Maybe he does understand you.

MICHAEL Maybe.

MARA In his own way.

MICHAEL Yeah. I think you're right.

SIMON He's just making sounds.

MARA Shibishibishibi.

MICHAEL Shiskabigabookabugaba.

*MICHAEL and MARA laugh.*

MARA It's liberating.

MICHAEL You can come out with anything you like.

MARA Like a baby.

MICHAEL Yeah.

*Silence.*

*Young women in Russell Street outside a Chinese noodle house.*

YOUNG WOMAN PASSERBY Every time I say anything... she watches what I say and anytime she says anything I watch she says. And that happens whenever we get together.

*At a café in Degrares Street.*

OLD MALE ENGLISH TOURIST Can you believe it? Twenty-eight bucks and the breakfast was awful.

YOUNG FEMALE ENGLISH TOURIST Oh yeah have you seen anything like it?

OLD MALE ENGLISH TOURIST The guy wearing that red t-shirt... he was rude.

YOUNG FEMALE ENGLISH TOURIST It's like they're catering for German students.

OLD FEMALE ENGLISH TOURIST I know I tried to get his attention...

YOUNG FEMALE ENGLISH TOURIST I mean there's so many groups that's one thing...

OLD FEMALE ENGLISH TOURIST He didn't wanna talk to me. And there were horrible towels.

OLD MALE ENGLISH TOURIST Looked so horrible.

YOUNG MALE ENGLISH TOURIST Did you see Andrew? This morning he came down with these two huge bags... oversized bags... I said where you goin with all that..? he says I'm taking it with me to go swimming.

OLD FEMAL ENGLISH TOURIST You see his acne? Bright yellow.

YOUNG MALE ENGLISH TOURIST Yeah?

OLD MALE ENGLISH TOURIST He's got terrible acne.

YOUNG MALE ENGLISH TOURIST Ya got no idea mate... no idea.

YOUNG GUY AT CAFÉ I was banned from that one... went to the other... was banned from that... went to another... banned there... dude you know I'm evil... but I don't care. He gets paid by the hour... he might work a full week... he's raking it in... he's barely at home these days... he's drinking twenty-four seven.

*On a train heading out of the city.*

YOUNG SKATERBOY ON A TRAIN 1 I'm not sitting on it.

YOUNG SKATERBOY ON A TRAIN 2 You sit on it.

YOUNG SKATERBOY ON A TRAIN 1 Why should I sit on it?

YOUNG SKATERBOY ON A TRAIN 2 Fuck off.

*YOUNG SKATERBOY ON A TRAIN 2 gets up and leaves and walks to another seat on the train.*

YOUNG SKATERBOY ON A TRAIN 3 I'm not following him.

YOUNG SKATERBOY ON A TRAIN 1 Don't ya sook.

YOUNG SKATERBOY ON A TRAIN 3 Why am I a sook?

YOUNG SKATERBOY ON A TRAIN 1 Don't follow him.

*YOUNG SKATERBOY ON A TRAIN 3 get up and goes to where the other boy is sitting. YOUNG SKATERBOY ON A TRAIN 1 waits a while, then follows him.*

*At Flinders Street Train Station.*

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 1 That's not something I do.

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 2 Na.

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 1 I never done that.

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 2 Na.

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 1 Some people work all their life and that's all they got.

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 2 That's right.

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 1 Cause I live in a caravan park right.

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 2 Yeah.

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 1 I don't have much. But if someone took all my stuff I would cry.

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 2 Yeah.

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 1 I would cry.

JUNKIE AT TRAIN STATION 2 That's right.

WOMAN PASSERBY Can you believe it? He was wearing a white t-shirt and over the top of that he had on a waistcoat and a scarf.

*OLD LADY talks to her OLD DEAF HUSBAND outside the Arts Centre.*

OLD LADY We'd come to see a lot more things if you could hear properly.

*Two sisters and their mother in the street fight over a packet of Twisties outside Arts Centre.*

SISTER 1 Stop doing that.

SISTER 2 I'm not doin nothing.

SISTER 1 You're upsetting me.

MOTHER Give it to her.

SISTER 2 Why?

MOTHER Give her one.

SISTER 2 She's had hers.

SISTER 1 She's upsetting me.

MOTHER Stop doing that Sarah.

SISTER 2 She's upsetting me.

SISTER 1 You just want everything for yourself.

SISTER 2 What do you know?

MOTHER Get yaself ready.

SISTER 2 She's upsetting me.

*Silence.*

CALLUM My best friend... his name is Angus... I've known him for years... went to school together. There was a period when I didn't see him... a gap of about eight years... that was when he went to live in Amsterdam... played the trumpet there in a band called The Fanatics. He liked the lifestyle... the freedom. When he came back he didn't seem to settle. Worked in a bar for a few weeks... then taught music... then went to live in Darwin. He came back after a month. Always seemed restless. Went away to Thailand... came back and moved to the country for three months. Now he lives in the city. A little while back he said to me... lets not talk to each other anymore. Let's just ban all conversation. We can text each other when we need to catch up... but when we do... we have to



to have singular directions... issues with betrayal... different traditions...  
ya know the veil... modesty issues... very interesting...

BUSINESS MAN 3            Yeah.

BUSINESS MAN 2            Sounds like it.

BUSINESS MAN 1            The biggest one I've heard... near the gas pipe.

BUSINESS MAN 3            Give us a guess.

BUSINESS MAN 2            How many?

BUSINESS MAN 1            Forty-five thousand... my god... extraordinary.

BUSINESS MAN 3            I believe the gas stove is the answer.

BUSINESS MAN 1            I'm sorry I mean...

BUSINESS MAN 2            Whether it's affordable.

BUSINESS MAN 1            I can give you an answer by the end of the week and it  
may be sorry no but the sponsorship is...

BUSINESS MAN 3            Yeah sure...

BUSINESS MAN 1            Head sponsorship for Bailey's... very PR conscious... the  
firm handshake.

BUSINESS MAN 2            Sure.

BUSINESS MAN 1            Let's do it.

BUSINESS MAN 3            Yeah... yeah.

*Silence.*

SARA            Who doesn't like making friends? If someone says they don't want  
friends I think they're lying. Are there people that are so likeable people  
just accept them? I'm scared of loneliness more than anything. So it  
never surprises me to discover the lengths people go to make friends. And  
people do go to enormous lengths... enormous... immense compromise is  
involved. I've decided it's about that first impression... that first snapshot

by which you'll always be referred to... by which all your subsequent actions... gestures... conversations... whispers... laughter... your smiles... every glance... every quivering of your eyelids will be judged. It's that first snapshot people carry about in their minds... carry it around forever... moulding it... colouring it... tampering with it... but keeping it out of reach of others... and whatever you might do to get them to shake it off... to discard it... forget it... you haven't got a hope.

*Three drunk women in Young and Jackson's*

WOMAN 1           What are you then? Slapper?

WOMAN 2           I'm just saying.

WOMAN 3           Saying what?

WOMAN 1           I like cock yeah. I like hard cock.

WOMAN 2           Cock in my pussy.

*A WAITER delivers a bowl of fried chips.*

WOMAN 1           Oh they gotta be joking. (*Referring to chips*) Send em back.

WOMAN 2           Send em back to the kitchen.

WOMAN 3           You tryin to make me anorexic?

WOMAN 1           I wanna speak to the chef.

WOMAN 3           Don't you think you're a bit mean?

WAITER            Yeah they are a bit.

WOMAN 1           Who's the chef? Send him out here.

WOMAN 3           I'm one of her anorexic clients.

WOMAN 1           He's cute though.

WOMAN 2           Oh yeah.

WOMAN 1           Aren't you?

WAITER            I dunno.

WOMAN 1            You are.

WAITER             Ok... you're right then.

*The WAITER leaves.*

WOMAN 3           Come back here when you've finished.

*At the Melbourne Museum people stand and look at the displays in silence, occasionally saying excuse me when trying to look at an exhibit, or apologising for blocking someone's view.*

*Silence.*

STEVE            I don't get bored often. Not often enough. I never seem to have time out. I never seem to reach that beautiful airy space where nothing needs to happen that usually follows on from boredom. The problem is when I am bored... I usually do something about it. I automatically assume that boredom is unhealthy for me. That it'll lead to something unbearable and so I make myself busy. I start having interesting little thoughts... I assume everyone does... I start daydreaming... derive entertainment from what my mind manages to dredge up or reassemble from the vast chemical soup in my head. Just before I was wondering why you notice the heaviness of an umbrella while you're standing still but not while you're walking. I've been trying to figure it out. Perhaps weight is like time... you only notice it when you stand still. I'm trying to get used to that feeling. To do absolutely nothing. Makes me want to scream. I admire people who have jobs that require patience... where a minimum of labour and social contact is required. I admire fishermen. Or archaeologists. Dusting off layer after layer of dirt to reveal something that's been hidden for thousands... millions of years. Work where's there's no talking allowed. No distractions because the work is too

important for that. Being a pilot is more like being a security guard. You're only needed in the unlikely event of something terrible going wrong. Otherwise it's just chitchat... continuous chitchat.

*Two middle-aged women converse in the deli section in Myer while waiting to be served.*

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN 1      If I heard Don snoring I'd do something about it.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN 2      By sleeping in another bed.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN 1      Yeah... no I'd tell him to go see someone.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN 2      What can you do?

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN 1      They can fix it.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN 2      He doesn't always snore.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN 1      No Don's OK.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN 2      Sometimes I can't sleep at all.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN 1      Well...

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN 2      It's terrible.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN 1      Don's not too bad.

*An old woman wearing a peasant-like headscarf pushes a trolley in the Bourke Street Mall. She goes over to two young girls sitting down and snaps her fingers together like talking castanets. She says 'yap yap yap yap yap' at them and laughs, then points at the now embarrassed girls.*

*Two Vietnamese Australian men sit not far away from the girls.*

YOUNG GUY 1      If Tait gets his line right...

YOUNG GUY 2      He gets smacked...

YOUNG GUY 1      Brett Lee's had it.

YOUNG GUY 2      Don't know why they bowl him.

YOUNG GUY 1      Gotta give him a chance.

YOUNG GUY 2 South Africa has some good bowlers.

YOUNG GUY 1 That guy from England what's his name..?

YOUNG GUY 2 Mohammed?

YOUNG GUY 1 What is it..?

YOUNG GUY 2 In it Mohammed?

YOUNG GUY 1 He gets wickets as well.

YOUNG GUY 2 He's wicked man.

YOUNG GUY 1 He does alright eh?

YOUNG GUY 1 They collapse.

YOUNG GUY 2 Yeah.

YOUNG GUY 1 Trescothic... Collingwood... usually get about fifty.

YOUNG GUY 2 But they didn't have em all summer.

YOUNG GUY 1 Hussey don't know nothing. Knows nothing about captaincy. He can bat but captaincy... different story. You gotta lead the team.

YOUNG GUY 2 What about..? he was like mid-air?

YOUNG GUY 1 Who's this?

YOUNG GUY 2 Collingwood. Leaps... one hand.

YOUNG GUY 1 Course he's kinda short. Ya wonder. Gotta leap.

YOUNG GUY 2 Cricket's mad uh?

YOUNG GUY 1 Like a slog fest.

YOUNG GUY 2 Sometimes.

YOUNG GUY 1 Warnie used ta get smacked about.

YOUNG GUY 2 Yeah.

YOUNG GUY 1 When he first started.

YOUNG GUY 2 Yeah.

YOUNG GUY 1 Tait's gotta get his act together.

YOUNG GUY 2      Inconsistent man.

YOUNG GUY 1      St Kilda should be good this year.

YOUNG GUY 2      And Melbourne.

YOUNG GUY 1      Na Melbourne they always talk em up.

YOUNG GUY 2      Bruce Davis got injured... two games in. Felt sorry for that guy.

YOUNG GUY 1      Too much hype around that guy. I felt sorry for him.

YOUNG GUY 2      Who was that guy... matted haircut..?

YOUNG GUY 1      Yeah kicked four goals in the last quarter. I reckon anyone can...  
ya gotta be selfish.

YOUNG GUY 2      That's what happened to Geelong. Premiership season  
collapsed...

YOUNG GUY 1      You see that at the station... Sunshine..?

YOUNG GUY 2      Yeah someone died on the platform man...

YOUNG GUY 1      Yeah.

YOUNG GUY 2      On my way to school last year.

YOUNG GUY 1      Everything happens in our area.

YOUNG GUY 2      Tell people you're from Sunshine they go... alright.

YOUNG GUY 1      Yeah now it's just people overdosing. Used to be breaking into  
people's houses everything yaknow... now it's just overdosing...  
breaking into cars... stuff like that...

YOUNG GUY 2      Yeah... Melbourne's pretty bad.

*Silence.*

MARA            I was in this room once... full of diamonds... wall to wall... and on one  
wall there was this horse blanket... a gift from Ghengis Khan to one of  
the tsars. It was huge and totally studded with diamonds... and as I  
moved in front of it... the created this light show... sparkling stars

across the whole enormous white earth and I have to honestly say... I swooned.

*MARA leans over and caresses her face with MICHAEL'S hand.*

MARA (To SIMON) Put the bathwater on.

SIMON Aren't we going to the park?

MICHAEL I don't want a bath.

SIMON I'm all for a kicking the ball.

MICHAEL Maybe just let me have a rest.

*Silence.*

MARA You must have a wife somewhere?

MICHAEL Not really.

SIMON You either have or you haven't.

MICHAEL I'm separated.

MARA Where did you meet?

MICHAEL I'm not sure exactly.

MARA I love hearing stories about where couples meet. Our next-door neighbours met in hospital. They were both in a car crash and they were lying next to each other and one day they just got chatting. And they talked and talked and talked.

*Silence.*

SIMON I fell in love with a nurse.

*Silence.*

MARA (To MICHAEL) Where did you meet?

MICHAEL This woman came round to the house where I was staying. She knocked on the door. There were plants hanging everywhere from the awning and

while she was waiting she stood behind one of them... when I opened the door I couldn't see her face very well.

MARA Is she beautiful?

MICHAEL She was looking for my friend Renaud.

SIMON Is he French?

MICHAEL And I said he's not here. And she said yes I knew that. And so we looked at each other and we laughed.

SIMON Did you ask her why she came round then?

MICHAEL We just laughed. And we kept laughing and then I said oh well why don't you come in? Or would you like to go for a walk? I was actually on my way out as it happened.

MARA What did she say?

MICHAEL She wanted to come in. So she came in and sat down and for a while we talked about Renaud. She knew him quite well. Much better than me. I don't know him very well really. But he's very friendly. Very easy to get to know.

SIMON Yes I know Renaud. He's very friendly.

MICHAEL Yes he's the sort of person who never gets cross or upset about anything and so everyone pretty much likes him.

SIMON I like him.

MICHAEL Everyone does. Except my friend. She didn't like him at all.

MARA Why?

MICHAEL For the same reason everyone likes him. So easy going. Nothing phases him. She said to me... don't you think it's odd... nothing ever phases him. And she knew him very well.

MARA How well?

MICHAEL Intimately.

MARA I think it's strange too.

MICHAEL So she said why don't we play a little trick on him? Why don't we take all the pot plants out of the house and put them out the back... and in their place we'll put something else... and just wait for him? And I said yes but what..? what can we put in their place..? And she said... what about a whole lot of paper spirals... we'll cut them out of newspaper and hang them from the roof... just to see the look on his face. It'd be worth it.

MARA And did you?

MICHAEL Yes.

SIMON It must have taken you ages?

MICHAEL Yes.

MARA That's so cheeky.

MICHAEL We waited for a couple of hours. I made her a cup of coffee and... Renaud never came home. So we just chatted. And she had to go somewhere so towards evening we took down all the spirals and put the plants back. And she left. We both left at the same time. We said goodbye to each other at the tram stop.

MARA So when did you meet again?

MICHAEL About a week later. Renaud gave me her number. And I rang her.

SIMON On a date?

MICHAEL Yes.

SIMON It's a bold thing to do... to ask someone out on a date.

MICHAEL Yeah it can be.

SIMON I have to really work myself up to it.

MARA           And then you got married?

MICHAEL       Yes. In Cairo. We've travelled a lot.

MARA           Whereabouts?

MICHAEL       I studied architecture in Berlin. And we used to go on these trips to different cities to see the buildings.

MARA           Should we know who you are?

MICHAEL       What do you mean?

SIMON          Name one.

MARA           Your buildings... are there any we would know about?

MICHAEL       No.

SIMON          No name one, come on.

MICHAEL       Not many of my designs have been built. Mainly just private commissions. Nothing major.

SIMON          Is it hard to break into?

MICHAEL       Absolutely.

SIMON          Bit clubby?

MICHAEL       Yeah.

MARA           I think architecture is very important. It's crucial we have buildings that can bring joy into our lives. There are so many that... not only do you not want to look at them... they make you feel sick inside.

SIMON          The thing with that sort of thing is you have to work long hours. Lots of stress I imagine.

MICHAEL       Something I'm not good with.

SIMON          And you have to be fairly compliant too... persistent with re-drafting concepts. You can't let the ego get in the way.

MICHAEL       Sure.

SIMON Like with anything... when you have cost cutting come into it. Is that a bit of an issue?

MICHAEL Yeah.

SIMON Original ideas cost money... and that's not what people want. What they want is slabs of grey concrete because that'll do. It's shameful. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were surrounded with an architecture that actually invigorated out imagination for a change? Instead what you get is this crude... functionality. It's demeaning... it's reductionist... that's what it is. It's reductionist. It's bland. You'd think it would come under some sort of environmental law. With imaginative guidelines. I love that Gehry guy. He's right of course. Straight lines don't exist. In nature everything is curved. Do you like Gehry?

MICHAEL Yeah.

SIMON Gehry and what's his name... the dead one... you know... curvy lines?

MICHAEL Gaudi?

SIMON The thing I like about the Greeks is that they base it all on a mathematical concept. The Parthenon for example. Now that has to be the most phenomenal building of all time. Along with the Sphinx. The concept behind it is just... even now they can't do it. Whereas that train station everyone's banging on about... what's the theme going on there? Confusion? Punishment? That's what it's about... punishment. It's these buildings built by a firm... the consensus instead of genius. *(Silence)* The only good thing I can say about a lot of this new architecture is that it won't last. *(Silence)* They're pretty expensive books though. I saw this book the other day on Islamic architecture and... Jesus! They came up with some pretty good stuff.

MICHAEL Yeah.

SIMON The Alhambra.

MARA Oh yes... when you walk through it... I mean to be able to arouse ecstasy... tranquillity... the essence of timelessness in a single breath.

MICHAEL Hm.

*Silence.*

SIMON They're expensive... the books.

*MICHAEL smiles.*

*Three Young woman in Fitzroy Gardens. YOUNG WOMAN 2 is the cousin of YOUNG WOMAN 1.*

YOUNG WOMAN 1 My boyfriend's an asshole.

YOUNG WOMAN 3 Is he?

YOUNG WOMAN 1 Your's is cool.

YOUNG WOMAN 3 He's alright.

YOUNG WOMAN 1 Mine just grabs me an everything.

YOUNG WOMAN 3 Does he?

YOUNG WOMAN 1 Calls us lesbians and like... she's my cousin.

YOUNG WOMAN 2 It's ridiculous.

YOUNG WOMAN 1 Told me to get toilet paper and I said no way... I had a shower...

I'm not getting it... No I'm being honest... I said you go and get it.

YOUNG WOMAN 3 Tell him next time... he calls you a lesbian... tell him you made me that way.

YOUNG WOMAN 2 I am so thirsty... I drank like two litres.

YOUNG WOMAN 1 Seriously how good was that water yesterday... it was delicious.

YOUNG WOMAN 2 I felt so sick... I wanted to vomit.

YOUNG WOMAN 1 If anyone touches my water... I put it in the fridge... if anyone touches it they're dead.

*Silence.*

CALLUM Rachel is a friend of mine since uni days. She invites me round to dinner every now and then. She's a terrible cook. It's really lovely to see her... but she puts food together in the strangest ways... really incongruous ingredients... like pasta and avocado with Worcestershire sauce... and pumpkin soup with seafood stock cubes... it's really inedible... and there's this salad with tinned beetroot thing that she's always doing. But she's so sweet. She knows she's a bad cook. She apologises about it all the time. We have a little joke about it. We get along very well. There's always been an ease there. Usually we wind up just watching television. We sit there complaining about it... about all the rubbish that's on. When I'm there I always make sure I check any new acquisition she's placed on her bookshelf. She has this huge bookshelf... with no books on it. She uses it to display odds and ends she picks up from junk shops... garage sales and just wherever. There's always new stuff there... but sometimes she puts old stuff there that she's kept in a box for a few years. My favourite from my last visit was this old pair of silk gloves with embroidered flowers... they belonged to a child. And there's also a Japanese fan... made from sealskin... it has pictures of women crossing a bridge... or walking across some grass... or reading... activities where you might require a fan I guess I don't know. And there's a brass coal-mining lamp from the twenties... that possibly saved someone's life... and a metal train with blue and red flaking paint... all these things have been loved and tirelessly played with... have been respected for their

inventiveness and versatility... have had every morsel of usefulness extracted from them... they have been battered and worked to the bone... but the hands that touched them for all those years have grown old... have withered and died and decomposed to nothing. When I look at these things... that's what I think about most. The hands of dead people.

*A young couple, MAN IN BLUE SHIRT and FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET, are sitting in Federation Square. The woman is showing the man a picture on her mobile phone.*

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET Can you see anything?

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT Na.

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET If you were looking through a microscope... you see anything weird?

*The man inspects the image.*

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET See if that's not his dick.

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT Yeah?

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET Swear you won't tell anyone.

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT Yeah won't.

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET He's been sending these pictures to everyone.

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT That's stupid.

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET Yaknow apparently they're not even goin out.

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT No way.

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET He's been telling everyone they're friends. He said that... first time we had sex it was a one night stand. She'll be so upset.

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT He said I don't want a relationship yeah?

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET Yeah said they were friends.

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT I don't know.

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET She really loves him. She reckons he never leaves her alone. Really affectionate. How can he do that? How can he do that to her if he's not interested in a relationship? I'm gonna tell her.

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT No you shouldn't say anything.

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET Why not?

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT It's her choice.

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET She really loves him. I'm not letting that go. He's confirmed it with someone else nothin's goin on. She's gorgeous. I love her. He'll hurt her yaknow.

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT He said she's been seein this guy for three years.

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET What makes you say three years?

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT That's what he said.

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET That was just a once off fuck in Sydney.

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT I don't know.

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET If he hurts her I'll bash him.

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT Yeah.

FEMALE IN BLACK SINGLET And I'll blame you too... you're his friend. Are you on my side?

MAN IN BLUE SHIRT Yeah.

*Silence.*

SARA I met this woman at kindergarten and we were always chatting. We clicked. After about a year she invited me to coffee at her favourite café... and as we walked down the street I linked my arms in hers. I thought it was okay to do it. I mean... I wondered for a split second beforehand... you know it crossed my mind that perhaps it was a bit presuming but I dismissed this idea as being overly formal. And she

wasn't at all formal. More of a hippy than anything. But after that... this woman from kinder just faded away. I have no idea whether it was the linking of arms that really bothered her or something else... something we didn't talk about. Anyway she didn't return my calls after that and gradually just faded away.

*Two male workers on Exhibition Street are digging up a pipe.*

WORKMAN 1        What's up Chris?  
WORKMAN 2        Eh?  
WORKMAN 1        Move it over there.  
WORKMAN 2        Uh?  
WORKMAN 1        Can you move it over there?  
WORKMAN 2        Yep.  
WORKMAN 1        Just over there.

*Silence.*

WORKMAN 1        What about Cousins?  
WORKMAN 2        Uh?  
WORKMAN 1        Cousins.  
WORKMAN 2        What about him?  
WORKMAN 1        You hear about him?  
WORKMAN 2        Yeah.  
WORKMAN 1        Eight hundred thousand.  
WORKMAN 2        Yeah?  
WORKMAN 1        In one year.  
WORKMAN 2        One year?  
WORKMAN 1        Yeah coke.  
WORKMAN 2        One year?

WORKMAN 1        Yeah.  
WORKMAN 2        Hard to believe in it?  
WORKMAN 1        That's what they're sayin.  
WORKMAN 2        Wouldn't think so.  
WORKMAN 1        Na.  
WORKMAN 2        I bet ya there's a few.  
WORKMAN 1        Oh yeah.  
WORKMAN 2        A whole lot of em.  
WORKMAN 1        Oh yeah tip of the iceberg.

*At a telephone at a telephone marketing company Collins Street. A young man in his twenties, SHAUN, is rubbing out writing on the white-board. He draws a circle and writes POWER PUP underneath it on the board. TIM, a man in his thirties, walks in with a pile of papers and puts them down on the table. SHAUN looks at him.*

TIM                You got pencils?

SHAUN            Yep... plenty.

*TIM walks out walks out. SHAUN flicks through the papers and gets a blank sheet and tears in up n squares. KRISTIE, a woman in her forties, walks in and takes a seat at the table.*

SHAUN            Kristie.

KRISTIE          Hi.

SHAUN            How are we tonight?

KRISTIE          Good.

SHAUN            Good?

KRISTIE          Yeah.

SHAUN            Good?

KRISTIE     Yeah...

SHAUN     Yeah?

KRISTIE     Yeah. Bit tired.

SHAUN     Tired?

KRISTIE     Yeah.

SHAUN     Don't tell me you've been...

KRISTIE     ...uni all day and it's raining all day and my car is just... I need to get some petrol but I was running late.

SHAUN     All fired up?

KRISTIE     Ah yep.

SHAUN     Yes?

KRISTIE     Yep.

SHAUN     Excited?

KRISTIE     Yep.

SHAUN     Good. That's what we all like to hear.

*TIM walks in, shuts the door then goes back and leaves it open and sits on the couch.*

TIM         Kristie

KRISTIE     Hi.

TIM         All ready?

KRISTIE     Yep.

TIM         Ready to go?

KRISTIE     Yep.

TIM         The others running late?

SHAUN     Ah Eleanor can't make it.

TIM         Can't make what?

SHAUN She rang and she's not doing it. She got another job... so she won't be coming in.

TIM Right. Thankyou Eleanor.

*SHAUN puts the pile of paper squares on the table and hands KRISTIE a stapled pile of papers.*

SHAUN For you.

KRISTIE Thankyou.

TIM What about what'shername?

SHAUN Ah Bree?

TIM Yeah no no... not Bree... um what'shername... the small one?

SHAUN Coco?

TIM Coco.

SHAUN Yeah she's gonna be late.

*Silence.*

FIONA I don't have anything really. No money... no car... no property... no girlfriend... no kids... no job... not a proper job anyway... not one I'd call a career... not one I really look forward to doing and expect to be doing for much longer. I seem to be just filling in time. But I'm not depressed about it. Actually not having anything gives me clarity. And really it just puts me at the same level as most people on this planet. People who have nothing much... who just live... and don't expect more than that.

*NICK walks into the office. He in his twenties.*

NICK Sorry I'm late. Hello.

SHAUN Sit down Nick.

TIM How you doing Nick?

NICK            Good. Good. Parked out the back. That's OK isn't it? At the back in the... parking. The car parking area?

SHAUN          Grab that Kristie will you. Hand Nick a booklet and a piece of paper there... that pile there?

*KRISTIE hands NICK a booklet and a paper square.*

SHAUN          OK... I think we can start. Now... first up... good evening. You all know already but I'm Shaun OK... hello.

*KRISTIE and NICK wait a moment.*

KRISTIE        Hello.

NICK            Hello.

SHAUN          Hello.

KRISTIE        Hello.

NICK            Hello.

SHAUN          Hello. OK. Be happy... liven up guys OK? You gotta be happy. OK. OK?

KRISTIE        OK.

SHAUN          Kristie?

KRISTIE        Yeah OK.

SHAUN          You should see those guys out there... the oldies... the permanents... they're rowdy. I'm constantly having to shut them up OK?

KRISTIE        OK.

SHAUN          Now I just want us to get comfortable with each other because look guys... to tell you up front... I'm your boss OK. I'm your trainer and your coach and everything but basically what I'm there for is to help you. OK? I wanna help you. I'm there for you. So that you're happy and comfortable and working well. I go and make you cups of tea. I go and

do those things. I go round and make sure you're OK. I'm here for you.

OK?

KRISTIE OK.

NICK OK.

SHAUN Now... I don't care how many sales you're making or how great you are or how much money you're making us... at the end of the day... if you're late to work... and I mean... we start at five... we start *calling* at five... That means picking up the phone at five o'clock. Not three minutes past or two minutes past... or ten past. Five o'clock. So if you walk in here at five or later... I'm gonna be pissed off with you. I won't like you. It's as simple as that. No discussion. I don't care how good you are. I won't like you. OK? And that won't be nice. For any of us. It won't be nice for you. Kristie What are you like?

KRISTIE What?

SHAUN What are you like for lateness?

KRISTIE Oh I'm pretty good yeah.

SHAUN OK. Pretty good?

KRISTIE Yeah. Pretty good.

SHAUN OK... Nick?

NICK Ah I'm not bad Shaun. I'm normally early but you know this week I won't be making it in until eight... but that's only this week.

SHAUN Yeah yeah... OK so... do you understand? If you're going to be late *call* me. Take the number now. Put it in your phones now. I can't take any excuses on this. I don't want you calling up every day OK. You can't be late. If you want to tell me now... I will be fifteen minutes late every

day... OK fine... you can start work at a quarter past OK. You'll be paid at quarter past. Ok. I'm not fanatical about this ok but...

TIM Yeah but you're goin on about it for fifteen minutes.

*KRISTIE laughs.*

SHAUN OK so this training session is very rushed and we do not have the time we need to cover all the ground we have to cover so I'm really going to rush through this OK. I'm really really sorry guys Ok. I'm really sorry. There's nothing I can do about it I'm afraid. OK. So first up...

*SHAUN unfolds his little paper squares and shows the others.*

SHAUN Ok. This is me ok? Power Pup see. I'm Power Pup. I put my hat on... pull my boots on... got a great big smile on OK. Power Pup. That's me OK? Do you all know Power Pup?

KRISTIE No.

SHAUN No? Nick?

NICK No.

SHAUN Ok. OK. Well... Power Pup... this Power Pup he gets things done and he has a big smile on his face.

*SHAUN refers to the drawing of Power Pup on the white board.*

SHAUN ...and he gets through everything he needs to do ok? Now... with the little bits of squares of paper in front of you... I want you to draw yourselves and put your name on it so we all know who we are Ok?

*TIM gets up and leaves the room. KRISTIE and NICK draw on their bits of paper, SHAUN draws on the white board. IDENTITY. LISTEN. OBJECTIONS. HOW DOES THAT SOUND TO YOU. POLITE. TIM walks back into the room with BREE and stands behind SHAUN.*

SHAUN OK everyone finished? Show us? Kristie?

*They all laugh at Kristie's drawing.*

TIM I don't mean to interrupt you Shaun but we can stop there.

SHAUN Ok.

TIM Yeah. Bree'll be organising things from here so...

SHAUN OK.

TIM Yeah that's alright... Bree will be having a chat to everyone now yeah?

SHAUN OK.

*SHAUN sits down looking dejected. BREE stands up to join TIM.*

TIM What Shaun is telling you about being happy is true. You need to put on a smile. A smile everyone. I want to see smiles around this place. Smiling is a disease. What's the word I'm looking for?

BREE Contagious.

TIM Yeah.

BREE It's contagious.

TIM That's right yeah?

*BREE writes (misspells) CONTAGOUS on the white board.*

TIM Yeah now I've been doing this for five years now... that's right. And I've enjoyed it. It's been my passion if you like for a long time. I first started working in telemarketing when I was twenty-seven and now I'm thirty-two. And I see this as my career. This is what I'm good at. I'm good at it because I'm passionate about it.

*Silence.*

SARA The thing I love about Tokyo is all the automated voices that talk to you. Whoever designed the lifts in the hotels had the wherewithal to have this sweet soothing voice express a very sincere apology for any discomfort caused by the lack of space in the lift... though I'm not sure why they

don't just design bigger lifts. People there seem to genuinely love their toys. You can get cute little electronic kittens and puppies that can be programmed to say your name and perform tricks just like you'd want a real one to do. Are they really popular, I ask my friend Ken? Yes he says, because having a real animal is too expensive and nobody has the space anyway. They've even been shown to prevent heart attacks, he adds. I picked one up in the shop. A little green fluffy thing. Hello I'm Sara, I said... hello, it replied... woof woof then rocked it's head from side to side. It was so cute... I got really attached to it. I've always wanted a dog that I could talk to. A dog can understand you so perfectly. I really wanted to buy it... but he wasn't cheap... a couple of thousand dollars for a standard model. I felt stupid but I couldn't bear to leave him. I nearly burst into tears. Ken says lots of people have that reaction. I made so much money over there. Quick easy money. And all I had to do was dress up in a mini-skirt and a cute pink blouse and sit there and listen to men talking. Some of them had such bad English I couldn't understand them anyway. I'd just nod. Raked in the cash. But not enough to spend two grand on a toy dog. It's stupid I know but I still think about him sometimes.

*BREE walks out of the office and then returns.*

TIM           Bree and me have been working together now for how long?

BREE         Three years.

TIM           Three years now?

BREE         Yeah long time.

TIM           Long time. We got no secrets.

BREE         Yeah.

TIM           No secrets round here. That's why the door's always open.

BREE         It's professional.

TIM           Yeah.

BREE         Wherever I worked you keep the door open.

TIM           You've worked lots of places.

BREE         Yeah I've worked yeah all over. I've travelled a lot. I've had an interesting life. This is what comes with the job. When you enjoy yourself. Make it interesting for yourself.

TIM           That's true.

BREE         I'm forthright. You'll find I say what I mean.

TIM           Say it like it is that's important.

BREE         I say it as it is. You see me that's it. Right? My bark is worse than my bite. That's fine. You don't know something don't afraid to ask. Say I don't know.

*She writes I DON'T KNOW on the white board.*

*Silence.*

CALLUM     I love my guitar probably more than any other object in my flat. And I consider it a friend. I'll pick it up no matter what my mood's like. If I'm happy and I start playing I usually remain so... in fact I can quickly become elated. But the same if I'm depressed or sad... the guitar seems to increase the melancholia rather than lift me out of it. If I'm feeling sociable then sometimes I'll play and sing along to myself... or to someone else if I have company. I play a lot more loudly then. Sometimes I just like to look at my guitar. It's like a pet... or a friend who's reassuring to have around. It wasn't expensive... but wasn't cheap either... it's quite well made and has a real vitality... sometimes I just

like looking at it... just a glance every now and then... it makes me feel at ease. Sometimes I want to destroy it... I think it's taken too much of a hold on my life. I associate it with everything I've done... achieved... or thought about... it's worse than a mirror... it actually magnifies and distorts how I see myself... how I want to see myself. It's addictive... dangerous... monstrous... and one day I will kick it in... or hurl it over the balcony or something. But I guarantee... the next time a friend comes over... and asks me to play something I won't hesitate... I'll pick it and play something... let it take me over completely... let it overwhelm our conversation.

*MARA leans over and caresses her face with MICHAEL'S hand.*

MARA Have we still got those strawberries?

SIMON Yeah we should have... unless you ate them.

MARA Maybe some strawberries would be nice.

MICHAEL I'm OK.

MARA What about with some apple liqueur?

MICHAEL No thanks.

MARA I'm addicted to it.

SIMON It's not everyday you meet someone who doesn't like strawberries.

MICHAEL I prefer raspberries.

MARA So do I.

MICHAEL Do you have any raspberries?

MARA No I don't think so. Do we?

SIMON No. Unless you bought some?

MARA No I didn't buy any.

*Silence.*

SIMON       The thing with strawberries is that you have to wash them very well because of all the little holes.

MARA        Really?

SIMON       You can get a serious illness... because of all the little holes. Bacterial microbes can get caught in there.

MARA        I just feel like curling up and going to sleep.

*Silence.*

MICHAEL     Why don't you? Why don't you go ahead?

*Silence.*

SIMON       I have these friends and we have this arrangement. The last Friday of every month we get together and dress up.

MARA        Like a theme?

SIMON       The reason it's the last Friday of every month is because in the Middle Ages there used to be this group of knights called 'The Black Masks' and on the last Friday of every month they used to go on a rampage... just do whatever the hell they liked... my friend has a book about knights and there's this paragraph about them. He thought it was a good idea... one day of the month where there's no holds bar. So when we get together we're quite a force to contend with. We dress up. We get drunk. We do the most stupid things. We're completely obnoxious.

MARA        What do you do?

SIMON       Whatever we want.

MARA        Anything at all?

SIMON       Pretty much.

MICHAEL     Like what though? Break into people's houses?

MARA        Is it just silly things?

MICHAEL Do you pretend you're German or something like that?

MARA I like being silly all the time.

MICHAEL Me too.

*Long silence. MICHAEL takes out his mobile phone.*

MICHAEL Do you wanna have a look at my kids?

MARA What kids?

MICHAEL I've got two girls. One's thirteen... the other's fifteen.

*MICHAEL shows them the pictures on his mobile.*

SIMON Some friends of ours have girls... Claire and Rachel.

MICHAEL My girls are called Anna and Larissa.

MARA And how do you get on with your wife?

MICHAEL Not very well. But the girls... we get on OK.

SIMON Where do they live?

MICHAEL Here.

SIMON Close by?

MICHAEL Yeah.

SIMON What about the mother?

MARA *(To SIMON)* He can do what he likes. Were you not happy together?

MICHAEL No. It was getting... I had depression.

*MICHAEL hands photos to MARA.*

MARA They're beautiful.

MICHAEL Thanks.

SIMON Can I have a look?

*MARA passes the photos to SIMON.*

SIMON She's pretty. Which one's that?

*He passes the photo to MICHAEL.*

MICHAEL That's Anna. The other one's Larissa.

SIMON Has Anna reached puberty yet?

MICHAEL Yeah... I think so.

MARA I was a late developer.

SIMON So was I. *(Silence)* It's hereditary... so if we had children they probably would be too.

*SIMON passes the photos back to MICHAEL.*

SIMON What's their favourite story?

MICHAEL Probably the one about the owl. It's all about this owl who fills up his kettle with his own tears. He has to think of all these sad things to fill it up and make a cup of tea.

*Silence.*

MARA Coming up with a name must be one of the hardest things. Fancy having to name a person.

SIMON It's convenience. There's no other reason.

MARA Giving a person a name.

MICHAEL Yeah.

SIMON Sheer convenience.

SIMON Dave... do you like Dave?

MICHAEL No.

SIMON I was nearly Dave. My parents were set on it and then changed their minds at the last minute. There's still this guy... a friend of the family... whenever he sees me he still calls me Dave. Hi Dave... whenever he sees me.

MARA A new born baby and you have to go ahead and give it a name! A name... for a real person... it's the strangest idea in the world.

MICHAEL It's just something you have to do.

MARA Are you going to go back to them?

MICHAEL To my wife?

MARA Yeah?

MICHAEL No. I don't think so.

SIMON Sounds like you made up your mind.

MICHAEL I tried to kill myself.

MARA How?

MICHAEL I...

MARA You didn't try and shoot yourself?

MICHAEL No it wasn't like that... it was more...

MARA How?

MICHAEL It wasn't something physical.

SIMON A friend of mine... at work... he went and jumped off a bridge. Everyone said he was so happy. He was going to china to travel up the Yangtze... went round telling everyone for weeks. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd bought a plane ticket. And then he goes and jumps.

MARA Is that what you tried to do..? jump off a bridge?

SIMON No... listen to what he's saying.

MICHAEL I understand that perfectly... he wasn't planning to go up the Yangtze I bet. That was everyone else... what they expected.

SIMON Well only because that's what he kept saying.

MICHAEL All these tiny plans... I was actually fine. That's the strange thing. It's just something that happened.

MARA Did you tell your family you were going to leave them or did you just vanish one day?

MICHAEL I just left.

SIMON Your wife... she must have guessed though.

MICHAEL No.

MARA Women can usually guess these things.

MICHAEL I don't think so.

SIMON No warning?

MICHAEL No.

*Silence.*

SIMON You're a drama queen.

*MICHAEL and SIMON laugh.*

MARA Do you want to ring them?

MICHAEL My family?

MARA You might want to say hello.

MICHAEL No. I'm right thanks.

*Silence.*

MARA I admire your courage. *(Silence)* Shibishijibooshiboo.

MICHAEL Shigabijigaboojabigabijoo.

SIMON Yabababababa

*They laugh.*

*FATHER, MOTHER and DAUGHTER at the Hoyts Cinema in the CBD.*

FATHER I'm an invalid.

DAUGHTER You're *invalid*.

FATHER You're cooler than me.

MOTHER We seemed to have picked the hottest day for seeing a film and the coolest day for going to the beach.

DAUGHTER I'm too hot.

FATHER They're not shorts.

DAUGHTER Yeah.

FATHER They're clippers.

DAUGHTER Shorts.

FATHER They'd keep you afloat forever you go in the water with those on.

DAUGHTER No they're right.

FATHER Fill up with air. You have to push them down like a parachute. Sink em first.

MOTHER The way they go about on a bike. It's a wonder they survive.

FATHER Mark fell off a bike.

MOTHER That's right.

FATHER Ripped his ear right off.

DAUGHTER That was on a motorbike.

MOTHER So where does someone go they get injured?

FATHER Uh?

MOTHER Where's the hospital?

DAUGHTER It's further out.

MOTHER Not round here?

DAUGHTER No.

*Silence.*

SARA I've only just realised that I never really say what I want. Whenever I meet someone... I bend... I crumple... I make myself compliant... to their needs. I worry that I'll say and do something that might upset them... or I worry that they'll think I'm odd... too odd to be comfortable around... that my voice is too loud... that my opinions are facile... or that I'm too short to take seriously... or my face is not interesting

enough... that I haven't smiled in a way that is friendly... warm... endearing. I really admire people who stand out. There's man at work... Ben... he operates the phones next to mine... he's very friendly but doesn't say much... just what he needs to say to make conversation... so if I tell him how is he going... he'll say oh I'm alright... or did you know that so so's mother has just died... he'll say... yeah I heard about that... or yeah it happens I guess... won't commit himself more than that. Maybe he doesn't trust me. He's plump and has a blue streak on his fringe... and he wears a t-shirt with Never Work written on it. When he walks... well it's more like he marches... takes enormous strides... He's like no other creature I know and I always watch him. I admire him... I admire his fearlessness. One day one of the top managers came in... I can't remember his name we have so many managers... he came in and gave us a piece of paper and a pencil and asked us to draw a picture of our face. Why Ben asked. Because I would like to know how you see yourself said the manager. He couldn't have been any older than twenty-four. But he was very serious. I drew a smiley face and handed it back to him. He told me it was great... but I could have spent more time on it. I did another one... this time I put some ears and hair on it... he seemed a bit happier with that one. Ben scribbled all over his then made it into a paper aeroplane and threw it at the window. The manager told him off... Ben said well that's how I see myself... flying. The manager just frowned then went away... I don't think he knew what to say. That often happens with Ben... he does things... like he'll lie on the floor for no reason or he'll spin his chair round and round and people have no idea what to make of it. Julian... who runs our floor... always makes fun of

him... makes derogatory comments... says he won't get anywhere. But of course he's jealous... because Ben... unlike Julian... doesn't want to get anywhere. Where on earth can you go? I smile whenever I hear him say that. I find that to be the most ridiculous comment you can possibly make. Where can you go Julian? Upstairs or downstairs?

*Silence.*

MICHAEL I went to a cathedral recently and sat behind this Swedish couple and just listened to them.

MARA You eavesdropped?

MICHAEL I couldn't understand a word they said but because it was in a cathedral every sound seemed incredible... seemed necessary...

SIMON They have extraordinary acoustics.

MICHAEL The whole thing.

SIMON I always want a shout when I'm in a cathedral.

MICHAEL And sing.

SIMON Yeah sing at the top of my voice.

*Silence.*

MARA I ate my first sea urchin the other day.

SIMON In a restaurant?

MARA No at home. I collected them at a beach. I prepared them in this special sauce.

SIMON You weren't worried about the pollution?

MARA Should I be?

SIMON Just that they're scavengers. So they pick things up.

MICHAEL Like muscles.

SIMON Yeah like muscles. You have to be careful.

MARA I only had one or two. My friend only had one or two.

SIMON That's the thing though... you only need one to get quite sick apparently.

MARA It was just one off thing really... you can't eat more than one anyway it's so intense... the taste... like a wave... a wave of seawater crashing into your tongue. It's so strong. You wouldn't want more than one.

MICHAEL It's like when you go surfing.

MARA Hmm.

*Silence.*

*Two woman in a bookshop in Little Flinders Street.*

WOMAN 1 Oh he must be an idiot.

WOMAN 2 Sounds like it.

WOMAN 1 He doesn't tell lies you know. He's a weirdo so...

WOMAN 2 How long was he working there?

WOMAN 1 I don't know I wasn't paying too much attention.

WOMEN 2 He must be new.

WOMAN 1 Probably.

WOMAN 2 Is he a new driver?

WOMEN 1 I don't know.

WOMAN 2 I'm surprised he got his license.

WOMAN 1 Anybody can get a license.

WOMAN 2 It's just a matter of going for it.

WOMAN 1 No-one get their license first off... I did... but everybody fails first time.

WOMAN 2 That's right.

WOMAN 1 You need car in this day and age.

WOMAN 2 There's just no way I could do what I do without a car.

WOMAN 1 I go to the gym every morning...

WOMAN 2 Do you?

WOMAN 1 I can't live without the gym... I need it in my life. My personality needs it.

*Silence.*

CALLUM I do worry about being mad. That's probably my greatest fear. I realise... I'm sure everyone has crazy thoughts and mine are no worse than anybody's. It's inevitable isn't it? The kind of world we live in... the images we're bombed with... the constant overload of language... so I think it's perfectly normal to think bizarre crazy stuff... it's just our heads filtering through the miasmal swamp to find some kind of clarity in it all. That's ok... I don't have a problem with that. What worries me is that I'll let it out... that when I get too comfortable with someone... when I relax in someone's company... I let things slip... my guard comes down and I start to reveal too much. I'm not very good at sorting out what to keep hidden and what to reveal. It's such a desperate labyrinthine kind of dance... this agonizing manoeuvring that's involved just to negotiate what might be acceptable in a given circumstance and what clearly isn't. Although people are surprisingly tolerant. You can do and say all kinds of bizarre things and get away with it. We're all very helpful in that way. We give people plenty of rope to a certain point. As long as there's no touching involved. But even then it's incredible what you can get away with. But it's the main reason why I don't drink. I just don't trust myself. I do wonder whether other people are the same. Or is it just me that finds this balancing act difficult? I find it exhausting... it's probably the thing about life that disturbs me the most... makes me the most reluctant to want to be with people. It's so overwhelming

sometimes I'd rather stay at home and listen to music or something. Then I think but that's probably how a mad person would react... the pressure's too much so they become reclusive. So I often force myself to be sociable... even though I know I won't enjoy myself... I'll feel totally burdened by all the restraints I place on my behaviour I'll get bored and stressed... but at least I know I'm fighting it... I'm not surrendering to my madness.

*Two middle aged men at a sushi restaurant in Little Bourke Street.*

- MAN 1        Saw Elton John about a week ago.
- MAN 2        Yeah?
- MAN 1        What a lazy self-satisfied slug.
- MAN 2        You think so?
- MAN 1        Lost the plot.
- MAN 2        Yeah lost a lot of weight.
- MAN 1        No no he's lost the plot.
- MAN 2        He's gay.
- MAN 1        What's that got to do with it?
- MAN 2        Such a ponce.
- MAN 1        That's stupid. Shut ya stupid mouth.
- MAN 2        So he play some of his old stuff?
- MAN 1        Played some of his old stuff... some new stuff... absolute rubbish.
- MAN 2        He's entitled to play his new stuff.
- MAN 1        Not when I pay hundred and twenty bucks for it.
- MAN 2        He's gotta experiment.
- MAN 1        It's jerking off. I'm not his boyfriend.
- MAN 2        He's entitled to do what he likes.

MAN 1 You weren't fucking there. He's become ridiculous. So fat.

*Two women in their thirties in a bank on Elizabeth Street.*

WOMAN 1 Footballers... one year they're at full-forward...

WOMAN 2 Yeah.

WOMAN 1 Next year they're head of some corporation.

WOMAN 2 Yeah... kicking goals.

WOMAN 1 Ripping off people.

WOMAN 2 I don't like sport.

WOMAN 1 Their morons.

WOMAN 2 It's the new black...

WOMAN 1 Black?

WOMAN 2 The it thing.

WOMAN 1 What is?

WOMAN 2 Being a moron. I reckon.

*Silence.*

STEVE The other day I bought a jacket... a simple black cotton jacket... it's nothing special... it's comfortable... I didn't really think too much about it... I liked the look of it so I bought it. One day I spilt some coffee on the sleeve... but before I put it in the wash I emptied out the pockets and I found this note in the top right pocket. It was written in Chinese so I couldn't understand any of it. But the girl next door is Chinese so I asked her what it said. She didn't know either but she said she could ask her grandmother. I left it with her. Didn't think much about it really. A week later I saw her putting out the rubbish and she said... by the way the note... my grandmother translated it... I've written it down... do you want to come in I'll get it for you... so I went inside her flat... she's

lived next door for three years but that's the first time I've ever been in there. It was very clean... not much furniture... a TV and DVD player... a nice stereo... a navy blue couch... she had some nice ceramics tiles stuck to the wall. She went into the kitchen and got the note... she'd keep it on top of the dishwasher... then she read it to me... My name is Hai Am... I sewed on the pockets of your jacket... please write to me... Hai Am Ling... Factory 7 Jiabin Rd. Meizhou City Guangdong... I haven't written to her yet. I've been thinking about her a lot.

*Three male friends in their thirties in a bar in Little Lonsdale Street.*

- FRIEND 1     You ever see any of those guys?
- FRIEND 2     From school?
- FRIEND 3     What about Matt Davies?
- FRIEND 2     No I don't know anything.
- FRIEND 3     They've vanished.
- FRIEND 1     I did cross paths with Roco once.
- FRIEND 3     Yeah?
- FRIEND 1     In London.
- FRIEND 3     What's he doing there?
- FRIEND 1     Owns a restaurant.
- FRIEND 2     Roco?
- FRIEND 1     He's huge now. Absolutely enormous.
- FRIEND 3     He was always enormous.
- FRIEND 1     Now he's like a mammoth.
- FRIEND 2     You go to his restaurant?
- FRIEND 1     No.
- FRIEND 3     I never liked him much.

FRIEND 2 No.

FRIEND 3 He was fuckwit.

FRIEND 1 Said he lived in Africa for a year.

FRIEND 2 Yeah?

FRIEND 1 Got this thing for Tanzania.

FRIEND 3 What's a restaurateur doing in Tanzania?

FRIEND 1 Beats me.

FRIEND 3 How long since I cooked you guys a meal?

FRIEND 1 I don't know. Ages.

FRIEND 2 Ages.

FRIEND 1 You'll have to come round one night.

FRIEND 3 Sure love to.

FRIEND 2 Yeah.

FRIEND 1 Caught up with Peter Angelou.

FRIEND 3 Pete? Yeah..? how's he going?

FRIEND 1 Good. Hadn't seen him since he broke his arm.

FRIEND 2 Didn't hear about it.

FRIEND 1 Yeah he was knocking down his shed. The whole thing collapsed on him.

FRIEND 2 What was he doing?

FRIEND 1 You know Pete. Doesn't like to spend money if he can help it.

FRIEND 3 It's a classic isn't it?

FRIEND 1 Yeah.

FRIEND 3 Like refusing to get an electrician. Next minute... you're on the floor...

FRIEND 1 That's right... two thousand volts going through you.

FRIEND 2 I know.

FRIEND 1     He broke his arm.

FRIEND 3     It's a classic.

FRIEND 1     Cracked a couple of ribs.

FRIEND 3     What did he think he was going to achieve?

FRIEND 1     You been to Jerry's Wine Bar?

FRIEND 3     Na.

FRIEND 1     That's where I caught up with him.

FRIEND 3     How's Jerry going?

FRIEND 1     I've never met him.

FRIEND 3     Don't you know Jerry?

FRIEND 1     No.

FRIEND 3     Lovely bloke.

FRIEND 1     Yeah?

FRIEND 3     Very easy going.

FRIEND 1     He's got a good bar.

FRIEND 3     You only ever hear good things. Even from the staff.

FRIEND 2     That's unusual.

FRIEND 3     Why don't we go there next Friday.

FRIEND 1     I can't next Friday.

FRIEND 3     How come?

FRIEND 1     Going to the game.

FRIEND 3     I might poke my head in.

FRIEND 2     What does he do exactly?

FRIEND 1     Who? Peter?

FRIEND 2     Yeah.

FRIEND 1     I dunno.

FRIEND 3     You don't know?

FRIEND 1     Never been too clear.

FRIEND 3     He's manages some charity fund raising thing.

FRIEND 2     Yeah?

FRIEND 3     I like Peter.

FRIEND 1     Me too.

FRIEND 3     Dry.

FRIEND 1     Very.

FRIEND 2     He's a wit.

FRIEND 1     He's a reprobate.

FRIEND 3     A what?

FRIEND 1     A reprobate... yaknow a dog.

FRIEND 3     Oh yeah

FRIEND 1     A terrific sense of humour.

FRIEND 3     Acerbic. Acerbic wit.

FRIEND 1     He has hasn't he?

FRIEND 3     I reckon.

FRIEND 1     You know he's always had money.

FRIEND 3     Yeah but now he's raking it in. Yaknow how much he earns?

FRIEND 2     What?

FRIEND 3     Shitloads.

FRIEND 1     How much?

FRIEND 3     About four gran a week?

FRIEND 1     Peter?

FRIEND 3     I'm telling you.

FRIEND 2     Yes but so what?

FRIEND 3 Nothing. He's doing well though.

FRIEND 1 Yeah.

FRIEND 3 That's what I'm saying... why can't a bloke like him get an electrician?

FRIEND 1 He's always been careful with money.

FRIEND 2 That's no careful. That's stupid.

FRIEND 1 That's what I reckon.

FRIEND 3 Oh well each to his own.

*Two women in their fifties in the Royal Women's Hospital.*

WOMAN 1 Did I tell you I saw your son?

WOMAN 2 Michael?

WOMAN 1 Saw him in Collingwood.

WOMAN 2 What was he doing?

WOMAN 1 With some girl.

WOMAN 2 Must be his girlfriend.

WOMAN 1 Yeah.

WOMAN 2 Did he see you?

WOMAN 1 I waved to him and he waved back.

WOMAN 2 Right.

WOMAN 1 He was on the other side of the street.

WOMAN 2 Didn't he come over?

WOMAN 1 I didn't expect him to.

WOMAN 2 That was naughty.

WOMAN 1 Had the girl with him so...

WOMAN 2 He's always been popular like that.

WOMAN 1 He's a looker.

WOMAN 2 Seems to know everyone. Whenever I walk down the street with him every second person stops and says hello. Can't go anywhere with him. You have to give yourself an extra hour.

WOMAN 1 Must make you proud of him.

WOMAN 2 Yeah.

WOMAN 1 He's obviously popular.

WOMAN 2 Just his nature.

WOMAN 1 You brought him up well.

WOMAN 2 Wasn't me.

WOMAN 1 You brought him up.

WOMAN 2 Not really. The way he is.

WOMAN 1 Yeah.

WOMAN 2 It's just natural.

WOMAN 1 He's a lovely boy.

WOMAN 2 Yeah... thanks.

*Two young woman in a clothes shop in Centre Place.*

WOMAN 1 Are you going on holiday?

WOMAN 2 Yeah Mexico.

WOMAN 1 Yeah?

WOMAN 2 Going with a few girlfriends from work. They won't do go the beaches but I'm not so into that. They're all very conservative.

WOMAN 1 When you going?

WOMAN 2 Soon. Couple of months.

WOMAN 1 That's exciting. You're lucky.

WOMAN 2 Yeah.

WOMAN 1 Wish I was going.

WOMAN 2 What's this music we're listening to?

WOMAN 1 I know.

WOMAN 2 What is it?

WOMAN 1 I'm ignoring it.

WOMAN 2 I don't have enough patience.

WOMAN 2 Who was that girl before?

WOMAN 1 Anna?

WOMAN 2 Yeah.

WOMAN 1 She's a masseuse.

WOMAN 2 Yeah?

WOMAN 1 She gave me a massage last week.

WOMAN 2 Any good?

WOMAN 1 Oh great.

WOMAN 2 Did she get the knots?

WOMAN 1 Oh yeah right in.

WOMAN 2 She looks a bit haggled. Maybe she doesn't eat enough.

WOMAN 1 I don't think she's all that busy.

WOMAN 2 It'd be hard wouldn't it? Making money doing something like that.

WOMAN 1 Yeah.

WOMAN 2 There's no way I'd do guys... no way.

WOMAN No I know.

*A girl and a guy in a Chinese dumpling House in Tattersals Lane.*

GUY You talk about yourself a lot. Do you mind me saying that?

GIRL I don't think I do.

GUY That's all we talk about.

GIRL No we don't.

GUY           Just I don't think it's all that healthy.

GIRL          I don't think I do.

GUY           It's not so much annoying yaknow.... just talk about something else.

GIRL          I want to get drunk.

GUY           Why? Why do you say that?

GIRL          I dunno.

GUY           What about something better?

GIRL          What's that?

GUY           You wanna get something else?

GIRL          Do you?

GUY           I will if you do.

GIRL          I dunno.

GUY           Well I'm not going to do it unless you say so.

GIRL          I'm alright.

GUY           Ok then... that's alright.

*Silence.*

MICHAEL     Do you wanna have a look at my kids?

MARA         What kids?

MICHAEL     I got two girls. One's thirteen... the other's fifteen.

*MICHAEL takes two photos from his wallet.*

SIMON        Some friends of ours have girls... Claire and Rachel.

MICHAEL     My girls are called Anna and Larissa.

MARA         And how do you get on with your wife?

MICHAEL     Not very well. But the girls... we get on OK.

SIMON        Where do they live?

MICHAEL     Here.

SIMON       Close by?

MICHAEL     Yeah.

SIMON       What about the mother?

MARA        *(To SIMON)* He can do what he likes. Were you not happy together?

MICHAEL     No. It was getting... I had depression.  
*MICHAEL hands photos to MARA.*

MARA        They're beautiful.

MICHAEL     Thanks.

SIMON        Can I have a look?  
*MARA passes the photos to SIMON.*

SIMON        She's pretty. Which one's that?  
*He passes the photo to MICHAEL.*

MICHAEL     That's Anna. The other one's Larissa.

SIMON        Has Anna reached puberty yet?

MICHAEL     Yeah... I think so.

MARA        I was a late developer.

SIMON        So was I. *(Silence)* It's hereditary... so if we had children they probably  
would be too.  
*Simon passes the photos back to MICHAEL.*

MARA        Coming up with a name must be one of the hardest things. Fancy having  
to name a person.

SIMON        It's convenience. There's no other reason.

MARA        Giving a person a name.

MICHAEL     Yeah.

SIMON        Sheer convenience.

MARA           A new born baby and you have to go ahead and give it a name! A name... for a real person... it's the strangest idea in the world.

MICHAEL       It's just something you have to do.

MARA           Are you going to go back to them?

MICHAEL       To my wife?

MARA           Yeah?

MICHAEL       No. I don't think so.

SIMON          Sounds like you made up your mind.

MICHAEL       I tried to kill myself.

MARA           How?

MICHAEL       I...

MARA           You didn't try and shoot yourself?

MICHAEL       No it wasn't like that... it was more...

MARA           How?

MICHAEL       It wasn't something physical.

SIMON          A friend of mine... at work... he went and jumped off a bridge. Everyone said he was so happy. He was going to travel up the Yangtze... went round telling everyone for weeks. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd bought a plane ticket. And then he goes and jumps.

MARA           Is that what you tried to do..? jump off a bridge?

SIMON          No... listen to what he's saying.

MICHAEL       I understand that perfectly... he wasn't planning to go up the Yangtze I bet. That was everyone else... what they expected.

SIMON          Well only because that's what he kept saying.

MICHAEL       All these tiny plans... I was actually fine. That's the strange thing. It's just something that happened.

MARA Did you tell your family you were going to leave them or did you just vanish one day?

MICHAEL I just left.

SIMON Your wife... she must have guessed though.

MICHAEL No.

MARA Women can usually guess these things.

MICHAEL I don't think so.

SIMON No warning?

MICHAEL No.

*Silence.*

SIMON You're a drama queen.

*MICHAEL and SIMON laugh.*

MARA Do you want to ring them?

MICHAEL My family?

MARA He'll give you his mobile if you want to say hello.

MICHAEL No. I'm right thanks.

*Silence.*

MARA I admire your courage. *(Silence)* Shibishijibooshiboo.

MICHAEL Shigabijigaboojabigabijoo.

SIMON Yabababababa

*They laugh.*

MICHAEL I feel like a massage.

MARA Would you like me to?

MICHAEL No I didn't mean that.

MARA No I'm happy to.

MICHAEL No really I wasn't...

MARA No go on...

MICHAEL Really you sure?

MARA Yeah that's fine.

MICHAEL Ok that'd be great.

*MARA gives MICHAEL a massage.*

MARA Tell me if it's too hard.

MICHAEL No that's good.

*Silence.*

MARA Sure you don't want a bath?

MICHAEL Maybe later. (*Silence*) I went to a hammam once... and they scrubbed me all over.

MARA It's just nice to get all the dead skin off. It builds up that's all.

MICHAEL I don't feel like a bath though.

MARA No that's OK you don't have to.

MICHAEL Was I being demanding saying that?

MARA No... not at all.

*Silence.*

SIMON I went to a hammam in Turkey once. Big fat bloke with huge hands just slapping me about.

*Silence.*

MARA You've got nice shaped bones.

MICHAEL Thanks.

*Silence.*

MARA Is that OK?

MICHAEL That's fine.

MARA Doesn't hurt?

MICHAEL No.

*Silence.*

*Three middle-aged woman at Victoria Market.*

WOMAN 1 I was at the zoo the other day and these English tourists were there watching these gorillas and one of them did a poo and the other one ate it.

WOMAN 2 Animals do the most disgusting things?

WOMAN 3 We're all animals.

WOMAN 1 What about those people who take their dogs for a walk with those plastic bags?

WOMAN 2 And the poos all sloppy.

WOMAN 1 Our dog's very naughty.

WOMAN 3 What kind of dog you got?

WOMAN 1 A mongrel.

WOMAN 2 How are your kids?

WOMAN 1 Fine.

WOMAN 3 It's not hard to look after kids.

*Silence.*

WOMAN 1 It's amazing how many species they discover.

WOMAN 2 Uh?

WOMAN 1 You'd think there's nothing left out there...

WOMAN 2 Sure.

WOMAN 1 I've been reading New Scientist.

WOMAN 3 But you have to balance that against how many species are becoming extinct.

WOMAN 1 Yeah.

- WOMAN 3 You can't do anything so doesn't matter.
- WOMAN 2 That's just complacent.
- WOMAN 3 Human beings are selfish... nothing you can do about it.
- WOMAN 2 What you just watch it all go to shit?
- WOMAN 3 That's right.
- WOMAN 2 That's stupid.
- WOMAN 3 What's the point? You fight something like that... something you are powerless to stop... you just get exhausted.
- WOMAN 2 Who said we're powerless to stop it?
- WOMAN 3 We are... to think otherwise is deluded.
- WOMAN 2 Why are you so... reactionary?
- WOMAN 3 Am I?
- WOMAN 2 You are now.
- WOMAN 3 I'm just thinking out loud.
- WOMAN 2 Being complacent... there's just no excuse.

*Silence.*

- WOMAN 2 See a word and you can't for the life of you tell what it means.
- WOMAN 1 It's so annoying.

*Silence.*

- SIMON I have these friends and we have this arrangement. The last Friday of every month we get together and dress up.
- MARA Like a theme?
- SIMON The reason it's the last Friday of every month is because in the Middle Ages there used to be this group of knights called 'The Black Masks' and on the last Friday of every month they used to on a rampage... just do whatever the hell they liked... my friend has a book about knights

and there's this paragraph about them. He thought it was a good idea... one day of the month where there's no holds barred. So when we get together we're quite a force to contend with. We dress up. We get drunk. We do the most stupid things. We're completely obnoxious.

MARA What do you do?

SIMON Whatever we want.

MARA Anything at all?

SIMON Pretty much.

MICHAEL Like what though? Break into people's houses?

MARA Is it just silly things?

MICHAEL Do you pretend you're German or something like that?

MARA I like being silly all the time.

MICHAEL Me too.

*Silence.*

CALLUM Sonja is a very good friend of mine. I've only known her for two years. It feels like I've known her a lot longer though. We've always been very physical with each other. Sometimes... if we're out... we'll start kissing. Not in a sexual way... it's just friendly... and fun... it's not something we plan... last time I saw her at a party we started kissing in the kitchen... for about half an hour... and then she had to go and we haven't really talked about it... we don't really need to. We hadn't kissed for about six months and I didn't think we'd do it again. But we did. She always wears dresses with floral patterns. And she smokes... she smokes all the time. One time we crashed on a mattress in a friend's lounge-room and she insisted on smoking in bed. She woke up at dawn and lit up. Then went back to sleep. But she still looks incredibly fresh.

Like she hasn't aged as much as I have. Maybe that's because she's vegan. She talks about herself all the time. In excruciating detail. I don't think she knows anything about me. I don't mind that though. I think she needs me to listen to her. I don't know whether she's like that with other people or not. She tried to kill herself when she was eighteen. She was in love... and the guy she was in love with slept with her a few times then didn't want anything to do with her... so she threw herself in front of a car... which is why she limps... and has scars all down her legs. She keeps them hidden under stockings. I think she's always had someone in her life to confess things to. She gravitates towards people who won't judge her. Who aren't embarrassed by her. Who don't want anything from her. She's like me... she doesn't have a proper job... she just gets by and somehow avoids becoming homeless. She's always meeting eccentric wealthy people... mixes in those kinds of circles... professionals... wealthy people... people who can take earning a living for granted. But she herself owns nothing like me. I'm very close to her... I love her in a way I guess. But I'd never say that to her. She wouldn't understand what I mean if I said that. I know she'd cut off all contact. I worry that one day she'll fall in love again and the same thing will happen... but next time she'll succeed. She has that look in her face... she's not destined to survive in this world.

*A mother and her daughter in a café in Degraeves Street.*

DAUGHTER            Can I borrow your car?

MOTHER            Yeah.

DAUGHTER            Might have to look around some real estate agents. Just want a bed-sit. Somewhere nice. But affordable.

MOTHER There's plenty of places I'm sure.

DAUGHTER Tomorrow I might jump in the car if that's ok.

MOTHER Sure.

*Silence.*

DAUGHTER Do you want me to cook dinner?

MOTHER Sure.

DAUGHTER What do you fancy?

MOTHER Whatever you like.

DAUGHTER Whose that boy who works in the pub?

MOTHER The new one?

DAUGHTER Yeah.

MOTHER That's Gary's son.

DAUGHTER Really?

MOTHER Yeah he's moved back.

DAUGHTER I don't remember him.

MOTHER No he used to live with his mother. She lives in Sydney. But now he's moved in with his father.

DAUGHTER How come?

MOTHER I'm not sure. He seems to like it here. Apparently he's a greenie.

DAUGHTER He's friendly.

MOTHER He's very thoughtful.

DAUGHTER Asked me if I wanted a drink on the house. Very talkative. Thought I was a lawyer.

MOTHER Why did he think that?

DAUGHTER That's what I asked. Said it was my manner. My way of talking. I think he was trying to chat me up.

MOTHER Do you think?

DAUGHTER I could tell.

MOTHER Maybe he was.

*Silence.*

SARA This man keeps ringing me up... leaving messages on my phone. He's balding... divorced... his name is Renato and he used to run a Sicilian restaurant... but it went broke. He said it was his partner's fault. He had a gambling problem. I asked him right out if he had a gambling problem because that's just not something I can tolerate. Actually I don't have an opinion about gambling. It's not something I care about at all. I know people get ruined by it... but it's good to believe in fate too... sheer luck. That's something I believe in... fate. Why not? There has to be something. When I look up at the night sky and see the stars I always get the feeling I'm being watched. They can't just be dead balls of fire. We can't be completely alone. I believe I have my own trajectory... it's all been laid out. Just like everything in the cosmos. Nothing else matters... certainly not money. When I was in Tokyo I saw a funeral... and they were burning the corpse in a Rolls Royce. They drove it onto a wooden platform and burnt the whole thing. I said to my friend Saiya... isn't that car worth a lot of money? He said so... he can drive it up in heaven. Anyway Renato said he didn't gamble and I pretended to be relieved. He has a birthmark on his head like Gorbachev... I wish I hadn't mentioned that to him... of course everyone says that. Am I attracted to him? No. I would never consider having sex with him. If I found him sexy I wouldn't beat about the bush... don't see the point. Inga reckons you've got to wait at least three months... you can't just give it away. Give what

away I said... my vagina? What are you talking about? It's not like they get to take it home with them. Mind you I did go out with a guy once who asked if he could pluck one of my pubic hairs. No way... I said. He begged me. Please just one... he kept on and on. I thought he must have been into some fucking voodoo thing. Turns out he just kept them in a jar. He showed it to me. Looked like a daddy-long-legs. I have to say it was so weird it made me kind of like him. Renato would never do a thing like that... he'd be shocked. He's cultured... used to live in Venice on a canal... had his own gondola... he loves classical music... loves opera. I think he's disappointed that I can't get into it. I like him... he has a dark sense of humour... but the thought of having sex with him. I know we're doomed. When we first met he used to kiss my hand... and I had to tell him I really found it disgusting. Those hairy sloppy lips on my hand... no thank you. But how do you stop something? I'm just waiting to go way really. I bought this book on Morocco. There's a place there called the Draa Valley. I've seen pictures. You can stay in a Berber village. It's right near the desert... towards dusk you can see the sand dune glow red. That's where I aim to go.

*Three male actors in a conversation at the Malthouse Theatre after a performance.*

ACTOR 1     How's Jerry going?

ACTOR 2     I've never met him.

ACTOR 1     Don't you know Jerry?

ACTOR 2     No.

ACTOR 1     Lovely guy.

ACTOR 2     Yeah?

ACTOR 1     Very nice.

ACTOR 2     You only hear good things.

ACTOR 1     Even from the crew.

ACTOR 2     That's unusual.

ACTOR 1     Let's go there next Friday... after work. I'll introduce you to him.

ACTOR 3     He's not there on a Friday.

ACTOR 1     Isn't he?

ACTOR 2     Apparently not.

ACTOR 1     How come?

ACTOR 3     It's his day off.

ACTOR 1     That's silly. Make a killing on a Friday. That's the busiest day of the week. I'd be at least poking my head in.

ACTOR 3     I like James.

ACTOR 2     James..? me too.

ACTOR 1     Dry.

ACTOR 2     Very.

ACTOR 1     A real wit.

ACTOR 2     A terrific sense of humour.

ACTOR 1     Acerbic.

ACTOR 2     He is isn't he?

ACTOR 1     I like James.

ACTOR 2     Yeah.

## **Performance Text**

PhD - Everyday Performance: Novel, Play, Theory  
Raimondo Cortese

1

My last year of school was a waste. I didn't like my subjects or, for that matter, any of my teachers. Every day I left my class bored, frustrated, sometimes I'd close my eyes and drift into a semi-delirium just so time would pass without me noticing. Only the morning recess, or the lunch break when I'd gather with my friends along the wall of the science block, or those happy moments between classes, bubbling with suppressed conversation, allowed me, briefly, to forget where I was.

My real life began after class. A group of us twelfth graders had taken to wandering the city alleyways around Sutherland Street. I can see my friend Pete now, searching the sandstone walls of the warehouses for the best spot to do his graffiti. The piece itself rarely took him more than a few seconds. Myself, Tony, Arino, or one of the other guys, would keep a look out while Pete pinned the card to the wall, sprayed colour in one steady sweep, leaving a floating contour of someone's face, friends he'd snapped at school, or parties; there were even a couple of his mother.

Only when Pete packed his gear away would he smile and become talkative. 'One day we should live round here Leo,' he told me once. 'Just imagine the freedom we'd have. We could do what the hell we wanted.' I looked around at all the busted windows, the buckled sheets of corrugated iron nailed up where the doors had once been, and further along where a row of decrepit printers and foundry workshops spewed out fumes and clattered non-stop. I laughed, and shouted back, 'Sure let's do it.'

Sometimes a grim look would cross his face; he'd gesture for us to leave him alone, with his bag of spray cans and stencils. We used to wait for him a little further along, in this vacant lot, surrounded by cars and weeds, sitting on a concrete slab that had

jacked away from the back wall. We smoked ciggies, talked about school, or girls, or music, or what movies were on; conversations that would engross us briefly then vanish without leaving their mark. Some of the guys would bring their girlfriends. Now and then, a couple would mosey on up McLean Alley, or around the cobbled walkway on Flanigan. I used to watch them enviously, wondering what they got up to around there, whether it was just kissing or something more.

## 2

This one time, it was during those dismally hot weeks before our final exams, we were hanging around the Café Zuni. There weren't enough chairs, so most of us squeezed under the awning, returning occasionally to our table to drink our coffee. Tony confided that Pete was trying to score some weed. I didn't hold out much hope, and suggested following the path by the river, mingling amongst the crowds going out after work, anything to stop me going home for a while.

Tony gave me that quizzical look of his, then said, 'How puerile.' It was the word he attached to anything he didn't approve of.

When Pete finally appeared most of us had already left. Those that stayed had run out of things to say, and were leaning back on the bonnets of cars, staring at the empty sky, or the slender shadows on the facades of buildings, swinging our legs and grinning as if we were already stoned.

Pete leapt over the curb and stopped a short distance away. I noticed his swollen lip.

‘Come on, let’s get out of here.’ He addressed us sweepingly, like those generals in war movies, without bothering to look at anyone.

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Where are we going?’

‘How the hell would I know?’ he smiled and he ran towards me, used my shoulder to vault into the middle of the laneway, now busy with people strolling in the late afternoon sun. A girl with straw-yellow hair eyed us off, frowning.

‘Don’t worry about money either guys,’ Pete added. ‘I’ve just had a windfall.’

I knew he was lying, or at least exaggerating, but what did that matter?

He began to walk off, slowly. After a few steps he turned about and frowned at us. ‘Are you fucking coming or what?’ Only me and Tony accepted the invitation.

Pete elbowed me in the side and said, loud enough for everyone to hear, ‘Good, I didn’t want those fuckwits coming anyway.’

I tried to protest, but Pete had already dashed behind Tony and was shoving him along, laughing. Arino and the other guys muttered something amongst themselves then picked up their bags and moved on.

3

You couldn’t call Pete pretentious, but even around the schoolyard he practised daily at cultivating a distinct appearance. Now he wore this scruffy t-shirt with ‘HELLBENT’ blazoned across it and the nails on his left hand were painted bright green. Dark hair and eyebrows gave his blue eyes an unnerving prominence. His face, lean, softly tanned, handsome, had the advantage of an easy smile. His body was long-limbed, cat-like. It swaggered through space with an airy infallibility.

It was a body unused to any kind of restraint.

The rumours about Pete added weight to this impression. One had it that he was expelled from Prince's High in eighth grade for getting a girl pregnant. In retaliation he'd set fire to the headmaster's car. In another version it was sprayed pink. As soon as he came to our school he set about smashing the weekly record for getting evicted from class; and there were charges for shoplifting too: all of which added to his aura. Only Tony thought it was cliché.

'He does it all by the book,' he told me after watching Pete making obscene gestures to Mrs. Buttress, head librarian. 'It's so predictable. And he does it just so he can win approval.'

But what we were all drawn to was his optimism. You saw it as soon as you met him, a natural effusiveness that would sear up and catch hold of anyone around him.

4

The three of us headed down Hardware Lane; we passed rows of shops and bars. Outside Pugg Mahones an old man surveyed the passersby, his face all screwed up like he was trying to hold in an explosive crap. Pete suddenly turned left, took long, strident steps in the direction of St Mary's Cathedral. I had to break into a jog to keep up with him. He turned another corner; belted down a street I didn't know the name of. Stopping, I looked up at an old warehouse with a sign that read 'Open for All Repairs- Jeffrey's Bikes' and from where, at odd intervals, sharp noises blasted out onto the street.

Pete was ahead of us near Redlegs ringing a buzzer. The door wedged open and he began to say something in earnest. The corner of a girl's face poked out in silhouette.

We thought better of getting too close. Tony leaned back, rested his foot onto a swollen slab of newspapers. Above us, the brightly manicured apartments stared serenely upon the alleyway where a steady stream of garbage spread from the bins to form a festering heap in the alcove behind the ROABGAB City Temple.

The door slammed. Pete was still for a moment then began to hurl gravel at a window on the second storey.

‘Hey! Zoe!’ he screamed out. No-one appeared. ‘ZOE!’ He roared a few times more. After a while, he returned to where we were standing.

‘Her bitch flatmate says she’s unavailable right now...’ He was panting, his face desolate.

‘What did you expect?’ Tony said. ‘You can’t just go rocking up to her house like that.’

‘What would you know about girls?’ Pete snapped back.

Tony’s face tightened, repressed the urge to say something.

Pete lunged toward him. ‘I’ll do anything for her, anything at all. Can you understand that?’

Tony smiled. ‘What are you talking about? You barely know her.’

‘So what!’ Pete screamed back at him. ‘She’s fucking beautiful. She’s the most beautiful fucking girl on the planet.’

There was a long silence. A couple of suits walked past, their faces inscrutable. Not even the jolting stench of the alleyway seemed to bother them.

Pete turned suddenly, walked ahead.

## 5

Although Tony denied it, we suspected he was still a virgin. At least, we had never seen him with anyone. Amid the drunken, orgiastic scenes that ushered in the close to our school parties, Tony would always be sitting in a corner, ear-bashing some newcomer about politics, or poetry, his theory on the latest threat of global catastrophe. He was a small guy, constructed proportionally, apart from his hands, which might have belonged to a ten-year-old. Around girls he kept them interlocked or hidden in his pockets. It was this self-consciousness that also caused him to fidget in their presence and avoid eye contact, or suppress his embarrassment by twisting his mouth into a grimace, which his pointy nose only made more ridiculous. For some, it led to the impression he was a bit slippery.

My experiences with girls were limited. None could justify the term *relationship*, bar one with a strange wispy haired girl in eleventh grade that teetered along, for a few months then fizzled. I knew nothing of the boundless, wild love Pete talked about.

## 6

Tony, ever the diplomat, caught up with Pete and put his hand on his shoulder. ‘Why don’t you text her, see if she’ll meet up?’

Pete gestured vaguely. ‘Yeah sure.’ But his mood began to brighten, and he put his arm around him. ‘Come on guys, let’s go down by the river. No one will disturb us there. We can lie on the grass and chat.’

To underline his intention, he took out a joint from his pocket and smirked impishly.

‘You got some after all,’ I said.

‘Of course I did dickhead.’ Pete lit it, took several deep drags then passed it to me. I toked, swallowed a cough. Tony had a go. ‘Sweet,’ he declared, ‘with the kick of a fucking ox.’

We set off towards the Yarra. Occasionally, Pete would break into a skip, leap into the air, fall about laughing.

We joked about how stoned we were. Still, with each step, Pete’s energy, his crazy exuberance spurred us along. We charged across Bourke Street, barely glancing at the cars volleying towards us.

Kirks Lane was a dead end. We found an alcove adjoining a galvanized roller-door and crouched there, sneaking a few drags at a time. For once we were content to say nothing. The joint had sent my head into a spin. Tony had the last drag and flicked it against a wheelie bin and we watched as it glimmered and died. Right next to us, water spluttered from a drainpipe and wove its way through an outcrop of rotting vegetables.

‘I’m gonna sleep right here,’ Tony moaned.

‘Why don’t you then?’ I laughed, pushed him in the chest.

Pete had been staring at the wall above my head. A monstrous green cephalopod had its tentacles around a girl with swollen thighs and a revolver.

‘That’s a Phibs for sure,’ Pete said, his voice had thickened. ‘He’s one of the best, what you call a genuine artist.’

He shifted his scrutiny to an area of frayed and illegible posters. Covering them were the words ‘Ghost Patrol’ and ‘Monkey says Relax’ spray-painted in yellow. Not even Pete knew who Monkey was.

‘It’s one of those enduring mysteries,’ he explained.

He got up, went further along, then stood stiffly, as before a sacred icon. There, a litany of heads, like death masks, John Lennon, Bob Marley, a blue one who looked like Kurt Cobain, presided over a writhing mass of squiggles and signs.

‘See these stencils?’ Pete said. ‘They’ve been there for over ten years. The guy who did ‘em’s called Bunny. Total legend.’

‘Does he still do this shit?’ I asked.

‘No, I don’t know what happened to him, probably just gave up, holds some job like every other cockhead.’ As a final thought he added, ‘Maybe he’s dead.’

‘Why would he be dead?’ Tony got to his feet, grinning.

‘All I’m saying is no one knows what happened to him. Maybe they got to him.’ Without elaborating who *they* were, Pete sat down and stared ahead, hands wedged under his jeans.

‘What are you saying? The fucking CIA kidnapped him?’ Tony said and glanced at me for approval.

Pete for once was in no mood to joke.

Tony leaned into me like I was his co-conspirator.

‘Don’t you reckon Pete looks like that statue in the Edinburgh Gardens, has that same startled look on his face, like every fucking stupid pointless thing in the world is amazing.’

Pete ignored him. ‘Hey! What would you do if you could freeze time? Imagine like the whole world was your own private space. Like in the belly of a whale?’

‘Like in Pinocchio?’ I said.

Tony nudged me. 'That was a fish you idiot.'

'What would you do with so much freedom?' Pete continued. 'If you could do anything you want? Just imagine it. Would you steal stuff? Run around naked? Create havoc everywhere? Like in banks and offices? What kind of crazy shit would you do Leo?'

'I don't know.' I tried to think of something interesting. Tony started giggling.

'You know what I'd do?' Pete said. 'I'd like to go round, just stare into people's faces. Really look at them. Every minute detail.'

'You can do that anytime.' Tony said.

'No you can't. You can never get close enough. Not so close you can really see into them. People are always extraordinary if you really look at them. I saw this old lady yesterday standing on the steps of the GPO. And she had this long pale face with a long thin nose and button lips and these calm enormous drooping eyes, like she was straight out of Botticelli or something.'

Pete was chattering now; he waved his hands about like he was painting her in space.

'Her arms and legs, everything about her was long and thin and pale and she stood there like some fucking weird insect. She had these orange trousers on and a green t-shirt and green slippers and long grey hair that melted down her shoulders. Her fingers were long and bony, she kept stretching them out and wriggling them like she was playing the harp.'

'Did you say hello to her?' I asked.

‘Course not, that would’ve ruined it. But I wanted to, I wanted tell her how fucking incredible she was.’ He took a breath. ‘It was like she was asleep, but with her eyes wide open, calmly absorbing everything around her, like she had just landed in someone else’s dream.’

He frowned. ‘I feel like that most days too, don’t you?’ Before I could answer, Pete staggered to his feet and roared; his voice hammered along the walls.

We sat there, stoned, happy in our secret hideout, which seemed to me like the peaceful epicentre, while around us surged the immense, convolving spasms of the city. The sky went from silver, to pink, to grey. I relaxed and closed my eyes, only to open them when Pete’s mobile buzzed. He took it out of his bag, grinned, stabbed some numbers.

Tony flicked my leg, ‘Guess who that is.’

Pete had already jumped up and was heading down the lane. We got up and followed him as he turned into Collins Street.

In the darkening light, bodies, arms, legs, heads, jackets, trousers, skirts, gelled together like blobs of mercury that rolled and shimmered in great dizzy, waves. Pete rushed ahead, spun about, screamed at us to hurry. Straining to keep up, I clenched my hands and broke into a run, sweating. ‘Where the fuck’s he going?’ Tony muttered behind me. Sometimes we’d lose sight of him; then see him bobbing up, his hand waving over someone’s head. We chased him, laughed all the way down Market Street, passed the BNZA with its Arabian Nights architraves. At the Immigration Museum, I had to stop and catch my breath. In the bleary field ahead, I saw a young guy barely older than me

clap shut his titanium laptop and disappear inside Sedges and Hardwick, Law Firm. I had a terrible premonition that one day that might end up being me.

7

The guys were waiting for me along Banana Alley, near a row of fitness centres and solariums. As I approached I could hear the shouts and stomping feet coming from behind the brick walls. Further along, the dinghies moored along the Yarra swayed peaceably.

‘We gotta keep going,’ Pete announced as soon as I’d caught up with them.

Tony wanted to get something to eat, and suggested going to China Town. Pete wouldn’t have a bar of it. ‘You should never keep a girl waiting,’ he said. ‘Anyway it’s good to feel hungry.’

We set off again. The path along the river rose steadily towards Prince’s Bridge. There were people everywhere; filling the footpaths and tram stops, Fed Square and Birrarung Marr. We crossed St Kilda Road, jumped the chain and went down a grassy slope.

Zoe wasn’t at the riverbank. If Pete was disappointed, he didn’t show it. He pulled another joint from his jacket and lit up. We sat down, passed the joint in silence. Couples lay about, drinking wine, listening to the radio, enjoying the thick summer breeze.

I lay back, stared into the open sky. My head swirled pleasantly. The low murmur of the city faded, all I could hear were shouts of the cox and the rowers rhythmically dipping their oars.

Someone whistled. I sat back up. Behind us, a group of kids loitered near the boathouse. Tony said they were homeless. ‘Sometimes cars stop by, and you watch, one of them will wander over and get in.’

‘But don’t the cops know about it?’ I asked.

‘Sure they know about it, why would they care? It’s capitalism, they’re earning a living.’

His head slumped forward, his neck muscles overcome by the giddy load of his thoughts.

Pete finished the joint and dug the stub into the grass. He scoured the riverbank opposite, got up and walked a little further away.

‘Zoe won’t turn up, you just see,’ Tony said under his breath. ‘It’s always like this. The fact is, she practically ignores him.’

‘Are they really going out, do you think?’

‘They’ve only just started talking to each other, she hated him all through school, but who knows with him?’ Tony sneered. ‘Though you should see where works some days. She’s a fucking fairy.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She dresses up as a fairy and sells beads and shit. There’s something sad about it don’t you think?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He always goes out with weirdos.’

His eyes had reddened; they darted about, alert, but with their focus turned inward.

Pete came over and quietly stripped down to his underwear.

We looked on bemused as he waded into the river.

‘What are you doing?’ Tony asked.

When Pete was waist deep, he turned about. ‘I’m fucking going for a swim, what does it look like?’

‘Watch the cops don’t see you!’

‘You’re gutless. There’s no law against going for a swim,’ he yelled then dipped the back of his head in the water. He went under, re-appeared again further out. He called for us to join him, and when we declined, swam brusquely towards a cruise boat anchored near the opposite bank. From the general merriment, the prevalence of gowns and tuxedos, I guessed it was a wedding.

‘Look at that crazy bastard,’ Tony squirmed.

Pete had already climbed onto the bow and was hanging off the railing with one hand, waving to us with the other. A couple of the male guests on board were making desultory attempts to grab him by the legs and push him off. Pete kicked out, sending a row of coloured light bulbs crashing to the deck. A woman protested in shrill tones. An older man at the back of the boat yelled ‘call the police.’ Pete now managed to get hold of a black shoe, which he held clear of several grappling arms, then lobbed it amongst a group of girls who laughed delightedly. A senior contingent advanced directly, austere looking men with determined, angular faces.

Before they could do anything, Pete screamed triumphantly, ‘You fucking beauty!’ and retreated headfirst into the water.

We watched for him to re-appear. He didn't. It was getting dark; perhaps he'd swum under water and we'd missed him. Tony paced the edge of the riverbank.

'Can you see him?' he asked. I shook my head.

It occurred to me that rather than swim back it would have been easier to head to the other side and cross one of the bridges. We tried to find him amongst the crowds opposite. Though he was virtually naked, we consoled ourselves that he was too far away for us to see him clearly.

'Jesus,' Tony muttered. 'We have to do something.' A frantic look took hold of his face. His hands were shaking. We were both scared.

We ran along the bike path, calling out his name. When we reached Princes Bridge Tony said, 'He can't have swam this far down.' An old man approached us, asked us what was the matter. We didn't answer. I couldn't even look at his face, frightened of how I might react. I stared at the river; saw myself sinking down into its oily blackness.

8

We spotted Pete getting dressed where we had left our things. The street kids were hovering close-by, eyeing off this new untamed rival. There was a woman there too, in the shadow of a Moreton Bay Fig. As we came closer, we heard her repeat, 'Bravo. Bravo.'

But we were in no hurry to join them. Having feared the worst, I now was too angry to speak. I pretended nothing had happened. Tony was fuming also. He kept saying, 'He's a bloody idiot!'

When Pete saw us he yelled, ‘Hey where did you guys get to? I’ve been looking everywhere.’

Tony made a show of ignoring him. Pete ran over and squeezed his shoulder affectionately, unaware of the fuss. He began describing in detail the astonished faces of the bridal party. One old fogey with a puffy neck and silver baubles for eyes had got so worked up his whole body shook. He ended up hurling his wine glass in the direction of Pete’s head. Even Tony could see the funny side of it. The street kids soon lost interest and receded to the boatshed car park, resumed their vigil amongst the beer cans and withered palm fronds.

The woman came over. ‘That was wonderful.’ She took us in with an assured gaze. ‘I could have watched you carry on all night. It was such a thrill.’ She smiled joyously then rounded on Pete, ‘I always feel like doing things like that.’ For the briefest moment she looked startled, as though she had revealed something she shouldn’t have, then her poise returned and she said softly, ‘I’m Vanessa by the way,’ and held out her hand. Pete shook it politely; the attention embarrassed him. We introduced ourselves, and stood in silence as the woman kept smiling at us.

It began to rain: a light, sticky drizzle.

The woman didn’t move. I found myself staring at her.

She was in her thirties or forties; it was hard to tell. She wore a pale blouse over a tight-fitting black dress that came to just above her knees, black lace stockings and blue slip on shoes; it all suited her as effortlessly as any twenty-something. She was thin, average height, and stood upright and still, apart from her hands, which fluttered about in front of her when she spoke. But what first drew your attention were her eyes; large and

grey, they met you without wavering. I don't know why but I thought for a moment she was about to grab me by the arm and whisper something terrible. Her lips were dark and full, enhanced by a small, finely articulated nose.

When she saw me watching her, she laughed, her body pitched forwards; she hastily adjusted and stood upright and calm as before. It was clear to me then that she had no intention of going anywhere fast.

Pete took his mobile out of his pocket, read the message. He frowned then began texting, showed no objection when Tony leaned over his shoulder to see what he was writing.

'That'll get her attention,' he sniggered.

'Zoe's not coming,' Pete announced. 'Let's go to the Almeda's.' He turned to Vanessa. 'You're coming with us I hope?'

'Sure, why not?' she said, then ruffled her hair, as though preparing herself for the inevitable hazards that now lay ahead.

We climbed the stairs at Princes Bridge. Rows of lamps flickered and lit up, resembling huge luminous blisters. It stopped raining, but people still clustered under meagre shelters; trams stops, the awnings of Lolita's Cafe and Charmaine's Ice Cream Shop. At Fed Square the paving and buildings shimmered with a quiet intensity. We crossed Flinders Street. Tony looked up at the demonic formations straddling the Forum.

'Maybe we should climb up there and hang out with those guys,' he enthused, arching his neck backwards. 'It'd be a good vantage point.'

Pete was dawdling, slightly behind us. 'No way, that's one thing I won't do,' he yelled after us. With his hair wet, he looked feverish.

Tony waited for him, smiled. 'Don't tell me you're scared of heights?'

Pete scoffed. 'You have to be scared of something or you wouldn't be fucking human.'

We side-stepped groups of old men with smoky faces and ragged beer soaked clothes, waiting for the soup van to pull up outside St Paul's Cathedral. Further along, a wall of cheery young golden-haired girls in debutante frocks advanced towards us singing and holding hands. As we waited for them to pass, Vanessa shut her eyes and began silently moving her lips.

9

The Almeda's was in Hosier Lane. Pete led us to a steel door with Turd Klass written on it in bright red paint. A shutter snapped open. Dark cavernous eyes considered us a moment. The door swung out. We headed up the stairs to the entrance of the bar where a Goth-girl with a black chopstick skewered in her hair was reading a book on a barstool. Her skinny frame sprang open the instant she saw Pete.

'Hey they're with me Sandy.' He kissed both cheeks, as was now the done thing. Her heavenly smile was then cast on each of us in turn as Pete pronounced our names. Tony was permitted a kiss. 'I always like Pete's friends,' she enthused. 'He's got the best taste in everything and that's a fact.'

No-one disagreed. We went inside.

It was one of those bars that looked like it been sectioned off from someone's lounge room and consisted of a few dark, cramped rooms filled with mismatching lounge chairs and scatter cushions. A few Chinese lanterns threw speckled light, making people

appear like they had some exotic disease. Down the hallway an enormous fish tank occasionally drew people's quiet attention. The star exhibit was fluttering its long yellow spikes and looked surprisingly undisturbed. From the speakers mounted on the wall, came a low, cheerless song by Cesaria Evora.

After a silence Pete said, 'I've got an idea. Let's get smashed.' He exhaled prodigiously then clicked his fingers a few times like he was conjuring some extravagant cocktail right there in the air. Tony sat down and stared in the direction of the fish.

'I'll get the drinks,' Vanessa said, turning to me. 'What do you fancy?' When I hesitated, Pete grinned and said, 'Get him a mojito. We'll all have mojitos.'

I offered some money.

'Don't be silly,' she laughed and slipped her arm through mine. 'You come and help me carry them.'

While we were waiting at the bar, she said. 'You learn to appreciate kindness more than anything, you know why?' I shook my head.

As I waited for her to elaborate, whatever it was she was thinking lost itself in the scenes before us of people struggling to be understood. A girl in front of me began a discussion in a high-pitched drawl about going to the gym. 'I don't care how much it costs, if you look great you feel great, and I don't care what anybody says.' Her friend nodded dutifully.

It took a while to get our drinks. The guy who served us regarded making mojitos an art form, particularly the part where you pulverise the mint leaves. That alone took five minutes of rigorous effort. We returned to where Pete and Tony were sitting by the window. Tony was looking glum, mumbled thanks when we put down the drinks, then

turned away and began making circles in some sugar that had spilt onto the window ledge.

Pete was in fits of laughter.

Vanessa made herself comfortable in an old upholstered armchair with a huge ladybird bug embossed on the backrest. She clutched her mojito with both hands and sipped.

I stood by the window, looked down into the laneway. There was nobody there. After a while I saw a girl emerge from the darkness. I wondered for a moment whether she might be Zoe. She wore a vinyl mini-skirt with knee-high boots and started swinging her head from side to side. She turned and vanished into a building with a massive grey door and no windows. Then the laneway was empty again.

Tony was now in conversation with Vanessa.

‘Oh yeah Pete’s a shit hot artist,’ Tony was saying. ‘He gets the best marks by a long way.’

Vanessa smiled, began fingering a button-hole in her camisole.

‘His dad used to work for a fashion magazine. Didn’t he Pete?’

Pete didn’t answer.

‘Don’t ask me which one,’ Tony continued. ‘I don’t read that junk. But that’s where Pete gets it from.’ He turned to me. ‘Have you ever met his dad?’

I shook my head.

‘Oh you’ve got to, he’s fantastic. Absolutely idolises him. But that’s nothing compared to his mother. She treats him like a little fucking prince. Hilarious to watch.’ His voice meandered cheerfully.

‘She thinks I’m a fucking genius.’ Pete threw in abruptly.

‘You are a fucking genius!’ Tony cried.

Pete leaned back, began drumming on the table in contrived disinterest. I grabbed the mojito, gulped it.

‘Someone’s in a hurry to get totalled,’ Pete said.

‘He can do what the fuck he likes,’ Tony said, and took a generous sip himself.

‘Sure,’ said Pete. ‘Wouldn’t be the first time we went to school with a hangover.’

‘Yeah I flunked school completely,’ Vanessa murmured.

Tony began laughing. ‘I bet you wouldn’t tell your own kids to drop out though would you?’

‘Who said I have any?’ There was a silence, Vanessa’s eyes pressed downwards. ‘You can’t lie to kids. They’re more perceptive than we are, they catch you out straight away.’

‘You’re absolutely right,’ said Pete. ‘Especially kids under five, they see right through the bullshit.’

Vanessa turned to him smiling. ‘Just make sure when you finish up with school you take some time off and go see some places, squeeze as much juice out of the world as you can. I know it sounds cliché, but trust me, if anyone says buckle down and commit yourself to something at your age, don’t listen to them. They’re just jealous.’

‘Yeah it is cliché,’ Tony said, looking pleased with himself.

A waitress came over with a bowl of chips and plopped them on our table. The odour of burnt fat made me queasy. It crossed my mind then that I should have rung my parents, to let them know I wouldn’t be home for dinner. They had just given me a

mobile for this very purpose. They were liberal by most standards, but this recent, less than subtle, obligation to be inclusive of them annoyed me. I reached into my bag and switched it off, shoved it under a pile of library books.

Pete leaned towards me. 'What's up with Tony?'

'I don't know,' I said, adding, 'Is he being weirder than usual?'

'Whatever's going on that's his fucking problem,' Pete said, his breath an unholy mixture of alcohol and fried chips. 'You never know what's going on with him.' He regarded me earnestly. 'With you a spade's a spade and that's the way I am too.' He was about to say something else, but stopped himself; instead, he slapped me on the back and said, 'I'm gonna buy you another mojito.' There was no time to object. 'Come on, I told you, it's no problem. Let me get you one.'

I relented, aware that he wouldn't listen to me anyway. When it arrived, I drank it in two gulps and sat back in my chair, happy and indifferent.

Vanessa was now standing some distance away, alone in a gap between some lounge-chairs. She stood very still for some time; then her hips began to sway, bending and turning in ever increasing circles. The tempo increased; she threw her arms up, brought them down in a whirl. She danced with the freedom of someone alone, loose and unconditional. A couple of girls our age joined her. They watched, whispered to each other, did their best to emulate her moves. Soon everyone in the room was on their feet. Only Tony remained seated, his face scornful.

I was drunk. My eyes roamed from one person to the next. Conversations fused into other noises, a man coughing, a glass shattering, a cackle from the alleyway below, somewhere a cat screeching.

I felt nails digging at my side. It was Pete, laughing. Vanessa was next to him, her face childlike and brilliant. Pete leaned over and said something in her ear. It had no effect on her at all; she stared all the while over people's heads. It was like she was evoking the far reaches of her memory, a time and place invisible to us.

The music finished abruptly. We stood there waiting, but the vital pulse that drew us together was lost, and everyone returned to their tables or headed to the bar. Pete went and sat on the armrest next to Tony, who had his face turned away towards the window. Suddenly he got up, stood over Pete, shouted, 'You're an idiot! A fucking self-obsessed, puerile idiot'!

Pete looked at him, bemused. Tony grabbed his jacket and bag from behind a chair and, on his way out, shoved aside a couple that were too busy kissing to care about anything else.

'Let's get out of here,' Pete said after a while, his eyes gleamed happily.

'I'm going for a drive,' Vanessa suggested. 'You can come if you want. Don't worry I haven't been drinking much.'

Pete frowned, his forehead suddenly looked inordinately high. 'Both of us you mean?'

'Yes of course.' Vanessa sat upright, rested her hands on the table. 'Perhaps we could find another bar, somewhere with a bit more verve than this place.'

We didn't quite know what to say. But we both had the urge to stay with her, to see where it was all leading. Silently, we gathered our things and followed Vanessa out of the bar and onto the street as she headed towards a nearby car park. Up ahead, St Paul's

Cathedral looked more sinister than usual; its steeples poked up like the claws of a dead bird.

10

We found Vanessa's car without too much trouble: a new BMW coupe with an incomprehensible dashboard. After insisting that we all buckle up safely, Vanessa started the engine, drove out cautiously, glanced at Pete, who sat in front with his legs outstretched like he sat there everyday. At the traffic lights outside the NGV, she apologised for not remembering our names. We introduced ourselves again. Pete changed his name to Arthur. Vanessa didn't seem to notice. I began to worry that she was more drunk than she realised.

Along St Kilda Road the car picked up speed. Above us, the illuminated elm branches folded over one another in a long delirious tunnel. Pete opened his window. With this sudden blast of air, any apprehension drained out of me. I closed my eyes. When I opened them I caught Vanessa looking at me in the rear-vision mirror. She winked at Pete who turned around and smacked my legs.

We were in Fitzroy Street. Cars pressed forward, leap-frogged each other. Occasionally, brake lights would blaze up, a car door would open, and somebody would jump out into the blanching light that excoriated both sides of the street. Well-heeled diners and tourists shuffled with prostitutes and drug addicts, pimps with indifferent and somnolent locals, and teenagers by the hordes milled about the nightclubs.

'Look at them, Vanessa whispered absently. 'They'll be waiting all night poor things.'

Outside Monroe's, a tranny with a towering bouffant hairdo and breasts to match struggled into a taxi. Cars were tooting their horns. Someone jeered.

The Esplanade was just as chaotic. The queue outside reached all the way to the war memorial. Even the pier was crammed with people. Advancing slowly, they went to pay homage to the charred remains of the historic kiosk that had burned down a few days before.

'We could go check out the penguins,' Pete suggested. 'Don't they come home to roost about now?'

'No, said Vanessa, 'they came in ages ago.'

'Come on it would be fun!'

'I don't want to disturb them,' Vanessa said decisively.

The car turned left, passed Luna Park and the Palais. We continued in silence along the bay. The moon shed its powdery light over sea and sand, on trees and concrete paths, turning everything silvery-grey.

Pete turned and looked at me, as though to ask 'Where's she taking us?' He looked uneasy.

Too drunk to care, I gestured ambivalently.

The car made a sudden turn, now we were heading towards a small promontory. The low hills and foreshore gave way to secluded, grey bursts of tea trees and spinifex.

Vanessa put her foot on the accelerator. She brought the car to a stop near Elwood Beach.

'I'm sorry,' Vanessa said. 'I need a cigarette.'

11

We got out, walked in silence in the direction of the water. Vanessa lit a cigarette. At some point she broke into a run. We shouted after her. She shouted back, a long joyous helloooo.

‘Where the fuck’s she going?’ Pete clearly thought it was funny.

I shrugged. ‘I don’t know?’

We yelled out again. And then we were both in pursuit, jarring our legs on clumps of earth, sweating, hurling ourselves forward, the shadows of bushes waving dark fists at us. Vanessa was only just visible now, moving in the direction of an enormous wooden pavilion at the far end of the beach, ghost coloured under floodlight; and beyond that, what looked like a pine grove. We had ceased calling out, but the breeze was carrying other voices, inhuman cries that seemed to reach out from the depths of the sea.

I stopped and sat down on the grass. I could see Vanessa surging ahead, disappearing now amongst the mouth-shaped shadows of the grove. I looked at my watch. It was past two. I was too drunk and tired to care. I lay back, watched the stars; amused myself by imagining that I could shoot them down with my finger. After a while I got up and walked back to the car.

Vanessa and Pete were sitting on the bonnet. They must have followed the path along the perimeter. Now they were finishing their cigarettes. I sat next to them. Vanessa was still panting softly.

She loosened a cigarette from the packet and thrust it at me. ‘Do you smoke?’ I took one, lit it off the end of hers.

‘I don’t feel tired at all,’ Pete said in a calm voice then gestured dismissively towards the sea.

We finished smoking in silence, then put out our fags and clambered back into the car. Vanessa insisted on driving us home.

‘What did you expect? I’m going to dump you out here in the middle of nowhere? Anyway I like driving at night.’

‘Are you an insomniac?’ Pete asked.

‘Sleep’s a waste of time as far as I’m concerned,’ she smiled, then put the car in gear.

We sped along the road, empty now. I nestled in the back; fell into a state of half-wakefulness due partly to the warmth jetting from a vent under the seat.

I was roused by the metallic cry of a street-cleaner. Vanessa had pulled up outside my house in Victoria Street. She was talking to Pete. As I said my goodbyes, she turned and shook my hand; there was a hint of sadness in her face.

I got out, stumbled into the cool, desolate air. The car hummed away.

Lucy, the family cat, was stretched out by the front door, waiting for me, as dad always said, like an old familiar whore.

12

The trucks began arriving at Victoria Market while it was still dark. I lay in bed for a while, listening. Men laughed, whistled as they unloaded crates, called out to each other as in a secret gathering of the hordes, their songs ancient and beguiling as any produced by nature. I wondered if, in the nearby houses, other people were listening to

them too, warming themselves for the rigours of the new day. Every so often a truck freed its brakes and took off, groaning like a Jurassic meat eater.

I looked about my room. It was still dark and I could only just make out the wardrobe where I kept my notebooks, the grey void of the mirror, the Bakelite knobs, which bulged out like mysterious mushrooms that had sprouted overnight. Wide awake now, I spent some time staring at the Polish film poster on the wall showing a woman in red, with 'skoda twoich strchy motywach' written in fat, dizzy brushstrokes. My attention found a less nebulous fixture in the spines of my book collection, stacked like a Spartan phalanx against the bricks in the fireplace. I checked them off, one by one, paused at Gallimand's *Arabian Nights*, thought about fetching it, but instead took refuge in an old copy of the *National Geographic*. There was a story in there about gorillas. I imagined what it would be like to be plucked off the footpath by one of those huge rubbery hands and swung around in the air by the ankle.

Outside the sky grew lighter. I got up and went to the window. The streets were empty. In the window opposite I could see my neighbour, Simon, the music teacher, pacing about in his lounge-room, his arms wrapped around his chest like he was trying to stop a balloon from bursting out of him. He had his music students all afternoon, but he spent the mornings alone.

The air was chilly. I went back to bed and read *Don Quixote* for about half an hour, forgetting all the words as I went along. Two whole chapters went by in a blur.

I got up again and went downstairs. The wall clock in the hall said quarter past seven. I passed the lounge-room door, heard low voices. My parents were discussing the forthcoming federal election; a choice between Australia's first female prime minister and a hard headed nutter from the right. Both were 'embarrassing,' according to my dad. Mum thought it was important that we had a woman in charge; 'Hadn't men made a complete mess of the world, so why not give a woman the chance to fuck it up for a change?' 'Australia is hardly the world,' my dad replied in his typically acerbic way.

Right now I wasn't up to greeting them. Whenever they saw me lately a look of disappointment came over them. Not that they would ever say anything to me directly. We'd made a pact, earned over countless arguments; how I ran my life was my own responsibility. But nothing could prevent their discreet, apprehensive glances across the dinner table when I told them how I was spending my time. Worst of all was the silence; the interminable gaps between conversations only made me watch them more intently for any unconscious signal of their disapproval. They seemed to have steeled themselves for my failure, for a time when I would make some terrible confession. To me they had sad, worn-out, anxious faces, so common to their generation. They were trapped in a predicament I couldn't fathom. But they seemed unwilling to resist it. I couldn't help but feel contempt towards them.

I poured a bowl of cornflakes, ate them standing up, then went back upstairs and had a shower, increasing the temperature until the steam rose up. The towel I used to dry myself was wet and useless and put me in an irritable mood. I went back in my room, dressed hurriedly in jeans and t-shirt. I checked my satchel to see if it contained my notes on Effi Briest, not that I'd read the book, but I'd managed to scour the net for something

on 'the use of allegory in Fontane's novels' or some other bullshit. It was best to arm myself in case my teacher, Petrel, decided to put me under the blowtorch. I was not her favourite student.

I left the house without saying goodbye. Sunlight bored into my face. I undid my top button. I was already sweating.

The shortest way to school was down Courtney Street. When I was little the Victorian terraces were all shambolic. I can still remember the balustrades and railings all covered in rust. The paintwork on the weatherboards was blistered and peeling off and had mould eating away at the gaps. Then one by one they were renovated; the interiors were gutted, refitted, transformed, roofs had skylights installed, flowerbeds were put in, the ironwork along the footpath were painted dark, forbidding colours. The whole street now pervaded a neat, orderly and, as far as I was concerned, oppressive air.

I thought about going back home, spending the day in bed reading or going to see a movie. But as I went along, the jackhammers pounding away at the Queensberry site, the shrill and expectant sounds of the trams and cars began to lift my spirits. Soon I found myself running all the way to school, stopping only at the traffic lights and once to watch an old lady with thorny white hair and wearing a green duffel coat amble across the road.

Pete and Tony were waiting for me at the rotunda. We met there most mornings, sweating, subdued from lack of sleep. From there we had a good view of our classroom. It formed the lower part of a double-storey brown building with enormous windows facing east west, which endured the full brunt of the sun, ensuring that in summer the blinds were always drawn. In the foreground was a paved plaza, with a couple of tennis courts on one side, and a fat turf oval on the other, which was nearly always deserted,

except on training nights. Behind it, a car park, and a grey concrete monstrosity that was the science building.

When I joined them, Pete and Tony halted their conversation. I wondered if they had been planning another escapade, were gabbing about Zoe or Vanessa, or some other girl that Pete had discovered on one of his nocturnal jaunts. They greeted me hastily.

‘Don’t worry,’ Tony said. ‘We’re just crapping about nothing,’ his face stiffened, then burst open into laughter. I got annoyed at being left out of their little secret, but tried not to show it.

The bell rang. Pete looked across the quadrangle; students were gathering their bags and bomber jackets and filing through the main entrance. His face was worn, his eyes red, dark in the hollows. It was clear he hadn’t slept.

‘Look at all those sheep,’ he sneered.

‘So what happened to you?’ I asked.

He turned to me, gave me a gentle punch in the shoulder. ‘When? Last night? Nothing. She dropped me home. But fuck is she something else. Don’t you reckon?’ Without waiting for a reply, he bent down, hooked up his satchel. ‘Come on, let’s go in before Petrel hangs us by the balls.’

14

We always arrived late to class; one at a time, each of us apologising in turn while grinning all the way to our seats. Our little game was intended to annoy Petrel, but over the course of the year her stiff reproach had diminished to a mere glance. This time she

didn't even bother with that. She continued her lesson after a short pause, her voice unharried and deliberate.

Rachel smiled and whispered hi as I sat down and pushed my satchel under my chair. She had smooth, olive skin, with moist eyes that looked like they were sensitive to light. A silver speck glittered on the side of her nose. I loved everything about her; especially the way her mouth curled up and the side, giving her an expression that was both contemptuous and amused. Right now she sat forward with her hand cupped under her chin. To me there could have been no better way to sit, and I leant back so that I could get a better view of her without her noticing.

I'd fancied her on and off since seventh grade; there were numerous opportunities to make something happen, but I was always too apprehensive to act upon them. I even heard that she liked me too, though I doubted she would approve of the kind of fooling around that me and Pete got up to.

'Yes the leit motifs,' Petrel went on, 'to be found in Effi Briest, those delicate seeds planted by Fontane that render Effi's potential downfall into one that now will become inevitable...'

I stopped listening. I could see Rachel's brow furrowed with concentration: made her look cuter than she already was. I so much liked the way she tucked her hair behind her ears. They were so small and childlike, too small for the large golden hoops that dragged at her earlobes. I imagined Petrel's words, twisting and turning in her ear at full-speed before worming into her brain. I didn't notice the silence.

'I wonder what Leo can shed on the question.'

I started, then turned to face Petrel who was leaning against the desk, eyeing me derisively. ‘Given he seems so keen on studying the female anatomy from close quarters.’

The class erupted in laughter; Pete leaned over and clapped me on the back. I sweated. I couldn’t bring myself to look at Rachel. I’m sure she was more embarrassed than I was.

Out of nervousness, I reached down and fossicked about in my satchel.

‘You can leave your bag alone,’ Petrel said. ‘I’m not interested in what notes you might have prepared, I want to know what you think now.’ She didn’t let her eyes off me for a moment.

I decided to meet her head on. ‘I haven’t read the book actually.’

She didn’t seem at all surprised. ‘I’ve never understood why you bother coming to class. You do have some intelligence it seems, though clearly you seem to think the brain is an obsolete organ.’

I didn’t answer. The muscles in my face had seized up. I sensed everyone’s eyes fixed on me.

Petrel didn’t say anything for some time. She got to her feet, began to circle the room, preparing us for the grim discourse to follow.

‘Yes that’s the sort of attitude I’ve come to expect. You can blame it on hormones going crazy, or social media, Facebook and all that inane nonsense, or the affluence of the age, mobile phones, promiscuity, but you know what? Personally I think all that’s just an excuse. The reality is, it’s just good old fashioned laziness. It’s always been the main determinant that sorts the wheat from the chaff. Always will be.’

Sean Wicks, a guy who came top in everything, was about to interject but Petrel wasn't finished. Having endured a year of feckless eyes staring back at her, Petrel now aimed to rouse us from our complacency. She began her circling manoeuvre again.

'It just so happens that university coincides with a time in your life when you have to start acting like an adult,' as she spoke she stressed the ends of each sentence, clicked her fingers to underline key points. 'It's when you have to start thinking for yourself, you can try relying on old habits, but that won't work anymore,' Petrel swallowed, thought about what she was going to say next. 'Reading is of course an opportunity to think afresh. It opens up your perception, allows you to shed the inertia of our daily lives.' Petrel stopped again, conscious perhaps of reiterating her favourite lines. She turned on me suddenly. 'Is this a joke to you Leo?'

I was, in fact, deliberately trying to look interested in what she had to say. 'No, I read all time,' I said with as much defiance as I could muster.

'Yes like what?'

'Like Don Quixote, for example, or... ' I was about to go down the list of my favourite books but Petrel cut me off.

'Well maybe it would be sensible to read the novels on your syllabus first?' Petrel made towards me, then averted a collision and continued down the aisle. She leant against the back wall; most of the class swivelled to face her. She began slowly, barely hiding her despondency.

'I see so many bright kids your age, and what happens to them? They refuse to take study seriously, fluff their exams, fail to hand in their essays on time if at all, and you know why?'

Sean Wicks put his hand up but was mercilessly ignored. ‘They just can’t see beyond a few days at a time. It’s a disease that seems to especially affect your generation. The future doesn’t exist. But it does, believe me it does. And it isn’t going to be so easy. You know what the science is telling us about the next fifty years? Have you thought about how you can make a real contribution to the future, to your own future and the future of your children? If you’re not careful you’ll end up cleaning toilets.’

She snorted; it was the end. She slowly made her way to the front, rested her elbow on the DVD projector, corralled the brightest students in her defence. ‘And what do you want to do Sean?’

‘Me? Yes, law, yes law, definitely yes,’ he said, nervously twitching his nose with each syllable.

‘And what about you Rachel?’

‘I’m still not sure,’ she replied coolly.

‘Well that’s valid too,’ she said, her tone weary, beaten. ‘But I know you do your work. Uncertainty is a natural precursor to any decision. Few people are brave enough to admit that.’

Petrel pulled out a folder from the side cupboard and placed it carefully on her desk. She sat down and leafed through it without saying anything. A few of us looked at each other unsure of what we were supposed to be doing. A couple of students began murmuring. I wondered if Petrel secretly wished she could give it all up and cloister herself in a secret hideout where only the fictional characters from books could ever gain entry.

After a few minutes, Petrel stood up. She was still quietly scrawling notes on the white board when the lesson ended.

15

I hurried into the quadrangle to avoid looking at Rachel. Some grade nines were playing handball. Petrel emerged from the class soon enough, her face listless and worn; I motioned to say goodbye, but she shook her head when she saw me and hurried her petite frame over the plaza towards the car park.

I was struck by the thought that Rachel was standing behind me right at that moment; I turned, saw she wasn't there and cursed myself for being so ridiculous. But then it occurred to me that she might have been standing there a few moments earlier, and that I had received a delayed recognition. I was sure her next class was Geography. I raced over to the science building in the hope of catching her before she went in. What was it I needed to tell her? I had no idea. When I got there the room was empty; the lights were off. I hurried towards the Japanese garden alongside the school tuck-shop; I knew that she used to sit there sometimes with her friend Melissa, and a girl from eleventh grade who had narrow, cheerless eyes. The only person there was Mr. Ingles, who taught biology; he looked like he was meditating. I lay down on the bench, my heart pounding in my ears, and closed my eyes.

I bumped into Pete and Tony half an hour later in the cafeteria. They were sitting on a lounge chair with their feet up. The place was otherwise deserted; apart from a couple of guys near the door who were taking it turns to thump the drink dispenser. The

fluorescent light excavated every pore in your skin, made your pimples stand out. Hardly anyone ever went there outside lunch hour.

We chatted about Petrel. Pete insisted she was a lesbian because she seemed to find all the boys in the class objectionable. Even Sean Wicks copped a serve, and he was as inoffensive as it got.

‘She dislikes everybody,’ I said.

‘Are you kidding?’ Pete leaned forward and began flicking at the cover of his exercise book. ‘Look at the way she glared at you just because you reckon Rachel’s hot.’

I smiled. ‘She just thinks I’m an idiot.’

‘Trust me mate,’ Pete said, ‘She’s threatened by your sexuality.’

I couldn’t stop myself laughing; Pete continued in earnest. ‘It’s true, she’s jealous. And what was she banging on about? The future what? Just because she ended up doing a boring job?’

‘She’s definitely a dyke,’ Tony added, smoothing down his fringe, which promptly bounced back up again. ‘Pete’s right, that business with Rachel, that was weird.’

‘Who, Rachel? No I don’t think so,’ I said, trying to sound ambivalent.

Pete agreed. ‘Now is she up for it or what?’

I glanced at Pete. Was there some secret way of knowing these things?

‘Sure I can see why you guys think she’s hot, from a physical perspective, but Jesus, have you tried to have a conversation with her? That’s almost impossible.’ Tony swung his leg off the armrest and leant forward. ‘There’s so many girls just like her, they

look you up and down and think they've got you sussed. Sure she's intelligent, but she's about as shallow and narrow minded as you can get.'

At that moment I would've liked nothing better than to smack him in the face. 'Everyone makes assumptions based on first impressions.' I looked at him coolly. 'So fucking what?'

'Yes but first impressions are influenced by your general outlook,' Tony continued, almost gleefully. 'With her it's all black and white.'

'Who cares, she's fucking hot and that's all that counts. Anyway, Leo likes her you idiot,' Pete said, laughing. 'So your opinion doesn't count for shit.'

Tony smiled; 'I know he likes her, I'm just teasing.'

So that was it, I concluded, they saw me as a coward. No doubt Rachel saw me that way as well.

A group of girls from the lower grades came noisily through the doorway, tossed their bags into a corner and plonked themselves languorously on the floor with their back against the partition walls. One of them curled up on the ground; a couple began texting.

Tony stood up. 'Shit, I better get to Geology on time, old grumble-bum Reynard hates it if you're late.'

Pete spoke as soon as he was out of earshot. 'Don't worry about him. He's a pain in the arse.' I didn't say anything. Then Pete asked me what I planned to do over the summer. Without wishing to sound evasive, I told him I hadn't thought about it. In fact, the prospect of finishing school filled me with dread. My parents would probably insist I get a job to support myself. I knew I'd have to agree to their demands, or leave home, which wasn't possible.

Pete didn't notice anything troubling me. He began to explain how he was planning to travel through South America.

'I've made up my mind to go down the Amazon, to be surrounded by jungle like that, somewhere that smashes you head-on.' He often floated ideas like that, as though it would be the easiest thing in the world to achieve. It occurred to me that he had probably rarely experienced failure. 'It would be incredible Leo, throwing yourself into somewhere that's truly wild like that.' He paused briefly, his eyes flashed. 'Why don't you come with me? Maybe we can get a group of us together? We wouldn't need much money. We could get work. Imagine how intense it would be, to go somewhere so completely different to here.'

He began to rap the table, unevenly, along the line of his thoughts. 'If there's one thing I despise Leo, it's people who are not open to things.'

I was jealous, now that I think about it, of his endless reserves of self-assurance. His passion seemed inviolable.

There was a longer silence. Across the cafeteria, behind gleaming glass cabinets, were rows of focaccia rolls and sandwiches, and bright yellow chips piled into bowls. Separated by a glass panel, were four oversized cakes, newly arrayed in monstrous colours.

'If I can get some money together, I'd love to come with you. But I'm not sure my parents would let me,' I added, aware that I must have sounded feeble.

'What are you talking about?' He leaned forward gripped my arm. 'You can do anything if you want to. And don't worry about money either.' He stood up, hoisted his bag onto shoulder. 'Great. I knew I could rely on you.'

16

During the days that followed, a devastating heat swept down through the Mallee towards the eastern seaboard, subduing everything in its path. The meteorologists had been promising a premature El Niño; still the temperature took everyone by surprise, arcing up from the pleasant mid-twenties to around forty.

Pete didn't bother showing up to classes. When I texted him, his replies were cryptic or he didn't get back to me until it was too late to meet up. One time he replied that he was 'up to something' but didn't elaborate. Tony couldn't shed any light on what he was up to either. We assumed he was too exhausted by the heat, or his nighttime exploits to come to school. He clearly wanted to be left alone.

'You know what he's like,' Tony told me as we waited in the corridor before Wednesday's Ancient History class. 'He doesn't care if he fails everything. And once he's made up his mind that's it, you can't move him.'

More and more students piled into the corridor to take advantage of the air conditioning. Their faces looked worn and listless, with reddened eyes, and skin that had been squeezed of its vitality. Every now and then someone moaned about the heat; nobody bothered to say hello to each other; it was too hot to even smile.

We soon found ourselves pressed up against the lockers along the back wall, whispering. I wondered what Pete would do when school had finished; I could never imagine him settling down with a 'real' job. Tony agreed.

'You know why none of this matters to him?' Tony added as an afterthought. 'His grandmother's loaded, she'll give him her entire fortune.'

This new fact about Pete irked me. For one thing, it made his disdain for authority now look disingenuous.

‘But I thought his parents were broke,’ I said

‘Yeah his parents are. They’re old hippies who have barely worked a day in their lives. But his grandmother lives in this mansion in Kew; comes from old money. She gives Pete money all the time. And she’s given his parents a whole lot of dough plus a house to live in.’

Tony was silent for a while; I looked at the window, where a cat was spread out in the sun fast asleep.

‘Don’t you see,’ he added, ‘he’s just acting the fool because he knows he’ll get an inheritance.’

17

Later that day, as I walked home from school, I remembered something dad had said when he saw me reading Marx’s Communist Manifesto of 1848 one night in the lounge room.

‘All rebels come from rich families,’ he said, without bothering to hide his disdain. ‘Engels, Lenin, Mao, Castro, the whole lot of them. They could afford to be communists. Everyone else is too busy working to think about world revolution.’

In reality, my dad was contemptuous of anyone who defied authority, rich or poor. But even he even thought it was too hot to go to school. ‘Absolutely crazy,’ my dad complained during Friday’s breakfast. ‘No common sense, some of these teachers. How

can anyone concentrate in this heat? I'm sure there's a law that says you don't have to work or go to school or work if the temperature is over thirty-five.'

My mother affirmed this as a fact, but only if it was combined with a serious medical condition.

My dad, always the wit, retorted, 'It's designed to prevent a medical condition.'

'Too bad he has to go to school,' my mum protested. 'His exams are only a couple of weeks away.'

'I didn't say he shouldn't go to school,' dad screamed back, his disquiet fuelled in part by the fact that he had argued himself into a hole and now had to get himself out; something he was well practiced at. 'Just that they should plan for these contingencies. You can't learn anything when it's boiling hot. Any fool knows that. Not that he learns anything anyway from those weirdo teachers he's got.'

At that point mum exercised a well-rehearsed show of acquiescence; she patted dad on the shoulder and walked away, pulling one of her 'he's obviously crazy' faces as she passed me on the way to kitchen.

While my parents appreciated the work of schoolteachers, they both regarded them with suspicion. They saw them as an odd species who preferred the company of minors in order to exert authority over them; it was a profession that attracted control freaks thanks to a genetic preponderance that overcame any other altruistic motives, such as the importance of literacy and arithmetic in children.

But they didn't tolerate me messing about. Once, after I bragged about being rude to Petrel, I was grounded for three weeks. They always apprised themselves of a few facts of my school life to assure themselves that everything was going smoothly, but they

were generally content to not pry into my private life. A couple of times my mum asked me if I had a girlfriend; I chose to ignore her.

18

As it happened, I ended up taking the Friday off. I convinced my mum that I needed the extra time to complete my assignment for Geology, which I hadn't even started. Then there was the essay for Ancient History on the Peloponnesian War. I'd taken out Thucydides and Sealey's History of the Greek City States from the library and thought I'd give myself the morning to plough through them. I read for about fifteen minutes, then decided to go for a walk. After I closed the door, I heard my mum yelling out, 'Where are you going?'

I spent an hour at Alberto's café round the corner, wandered through the market and came home. I sneaked back up to my room and looked up music videos on YouTube. I didn't do any schoolwork that whole weekend. Every time I went to begin my essay, or open up a textbook, I ended up staring into space, or looking out the window. The lively chatter of passersby, the sounds of the traffic and the smell of hot asphalt and car fumes kept me distracted. On a few occasions I spied on my neighbour Simon. On Sunday he had a girl with dark brown hair and pale legs practice the oboe in his lounge room for two hours. He wasn't married; I wondered whether he visited prostitutes.

When I was really agitated I went for a walk. I don't know if it was just the heat affecting my temperament, or whether a deeper part of me wanted to see the look of disappointment in my parent's faces when they discovered that I'd failed everything; the need for a definitive act of defiance that might precipitate my separation from them. I

knew I wanted to be free from them, but what that might mean in terms of my future, of getting a job, or my ability to go to university, wasn't something that interested me in the slightest.

Pete had convinced me that another way to live had opened up for me. The heat had merely broken down any last remaining resistance in me; it had set my animal will to work. During those few days of the heat wave, I saw something not just in myself, but others too. Nobody had time any more for decorum, or the usual formalities. Bodies sweated; stank, despite the best efforts of deodorants and perfumes, people were rude or bad tempered, there was something bestial, vulnerable, even absurd in the way people behaved towards each other. An oppressive inertia milled around the entrance to shops, flowed silkily over the footpath, flattened out the angles and made the buildings look like they were paper thin, and the sky just a rolled up piece of newspaper. Only the cafés with air conditioning had any people in them.

But I lacked Pete's confidence. Wandering off on my own, inside shops, through laneways, following girls that I liked the look of, was not the same without Pete around. I would never have the courage to approach a girl, to strike up a conversation about nothing at all, to ask them to come to the cinema, or a cafe with me. If I did manage to find my nerve and approach a girl to say hello, the slightest show of disinterest would send me back into my shell again. Still I was happy to wander, to occasionally find myself in places that were unexpected, to come across a doorway or a flight of concrete stairs that led to a bar, or record shop, a bookstore run by Boris the Anarchist, or a Chinese noodle house I hadn't noticed before called Nanjing Dumplings. Sometimes I walked for hours at a time, especially after dinner, when the air was cooler. I liked

laneways the best, and went the same way night after night. What did I hope to see there? Somehow I hoped to get caught up in something, someone else's life for a few moments, a conversation with a stranger, an encounter with a girl sitting on her own, someone like me, who looked at other human beings like they were a new discovery.

One day I saw Zoe dressed up as the fairy woman. There she was sitting on a stool in a tiny Alcove in McKillop Street, surrounded by grimy Antique shops with dark curtains and rotting window frames. An old lady leered through an open doorway, and fidgeted with the buttons on her blue overcoat.

I saw Zoe straight away. She sat in behind a trestle table full of jars of coloured beads. She was wearing a white lace satin fairy costume with large wings and a wand with a sparkly star on its tip; the kind of fairy you would expect to see on top of a Christmas tree. She had on wispy blond wig and blue-grey sunglasses and pink blotches of rouge on her cheeks. She smiled, a beautiful clear smile when I went up to her and asked her how much the beads were. She said ten cents each. I bought two dollars worth. I tried to think of an appropriate way of asking her some personal questions, like how school was going, or whether she made any money out of selling beads, but it was like she didn't recognise me.

'It's me Leo,' I said.

'Yeah I know who you are,' she said and kept smiling. It was clear she didn't want to break the pretence of being the fairy.

I put a packet of beads in my pocket and left.

Pete didn't turn up to Petrel's class the following Tuesday either. Missing classes was not unusual, but five in a row, right before the end of school? Perhaps he was ill, which was why he still wasn't answering his text messages. According to Tony, the Headmistress had sent a letter to his parents.

I sat in my usual place next to Rachel. She smiled at me then turned to face the front. It was obvious she didn't want to engage me in our usual furtive pre-class conversation. I responded by ignoring her for the entire class. I was in no hurry to make a repeat fool of myself. This time I had even come prepared. I was up all night writing up my 'personal response' to Effi Briest. After several hours plundering the Internet and rehashing 'found' material, I ended deleting it all and starting again. It was five in the morning by the time I finished. I didn't think much of what I'd come up with, but at least it was something.

But Petrel didn't talk about Effi Briest that morning. The air conditioner was making an interminable buzzing sound. She concluded, after the odd student claimed they couldn't hear what she was saying, that it was too distracting. Now we had to contend with the heat. To spur our concentration Petrel implemented a regime of exercises that went for the next half hour, a bizarre blend of military rigour and improvisation, a product perhaps of her Teutonic heritage. They consisted of rolling our head around, while rotating our arms in the opposite direction and, if we could manage it without falling over, to shake our bodies in an anti-clockwise direction. It left us with our bodies primed, but our minds still indifferent. When we had finished, Petrel told us to work on our assignments and left the classroom.

As I had already finished mine I went to her office so I could slip it under the door. Petrel was in an adjacent room, chatting to the Biology teacher, Sam Tucker. When she saw me she smiled, said hello. Her friendliness took me by surprise. Maybe it was all due to Sam Tucker being there; he was handsome, in his twenties, charming, friendly in a casual, unassuming way. He was gay, which Rachel and the most of the twelfth grade girls couldn't accept as possible.

I handed her my essay. She said thankyou. I began a conversation about *Don Quixote*, which I informed her was the greatest novel ever written.

'Would you like me to recommend any other classics to you,' she said.

'Sure, that would be fine,' I said, 'but I already have a long a list of books I intend to read.'

'Do you mind sharing it with us?'

'Now?' I said. 'Maybe I'll bring in a list next class.'

From the smile Petrel gave me, I could see she doubted my list even existed. It irritated me no end. I said goodbye, and left. As far as I was concerned, we were back on the same footing as before.

I decided to go to the library, which was where I usually spent my lunchtimes, wandering the dilapidated columns of aluminium shelving, searching row after row of books, DVDs, and magazines on grand subjects like General Biology and Histories of the World. The literary section wasn't so impressive; but it contained an anthology called *World Literature in the Twentieth Century*.

It wasn't just its sheer volume of information that impressed me; nothing interested me more than poring over details about writer's lives, the miniscule insights

into what motivated them. The idea of writing a book seemed to me the most monolithic of labours. I reasoned there must be something peculiar, a unique blend of personal catastrophes that would make a person sweat for years in complete isolation in order to write something that so few people would appreciate.

‘People like that, who live in their minds, are usually degenerate,’ my father once said of a writer who grew up in the same village as him. It was an observation that only encouraged my interest in writers further.

I had been determined to pinch the book since the start of the year, and had even ripped out the magnetic strip from its spine. It was Pete who had advised me on the best methods for steal books; ‘The thing you need to remember Leo is this, we’re still underage, so no-one’s going to feel your balls are they?’ He recommended having Tony there all the same, to create a diversion.

But the Anthology of World Literature was a massive tome; getting it past the librarian, Mrs. Buttress would be a considerable challenge. I couldn’t bear the thought of being banned from the library for six months, as had happened to Arino who was busted lifting a book on World War I. I’d wait until the last day of school. I took it off the shelf and headed to the reading room.

Pete was there, hunched over the table next to a pile of travel books.

‘Where have you been all week,’ I asked him.

Pete shrugged; gave me a look like he had only seen me five minutes earlier.

‘Oh you know... just this that and that,’ he replied evasively.

I sat next to him and we talked, about school, our upcoming exams, and then he asked me how things were going with Rachel. I told him they weren't going anywhere. She barely looks at me, I told him.

'Don't you worry Leo,' he said. 'That's a sure sign she likes you, she probably just can't bring herself to admit it.' He opened up one of the travel books, a coffee table book on African scarification rituals.

'We need to rethink our end of year trip,' Pete said, as he turned the pages. 'I've ditched the Amazon. I'm thinking Africa is the place to go.'

We decided to wag art class, and spent the next couple of hours drooling over deserts, citadels, ruins of the ancient Carthaginians, sunny beaches in Madagascar, spoke in covert undertones about remote, inaccessible regions or cities with exotic sounding names, like Dar es Salaam or Ouagadougou. Pete was particularly obsessed with Marrakesh and made a colour photocopy of a picture of musicians and fire breathers dancing in Jemaa el-Fnaa.

At around three, Pete suggested we head into the city, as he was meeting someone there. We caught a tram down Elizabeth Street and watched people get on and off; emos, students, a group of doctors from the Royal Women's, a couple of women wearing Hijabs, their children.

Did I notice any changes in Pete during that week? No, but if anything he seemed more relaxed. After I asked him if he was worried about failing his exams, he dismissed all learning as a waste of time.

‘The whole capitalist system Leo is heading for a meltdown,’ he said with complete serenity. ‘We’re going to be the guys that change everything. We’re going to instigate it.’

20

We got off the tram and went towards the Block Arcade. Pete said he was meeting a friend at Segovia’s Café. When we got there, Pete glanced about the café to see if his friend had already turned up. When he realised that they hadn’t, he gestured towards a spare table by the window. We sat down and ordered our coffees. The waitress was a Timorese girl called Kira. Pete openly flirted with her.

‘Do you know her?’ I asked.

‘Yes I come here a lot. It’s my new hang out,’ he said, and looked out the window, craned his neck so he could see down the laneway. When he turned back to face me he seemed irritable.

‘Who are you meeting?’ I asked.

‘Don’t worry about it. You’ll see.’

‘Maybe they’ve forgotten.’

‘Course they haven’t forgotten,’ Pete said, and glanced about the café once more.

His mood changed again when Kira came over with the coffees. I added a teaspoon of sugar; stirred, and scooped out a teaspoon of syrupy coffee as a taster.

I looked up. Vanessa was standing at the table. Pete stood up to greet her, kissed her on the cheek. I said hello. Vanessa looked at me; it was the kind of look you’d give

an old friend. I began to think of the night we met; Pete disappearing in the river, our drunkenness, the drive along the beach, and then Vanessa running off into the trees.

She shook my hand. 'Pete said he was meeting someone,' I said after a short pause.

'Yes that would've been me,' Vanessa said softly and sat down. Pete went to the counter and ordered Vanessa a coffee.

My coffee was lukewarm; I drank it in two gulps. Vanessa watched me closely.

'Have you just finished school?' she said.

'Yes... that's right,' I said. I didn't know what else to say.

'Pete's told me so much about you,' she said. 'You're obviously his best friend.'

I looked over at Pete. He was waiting at the counter. I saw something in his face I couldn't understand. Was he giving us time alone to get to know each other? He had so many friends and acquaintances that I had never met. Why did I have to meet this one?

I felt a tremor run through my leg that went into my stomach, and then into my head. My ears began to buzz and I sweated. It was not a panic attack. I had experienced those before; shallow breathing followed by nausea, my field of vision would blur followed by a sense of complete disorientation. Often I would need to sit down to avoid falling over. I had a few attacks like that in the past couple of years. I had even seen a doctor about it; she told me it was nothing to worry about.

But this was something new, a different sensation altogether. In that calm look Pete gave me, I saw something significant had changed in him. But I didn't know what it was. I just knew I should get away from them.

'I have to go,' I said and stood up. 'I have to prepare for my exams.'

‘Well I hope I’ll meet you again soon,’ Vanessa said and got to her feet also. Pete saw that I was leaving and came over.

‘What? You can’t go now. We just got here.’

‘No I have to go,’ I said decisively and went to the door. I turned and gave them a little wave before fleeing through the arcade. At the first corner, I stood to catch my breath. My knees began to wobble, like the earth beneath me was about to give way.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Pete. Vanessa was walking towards us, some distance away.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ he said. ‘Vanessa wanted to invite us to her place. I thought you might want to come along.’

‘Why would she invite us?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Let’s just go. If we get bored... we can always leave.’

I nodded, ‘ Alright, but I’m not staying long.’

21

Vanessa’s house was down a side street not far from the old convent. A three-storey red brick Edwardian mansion, it was easily the grandest house in the neighbourhood, in spite of serious competition. The side walls had been reclaimed by creepers and succulents that had come out in white and yellow flowers. The front was L-shaped, with large bay windows and drawn curtains, and the top storey had an expansive decking where a number of armchairs sat facing the street. It had a tall slate roof traversed with attic windows with looping wooden frames. Like those of its neighbours, the garden was well trimmed and came with a neat arrangement of rose bushes and lilies

and mixed natives. There were olive trees on the nature strip sporting little white buds, and occasionally red and yellow banksias.

Vanessa walked ahead down the front path and opened the front door. She entered, then turned and beckoned us to follow her down the wide hallway decorated along both sides with photos and paintings and into a sedately lit lounge room.

‘Did you see those paintings?’ Pete whispered as we passed them. ‘Jesus there must be a few thousand bucks worth of art on that wall.’ He stopped and observed a painting of angular figures waiting at a tram stop. ‘That’s a Brack for sure,’ Pete said. ‘And that’s gotta be a Blackman,’ he added pointing to another depicting a woman lying on the ground, the sun blanching her face, her expression bland and cheerless.

I looked up to see if Vanessa was watching us, but she was already in the kitchen.

‘Please, sit down?’ Vanessa said casually as she hovered over a plate of dips, cheese and Turkish bread, giving them a final adjustment.

Pete sat on a couch, a small crease appearing on his forehead, usually a sign he wanted to say something but couldn’t.

The room was open-planned and vast. Artwork covered the walls, without looking crowded. Most of it was clearly more contemporary than what I’d seen in the hallway. There were paintings, silk screens, photos, multimedia works, a number of paintings, and a variety of artefacts that sat inside specially designed alcoves, backlit by frosted glass windows that created slit-like shadows across the walls. The walls were immaculately white and the leather couch and lounge-chairs were the same teak colour as the antique dresser, the train station wall clock and a large wooden carving hanging by the window, which I later discovered was a fertility totem from the East Sepik River.

I scoured the room for a hint of imperfection; not finding any, I allowed my gaze to settle in the garden beyond the French doors where some magnolias lay opulent amongst a fleshy mass of green leaves. A dense lawn of grass weaved its way around islands of native grasses and a number of sculptures. At the very back of the garden I noticed a small wooden bridge arched over a small pond. Next to it stood a birdbath. It was then that I became aware that not a single sound from outside penetrated the room.

‘You have a very nice garden,’ I said.

‘I can’t take any credit for that,’ Vanessa said effusively, ‘we pay someone every week to come and look after it. He’s also an expert ornithologist, and he knows exactly which plants attract the birds and the bees.’

Pete stood and wandered over to the doors, surveyed the garden impassively.

Vanessa came towards us. ‘What would you like to drink?’

‘Just water for me thanks,’ Pete said and began combing the back of his head with his fingers.

‘You can have whatever you want. What about some homemade lemonade?’

‘What are you having?’ Pete asked, his tone overtly playful.

‘I’m having something a bit stronger. Cognac.’

‘I’ll have one of those too,’ he said, smiling, and then to offset the swell of disquiet that passed over Vanessa’s face he added, ‘I’m nearly legal you know.’

‘I’ll give you a beer if you like, but nothing stronger. Do you want one Leo?’

We both agreed.

Vanessa busied with the drinks. ‘So have you boys been friends for long?’

‘Yeah, since grade seven,’ Pete said, which was not strictly true. We had known each other since then, but it was only in the last two years that we’d become friends and hung out together after school.

Pete began inspecting the artwork from close range, stopping in front of each painting for a few seconds before moving on. He pointed at a stencil of a naked girl, who looked vaguely like Brigitte Bardot.

‘Is that a Banksy?’ Pete asked.

Vanessa laughed. ‘No. It’s a local artist, Trent Morton. Do you know him?’

‘I’ve heard of him,’ Pete said. I could tell by his voice that he was lying.

22

Vanessa came out with the drinks. Pete sat down next to me. We drank from the bottles and continued staring at the artwork on the walls.

‘I’m looking forward to seeing your work,’ Vanessa said after a silence. ‘Do your parents support what you do?’

‘What you mean his graffiti? They’d probably kill him if they found out,’ I said. Pete gave me a foul look.

Vanessa laughed. ‘I never used to tell my parents anything I did either. Everything had to be a secret. All the things that mattered to me at least.’

There was another brief silence. I looked over at the photograph on the dresser. A child’s face, with a small nose, enormous brown eyes, and a free, fulsome smile that only children and drunks can make look natural in photos. Vanessa saw me looking at it.

‘That’s Chloe. My daughter. She’s thirteen.’

‘Beautiful photo,’ I said politely.

‘It must be hard coming up with a name?’ Pete said.

Vanessa eyed him closely.

‘It’s the hardest thing imaginable,’ she said. ‘It’s crazy when you think about it, the whole idea that you have to give a person a name.’

‘It’s just convenience,’ Pete said, and then looked at me as though he’d said something witty.

‘A newborn baby and you have to go ahead and give it a name! A name, for a real person. I thought, when my daughter was born, that it was such a strange thing to do. There she was, so tiny and I had to go and call her something she couldn’t possibly understand. But then I realised that so much of what we do for babies is about making other people feel better.’ Vanessa laughed; she put her hand to her mouth to regain composure. ‘It’s just something you have to do obviously,’ she added. ‘But in an ideal world we’d be able to change our name whenever we felt like it.’ She took another sip and smiled profusely. Her whole manner seemed to change now, her face had relaxed and she became more talkative.

‘Just the one child?’ I asked.

Vanessa nodded. ‘Yeah, just one. I would’ve liked to have had another one...’ she paused, ‘but I couldn’t.’

She glanced at Pete, who was busy picking at the varnish on his fingernail. ‘Did you hurt your nail?’

‘Yeah this guy at school stepped on it,’ he said.

‘Why would he do a thing like that?’ She was genuinely shocked.

‘He’s just a bastard. We don’t like each other.’

Vanessa looked at the hand once more. She leaned forward, then turned towards me suddenly, her voice shrill. ‘People can be so cruel. It never surprises me.’

‘I was joking before,’ Pete said indicating his finger. ‘It’s just nail polish.’

Vanessa smiled; ‘Yes I thought so.’

‘Then why did you think I hurt it?’ Pete began to grin, which he covered by gulping his beer and standing up. He looked like he wanted to leave.

‘I don’t know,’ Vanessa said. She finished her drink and stood up also. She walked over to where Pete was standing.

‘Can I have a look at your photos?’ She said.

‘What photos?’ I said.

‘Sure,’ Pete said and took out some photos from his school bag. ‘There’s only a few of them.’ He handed them to Vanessa.

‘Let’s go into the study,’ Vanessa said, ‘we’ll be able to see them better.’

She led us into an adjoining room, full of books and more artwork.

‘Put them down here,’ she said, indicating an office table. Pete placed several scrappy photos of some of his graffiti work on the table. He explained where he’d done the work and how they might look on canvass if Vanessa chose to commission one.

‘I’d prefer to do something completely original,’ he said.

Vanessa picked some up, gazed at one print, and the another, and another, never for more than a few seconds at a time, and never once altering her expression, which seemed remote, as though she were staring at something far away. ‘I used to study painting,’ she said at length. ‘But I gave up. I wasn’t very good.’

‘Maybe you were better than you thought,’ Pete said sincerely.

‘Don’t be silly,’ she snorted. ‘It’s annoying when people make things up like that.’

Pete looked at me and then began glancing about the room. He had resigned himself to having his idea rejected, not that he would let it rattle his outward confidence. His idea had only just become clearer in my mind. He was trying to squeeze money out of her.

Vanessa put the photos she held down, left the room to pour another cognac. She came back into the room shortly, held the glass to her cheek for a moment before sipping it.

‘Thanks. I liked them very much. You’re good. If I’m not saying much it’s because I wasn’t expecting that. I wasn’t expecting them to be so good. You obviously know what you’re doing. Even the more simple ones you make look interesting. Believe me, my husband knows a lot more than I do. He’s been buying art for years. Most of the stuff is hidden away in drawers. And some he even lends to galleries but...’ she hesitated, tried to find the right words. ‘Most of them are not as interesting... as alive like yours.’

Pete thanked her and folded arms, trying his hardest to look unaffected by the compliment.

‘I want to do something like that.’ Pete said without looking up from the table.

‘But on a huge canvass.’

‘Well if Simon was here he’d be able to speak more about that. He’s the collector.’

Pete began picking up his photos and putting them back in his folder.

‘What does your husband do?’ I asked.

‘He’s an architect. Studied in Berlin. That’s where we met. I was on holiday.’

‘You know where my parents met?’ Pete said abruptly. ‘In hospital. They were both in a car crash and they had beds next to each other and they exchanged phone numbers.’

‘Is that true?’ Vanessa laughed.

Pete began laughing also. I could see that he could barely contain his excitement. We returned to the lounge-room and sat back down on the couch. Vanessa put her glass down and sat down in an armchair facing us. She stared at us in silence. I suddenly got the sense that she didn’t want me there. I got up and began to look at some photos on the wall. Coloured prints of empty phone booths in suburban streets. There was something quietly terrifying about them. Pete closed his eyes, sighed softly.

Vanessa came towards us, her face looked alarmed, like she’d just woken up after falling asleep in a public. ‘I’m sorry... I have to pick up my daughter from her friend’s house. I’ll have to call you a taxi.’ She fetched her handbag that was lying on the kitchen bench and took out her mobile. She ordered a taxi, then joined me at the bottom of the stairs, where my eyes drifted upwards to the balcony. Beyond the landing I could make out a series of dim rooms.

‘It’s disgusting I know,’ Vanessa said. ‘But I just can’t get rid of it.’

She must have thought I was looking at something else.

‘I brought it back from West Africa, in one of those tourist markets. It was such an effort to cart it around.’

I could see now what she was referring to: an elaborate tribal mask with feathers sticking out of its chin glared at me from above. We were both studying it now.

‘I like it,’ I said.

‘I had such a special time over there, that’s the only reason I keep it.’

She turned to Pete who was now standing next to us.

‘Let’s talk again. We’ll work something out. You need to have a think about what you would like to do for us.’

‘I will. I’ll work on some ideas,’ Pete said and thanked her again.

The taxi beeped its horn. Vanessa saw us to the door, shook our hands and said goodbye. When she closed the door, I assumed it would be the last time I’d see her.

On the way back to the city, Pete talked incessantly. He enthused about what he might paint if he could get Vanessa to commission him. He clearly saw in Vanessa an example of refinement and culture that was so lacking in this country. ‘If there were more people like that, imagine what a difference it would make?’

I nodded, stared out the window, only half listening.

‘They obviously buy all that stuff because they love it, and you can’t fault that, even if she is rich and a bit on the pretentious side.’

The taxi driver glanced at him every now and then sighed and shook his head disapprovingly. He had a smooth skull, like a pale mushroom, with wisps of hair hanging about his ears. His pupils stared out of two cavernous holes, and his mouth sagged open to form a pouch that reached down to his chest. I asked him when he started work, but he only grunted in reply.

Pete had ceased talking now, and was resting his head back on the seat. His face was calm, smiling.

The air in the art room was always stifling. The benches were littered with driftwood, rubbish picked up from the tip, plaster casts, crayons, blocks of wet clay, chicken wire, buckets of plaster; in one corner an army of paintbrushes stood up in containers full of turps, next to boxes of scrap paper and cardboard. Despite the appearance of chaos, everything had its rightful place. Our art teacher Mr. Morris insisted on order. He had a permanent cough, which he blamed on clay dust and fumes, and spoke in a drawling Scottish accent. No artist worth their biscuit worked in confusion, he was fond of saying, staring at us from the deep pits of his eye sockets. Even drunkards like Pollock, he assured us, were sober when they made their art. Apparently he was a sculptor and widely exhibited. He was rarely enthusiastic about our work. Pete was his pet student.

Morris regarded him as a natural talent and let him use the back studio all hours of the day, while the rest of us were confined to class-time. If you couldn't find him in the yard, or the library, chances were he was busy on his painting that he'd been working on for more than half the year. Truth was he got frustrated and kept changing it; one week it was an abstract expressionist collage, the next week he'd scraped off all the broken debris and turned it into a nude, now it was a mixed media collage. No matter what he came up with, Mr Morris thought it was brilliant.

For my final assessment, I had produced a papier-mâché face, elongated with large diamond shaped eyes, a sort of shoddy replica of a Modigliani. I was quite embarrassed by it; but Mr Morris gave me a B for it, without much comment.

Pete was less enthusiastic. During Wednesday's class, when he caught me hiding it away on one of the shelves, he summed up his disapproval by laughing and slapping me

on the shoulder. ‘Don’t worry. You have to cadge from the old masters, that’s how you learn.’

After the class we headed across the oval; he mentioned Vanessa.

‘I’ve caught up with her a few times. She’s a pretty interesting woman, what a life,’ he said but didn’t elaborate.

I looked at him. Little furrows had formed over his brow.

I took a breath. ‘Are you sleeping with her?’

‘What?’ Pete laughed. ‘No she’s too old for me. She’s a friend. That’s all. What’s wrong with that?’

I didn’t reply; I knew he wanted me to say something, but I could sense myself getting annoyed with him, the whole business with Vanessa seemed pretentious to me.

Pete glanced at me thoughtfully, but didn’t say anything either.

‘What are you doing after school?’ Pete said.

Nothing.

‘Do you want to come to my place? Mum’s cooking roast?’

I hesitated, surprised; Pete had never invited me to his home before.

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘But I better ask my parents first.’

I texted my mum. She replied within a minute saying it was fine, but to be back home by ten. It was unusual for her to give me a specific cap on my free time. Perhaps she had started to come to the conclusion that Pete was not a healthy influence.

We ran through the university at breakneck speed. We soon reached the cemetery, on the side of the Royal Parade gardens, sweating. A gust of wind took hold of some leaves in the gutter, blew them skyward; then everything went quiet for a while.

‘It’s going to rain,’ Pete murmured.

As we walked down the gravel pathway, Pete veered off to inspect a gravestone. A huge white marble grey cross with embossed gold lettering stood erect over an equally impressive grey slab on the bed surrounded by a moat of flowers. It belonged to a girl who had died at nineteen in 1954.

‘Must have died in child birth,’ Pete said.

‘Maybe killed herself,’ I said.

‘No, they don’t bury suicides.’

Pete saw Mr. Turnbull, the gardener, down towards the end of the path, pushing a mound of weeds in his wheelbarrow. They waved to each other. Mr. Turnbull had been working there since Pete was a small and they always greeted each other, though they’d never had a proper conversation. In Mr Turnbull’s eyes Pete was probably still a child, or perhaps he respected the idea that cemeteries were places of silence.

‘My dad took me to Pere-Lachaise when I was nine,’ Pete said. ‘I’ve never forgotten it. Of course it’s full of famous people that you look for like you’re on a treasure hunt, but what’s interesting here is that you don’t know of anyone who is buried here.’

‘That’s not true,’ I said. ‘What about Menzies and Gorton? And Holt?’

‘Holt wasn’t buried here,’ Pete laughed. ‘They never found his body.’

‘Okay sure, but there’s some poets buried here aren’t there?’

‘No poets, Pete said. ‘Just Burke and Wills, a boxer and a few professors. What’s funny,’ he added, ‘is that people have fought battles to be buried here. Someone was even murdered to prevent him from buying a plot.’

We turned down a separate path. There was a young girl sitting on a bench reading a book, her head cock sideways; the wind caught hold of her long brown hair. I thought for a second that she was a ghost.

It began to rain; in a few seconds we were drenched. We ran off towards the chapel near Macpherson Street. It was built by the Domingo family in 1927, and presumably designed to accommodate them during commiserations. Even though it was now derelict, nobody was supposed to go inside. The wooden door was padlocked, but one of the hinges was broken. Pete prised it open wide enough for us to squeeze through the gap.

Once inside I could see that parts of the roof and the stucco walls had collapsed; rain poured through the openings, ran in courses through the fissures in the marble floor of the vestibule and in the altar, where weeds and vines had taken root. There were still the remnants of candles lying on the floor, and a couple of candelabra that lay on their sides, squashed and bent, along with some plastic Madonnas, their faces grimacing through the dirt. On the back wall, behind the altar, I could just make out some tiny frescoes.

Pete saw me looking at them.

‘Aren’t they incredible,’ he said. ‘It’s the Stations of the Cross.’

‘Do you know who painted them?’

‘No, probably someone in their family, or maybe they commissioned a local Italian to do it. I tried to look them up on the web, but there’s nothing.’

He went up close to the walls to get a better look.

‘They’re so weird. Christ is smiling in every one of them. Look, he’s in rapture, even though he’s got congealed blood over his face. It’s like he’s seeing beyond it all, or he’s seen the procession of his fate so many times he can’t feel pain any more.’

I went up and had a look. It was true; the faces of Christ were all the same, blissful and oblivious to the scene round him. But I had no interest in religious iconography. I turned away and went towards the door.

‘Imagine if everything was like that,’ Pete enthused. ‘Everything had that kind of significance. It’s just a matter of looking at it in the right way. Even rubbish on the ground. That’s what Warhol was on about. Everything has beauty... significance. It’s like everything is meant to be where it is.’

‘What if in fact... every second was like that. Every second had the same significance? Everything occurs because it’s meant to occur and suddenly everything you see... everything that happens seems like it was destined to happen... every simple event leads to inviolable, fatalistic conclusion because it’s connected to everything else...like it’s all part of a great plan.

It stopped raining; I began to feel cold.

‘Shall we go?’ I said.

Pete stepped back from the wall. He looked disappointed. I hadn’t appreciated what he was trying to share. It occurred to me then that he had probably been coming here since he was a kid. I couldn’t fathom what secrets it held for him.

‘Yeah let’s go,’ he said, and pushed aside the door.

26

Pete’s parents’ house was down the end of Macpherson Street. It was the only one that remained unrenovated, and without an expensive car parked in a manicured driveway. At first sight, it looked like it hadn’t been touched since it was first built, paint had peeled off the boards on the front of the house to reveal the raw wood underneath, one whole side was covered in creepers that had grown round towards the front and threatened to bury the windows. The entire front garden was overgrown with bushes and weeds, through which I could see a number of broken statuettes, one of a large green frog. The drainpipes were half eaten away by rust. On the front porch was a pile of newspapers and an old couch with torn upholstery. As we approached the front door, we had to duck a section of guttering that was hanging low.

The man who opened the door had no discernable similarities in physique to Pete. He shook our hands vigorously, said his name was Jeremy. He had a beard, a paunch, grey hair tied in a pony tail, faded denim jeans, a silver earring in one ear and one front tooth missing, like a regular Carlton bohemian from the seventies. His left arm was in a sling; he slapped me hard on the back with his free hand as I crossed the front door. I couldn’t help but wonder what Pete might look like at that age.

‘See what trouble boys are,’ Jeremy said. I smiled.

‘He fell off a ladder,’ Pete said.

He led us into the lounge-room. The walls were amassed with books, paperbacks and leather bound editions; some of them were quite rare. Pete confided to me afterwards

that his dad had been collecting them since his student days, but had never actually read any of them. The rest of the room was decorated with an array of antiques and odds and ends; an African carving knife, a couple of warring Balinese puppets, Tibetan prayer-flags, some antique chairs inherited from Pete's grandparents when they died. There were photos too of Pete's mother as an actress in theatre shows at La Mama from some time in the eighties alongside other thespians that I couldn't recognise. When I asked Pete about them later he said they were famous. One guy who was in the Cars That Ate Paris; I'd hadn't seen it.

Jeremy sat down and expected us to join him in conversation; but Pete didn't want to linger. His dad looked put out.

'Is your friend staying for dinner?' he said finally.

'Of course he is,' Pete said. 'That's why he's here.'

Jeremy winked at me. 'Thank God I encouraged his rebellious side. I was even worse with my father.'

Pete rolled his eyes. 'Come on, let's go to my room.'

Before I could reply, he had already left the room. Pete's bedroom was on the second floor. We passed a closed door on the landing. Pete saw me look at it. 'That was Sonia's room,' he said then continued up the stairs.

Sonia was Pete's sister; she had died when she was eight, from a brain haemorrhage in her sleep. Nobody had known anything was wrong with her. She went to sleep and didn't wake up. It was the first thing I knew about Pete; he was the guy whose sister had died.

Pete's room was surprisingly immaculate. Pete must have kept it this way, a refuge from the chaos that dominated the rest of the house. Books were neatly arranged on the shelves. Among them, at regular intervals, he kept an assortment of artefacts that immediately grabbed your eye, like glass jars containing kangaroo embryos, nude photos of young women, a series of hand puppets with distorted faces, which according to Pete were supposed to ward off illness. There was a CD rack along one wall, along another a double bed, and an antique chest of drawers. But most of his space in his room was given over to his studio. There were enormous lights standing in one corner, an easel, tubes of paint. There was the faint smell of turps in the air.

'I don't normally work in here,' Pete said, as if my way of apology. 'Sometimes it's just easier.'

He went over to the wall and picked up a canvas that was facing the wall, turned it around.

It was a hyperrealist painting of a naked girl with beautiful long black hair. She was standing, staring out as though being naked was the most comfortable thing in the world. She took up the entire space of the canvas.

'That's Zoe,' Pete said. 'Now you can see why I was so obsessed with her.'

'Sure,' I said. 'She's beautiful.'

Pete smiled. 'Yeah, but crazy. She didn't have any inhibitions at all. She just did whatever she thought. That's the way it should be.'

He put the painting back facing towards the wall; it would have dominated the whole room otherwise. He sat on his bed.

'Have you finished that essay?' he said after a silence.

‘No. I’ve barely started it. What about you?’

He laughed. ‘Tony’s helping me with that one.’

‘Does he often do that?’ I asked.

‘He’ll do anything I ask,’ he laughed. ‘That’s fair,’ he said even though I wasn’t protesting in the slightest. ‘It was you two crazy bastards who convinced me to do European lit in the first place. Anyway none of this shit will count for anything. Those teachers of ours are just a bunch of over-grown insects. Screeching out quotations because they don’t know anything themselves.’

He got off the bed and sat on the floor and leaned against the wall.

‘You know what my dad says?’ he continued. ‘Teachers, as professionals, were of the same breed as politicians, bankers, lawyers, doctors the lot. They see themselves on a floating platform higher than everyone else. It’s a position they occupy without any modesty or dignity, or even a semblance of know-how.’

I nodded in agreement; when Pete talked like that I was too impressed with his self-confidence to argue with him.

‘All politics is degraded,’ he said, waving his arm about dismissively. ‘The point is to rise above it. Look at Michelangelo. How could he have done something like the Sistine Chapel without believing in the impossible, going beyond the restrictions of his times? See, for him art was about how the soul can harmonise with the vibrancy of life. All this bullshit people go on about now, on Facebook, twitter, all that other crap, that inane garbage that people go on about. I can’t stand it.’

Me, Pete and Tony were the only people we knew in our school who refused to join Facebook. We were proud of the fact, relished in the idea that it set us apart.

Pete's mum yelled up the stairs to tell us dinner was ready.

27

We went down to the dining room and sat at a long cedar table with bentwood chairs. Pete's mother entered with a tray of roast lamb and potatoes. She had aged considerably since the photos on the walls; grey hair tied at the back, large affectionate eyes, and a mouth that seemed permanently fixed as a smile. She put the tray down on the table, then came over and hugged me warmly.

'Hi, I'm Melissa,' she said. 'Pete's told me all about you.'

'Nothing bad I hope.'

'No of course not,' she said, her mouth opening into a large gaping smile.

Jeremy poured himself a beer. Melissa broke away from me, scolded him for not putting a bottle of wine on the table.

'Leo here is from an Italian background Jeremy, surely you could open a bottle of wine.'

I smiled; cast my eyes on an East Sepik sculpture on the wall. I'd seen them before in an art book on Surrealism. I asked where they got it.

'I grew up in Papua,' Melissa said. 'Lived in Africa too. And Burma for a few years. My parents were ethnologists. Dad was a complete bigot. Mum wasn't like that, though. She loved adventure all her life. Loved people of all creeds and colours.'

'But married to a total bore,' put in Jeremy.

'Oh that was just his generation I'm afraid.'

I looked at Melissa; imagined that she must have been quite the rebel when she was younger.

Jeremy got up and fetched a bottle of wine. We sat down; Melissa and Jeremy talked continuously as they ate, conversation about school, the theatre, which Melissa was still passionate about, and even broached the topic of girlfriends. Jeremy proudly complained that he couldn't keep up with Pete's girlfriends; he seemed to change them every other month. I glanced over at Pete, who had long fallen silent. I could see he was embarrassed, but I couldn't help wishing that my own parents were as open-minded.

Jeremy poured me another glass of wine. Melissa protested, but Jeremy insisted.

'He's old enough to handle a couple of glasses.'

Melissa changed the subject. 'Pete said you're a bit of a bookworm. What are you reading at the moment?'

I mentioned the essay on Effi Briest.

Melissa looked surprised. 'Don't they teach you Australian Literature? Authors like Christina Stead?'

'Or Carey or Malouf,' put in Jeremy.

'Not in European lit they don't,' Pete sniggered. 'Anyway you can read whoever you want, who cares where they're from. Most of the painters and photographers I like are not Australian. So what? It's all one world on the Net.'

Melissa nodded. 'Yes the whole world is there for you to taste, it's scary sometimes.'

I could see she idolised Pete.

‘It’s so confusing these days. I even hate going to the supermarkets. They’re so oppressive. Where does it all end? It’s reached saturation point already. The thing that is so frightening is that nobody seems to remember what it was like... even Lygon Street or Brunswick Street. They’ve changed so quickly, and nobody seems to care a fig for what’s lost.’

I looked at Pete as he listened to his mother rave. It was strange to see him so respectful and admiring. It was like he and his mother were best friends.

‘That’s why it’s so important to follow your heart,’ she went on. ‘You have to do something that nurtures you because otherwise you get to our age and you realise that it so easy to waste your life. You get no satisfaction doing something you hate for forty years.’

Jeremy laughed. ‘Speak for yourself.’

Melissa patted his shoulder tenderly. ‘Don’t be silly, you know what I mean.’

‘I loved doing what I did. Except driving fucking trams. Those bastards were all fucking Maoists.’

‘Yes but you did that for money. But your real love was for photography. And that’s where Pete gets his artistic eye from.’

‘So long as you get to meet people you can enjoy anything,’ Jeremy said. ‘Whether it’s robbing a bank or working as a waiter, what does it matter? There’s nothing better than meeting people. Artists are usually lonely people, and there’s not fun in that.’

‘Don’t listen to him.’ Melissa protested. ‘He loved taking people’s pictures.’

‘Yeah it was my way of meeting people,’ Jeremy laughed.

Pete got up and began to clear the table. I got up and helped him. As we were stacking the dishwasher, he took me by the arm.

‘Let’s go and smoke a spliff.’ He spoke quietly so his parents wouldn’t overhear. ‘I’m sick of listening to those hippies.’

When we went back out to the dining room, he announced that we were going to sit on the balcony.

‘Okay boys,’ Melissa said, still smiling. ‘I’ll put a cake in the oven.’

We went outside on the porch. I could see the Cemetery, which shone blue in the dusk light. Pete rolled the joint while I leaned back in the chair, listened to the raucous cries of the cicadas. Pete lit the joint; we smoked, tiny embers blew into my face.

Pete finally broke the silence. ‘What do you think of my parents?’

‘I like them,’ I said. ‘They’re so open and friendly.’

‘I’m usually too embarrassed to introduce my friends to them. But I thought you’d like them. Anyway you don’t judge people. That’s what I like about you.’

I smiled but didn’t say anything.

28

I didn’t see Pete during the next week. We both skipped classes in order to finish our assignments. My parents had been putting more pressure on me to knuckle down; I decided to knock my work off in one week; Tony also was busy studying. A couple of times I bumped into him, but he wasn’t in the mood to talk. Our regular meetings at school with Pete had evaporated. For the first time, I began to foresee our futures

separating. Tony was clearly the most dedicated. Pete tried to draw me into his nighttime revelries, texted me a few times to catch up. For once, I turned down his offer.

I had a Geography exam on the Monday, which I decided in the last few days to study for. It was easier than I expected; perhaps I'd pass some of my subjects after all. I caught up with Rachel in the corridor. Our conversation was easy and avoided anything contentious; we joked about Petrel, and touched on the whereabouts of Pete. I wasn't sure what Rachel really thought of him, and I didn't like to enquire in detail in case she revealed there was something between the two of them. Pete'd already made a move on a couple of other girls I'd fancied over the years, and while I doubted Rachel was his type, nothing would surprise me. He was by far the most popular guy in our year, and that in itself seemed to create its own opportunities.

Our conversation stopped; we stood there in silence for what seemed like an eternity, before Rachel announced that she was going home to study. She said goodbye, and walked with nimble steps in the direction of the gate. She turned about; we exchanged smiles, then she disappeared behind the hedgerow.

29

Pete turned up for the Geology exam on Wednesday, with his dictionary crammed full with handwritten notes. He was brimming with confidence when I saw him afterwards. 'Well you'd have to be an idiot to fail that one,' he said.

'I think I just did,' I said.

'You're joking?' He looked at me askance. 'At least we can ride out the rest of the year,' he added.

‘I still haven’t finished my assignments,’ I said.

‘You worried?’

‘No,’ I said. I meant it too. I’d long given up on any prospect of passing my subjects. Pete seemed to read my thoughts.

‘Just hand anything in. Doesn’t matter anyway, does it?’

He slung his school bag over his shoulder.

‘You going home?’ I asked.

‘Nope,’ he said, and smiled. ‘I’m seeing this girl I met on the tram. We’re going to a movie together.’

He walked off. I watched him as he hurried through the gate and walked onto the road to avoid the group that had massed at the bus stop.

30

The last week of school came quicker than I expected. The classes were just a formality. Students everywhere acted a little crazy; even those who had a reputation of being straight-as looked dazed and couldn’t help being affected by the excitement. But amid the heady effusiveness, there was a sense of fear about what comes next. Some of the teachers began to get emotional; they seemed reluctant to see us go.

During lunch on Monday a rumour went round that a guy from the grade below was going to run around the oval naked. There was already a crowd on the footpath on the perimeter when I got there with Pete and Tony. Pete doubted it was going to happen, but then a roar erupted. The guy, a pretty inoffensive kid called Simon, squeezed out

from the crowd and ran up the embankment with nothing on but his shoes. He was visible from the road, and a number of cars tooted as they passed.

‘That was a bit of fun. Didn’t think he’d have the guts,’ Pete said, who looked otherwise unimpressed.

‘I heard on Friday someone in grade ten set fire to their desk,’ Tony said.

Pete laughed; any display of organised chaos was as much an anathema to him as any form of organised behaviour.

‘You see, some people need a great occasion for them to do something out of the ordinary. The point is to live like that all the time.’

As we walked across the lawn to the quadrangle, a group of students ran past us screaming. A little further along they off-loaded a balloon that burst and splashed on the door of classroom B. It had evidently missed its target, because one of them, a tall redhead, stared complaining to the others.

We walked to the library and sat down under the hedges. He asked how it was going with Rachel.

‘Nothing,’ I said.

‘What do you mean nothing?’

‘Just that,’ I said. Tony was smirking.

‘We’re just friends,’ I added. Truth was, we weren’t even that.

‘You still want to go away with us at the end of the year?’ Pete said.

Only a week ago, he had texted me with a long list that included all the great cities of the world: a grand tour that included maps and adventures. We’d start in Europe, London, Paris, then head south to Rome then catch a flight to New York, and then make

our way down to South America. But this was the first time that I heard him include Tony in our plans. I tried to cover up my annoyance.

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Whatever.’

There was a silence. Pete gazed across the lawn; he’d spotted a cute girl from Geography. I asked how his parents were.

‘Same as always,’ he said. ‘They bicker in a friendly kind of way. Mum had to drive his dad to the hospital the other night, because he had some stomach complaint.’

‘Was he alright?’

‘Course he was, they’re just hypochondriacs. They got home, opened a bottle of wine and got pissed. That’s the way it is with them, they create all this drama in their lives so they have an excuse to live a little.’

31

On Friday the headmistress called a special assembly. As it was over thirty degrees, she resorted to gathering us all together on the bank on the oval.

‘You just wait,’ Pete whispered to me. ‘She wants to bore us to death with one of her speeches.’

Sure enough he was right. The Headmistress solemnly took up position on the top of the embankment and, with her arms flailing like she was rousing the wretched of the earth, exhorted us to apply all diligence to our study.

‘It’s now or never,’ she repeated in her elaborate, shrill tones. ‘What happens in these next few weeks will determine the course of your lives. It’s UP to YOU!’

It went on like that for a while; Pete pretended to snore, setting off a chorus of sniggers.

The Headmistress tried to locate the culprit; not wishing to show any outward sign of humiliation, she continued at once. ‘You are about to enter adulthood, don’t you see? That means facing up to the responsibilities that go with it.’

But what could that sort of talk possibly mean to us?

The whole of last term my parents had marked their concern too by offering inducements; if I studied hard I might have the old Datsun; or they might help with that airfare to Buenos Aires I’d mooted over dinner. Yes, the lacklustre path of conscientiousness could be made to dazzle with gifts. But when I looked ahead of me, all I could see were endless summer days, the nowhere time between school life and eternity. I had already told them that I was going to take a year off to decide what I really wanted to do. Little did they know that I had made up my mind to disavow everything they stood for. I already knew that my culminating weeks of school life would be wasted; university was never going to be an option. I was unable to think about anything to do with my future. I was consumed by the present, the desire to enjoy this strange, heady time between youth and adulthood. Even my friends who had passed the mid-year exams with flying colours now fell under the sway of a protracted, imperturbable mood.

32

Saturday was my mother’s birthday. I hadn’t bought her anything; I got up early and left the house without anyone seeing me. I headed towards the bookshop on Elizabeth Street. Books were the only thing I ever bought my mother.

I didn't know what one to buy; the girl at the counter recommended a book about wearing the veil. I didn't see how mum would relate to it but bought it anyway. The girl gift-wrapped it for me, absolving me of even that miniscule task.

I spent the next hour in my room; I could tell my parents hadn't got out of bed yet. I looked out the window. My neighbour was pacing around in his room, like he was contemplating something significant. Maybe the girl was there again; had she said something profound and now he thinking about what it all meant? He disappeared for a while, then came back and sat in his lounge-chair. No, he must have been alone after all.

At half-past ten I heard some noise downstairs; my parents had got up and were making breakfast. Half an hour later, the doorbell rang. I heard the voice of my Uncle Herbert and Aunty Sara and my cousin Jamie. My father greeted them in the hall; he wouldn't hug them but give them a firm shake of the hand. Mum emerged from the kitchen, after a brief panic, without time to consolidate; now they were all greeting, talking over one another, laughing at every silly joke my uncle made.

I knew Jamie wouldn't come up to my room. We had nothing in common. He seemed to have resigned himself to being a store manager at his father's Retrovision store. My father sometimes mentioned him by way of comparison to my own lack of ambition. But in lucid moments, he realised there was no point expecting me to do something similar.

After a while, I went downstairs and shook everybody's hand. Jamie asked me how I was. I said I was good. He had a face that was inoffensive, no features that stood out.

I placed mum's present on the bench next to where she stood, leaning over the pot. She turned, smiled, gave me a hug. She opened my present, looked at the cover and smiled; showing no hint of disappointment.

'That looks very interesting,' she said, then put the book back down on the bench and continued with the cooking.

She was preparing a roast chicken for lunch, baked in an earthenware pot. Il primo was spaghetti and clam sauce. When my mum served it up, my dad gave a short, impromptu speech.

Mum insisted on showing our guests a photo of me sitting outside the student library, and seeing their obvious disinterest, she soon put it back in the cupboard. Halfway through the meal, my uncle turned to me.

'So you gonna become a lawyer?' he asked.

When I replied no, he clasped his hands together, as though my denial confirmed his belief that I was a no-hoper.

'What about a girlfriend? My aunty asked. 'You got a girlfriend, a handsome boy like you?'

When I said no, she sighed.

'No?' my uncle said. 'What does he get up to then?'

'God knows,' my father replied. 'He's always out, or in his room.'

When they braved further enquiries, or shot perplexed looks at my dad, he would bundle up his fork with spaghetti, and still chewing, explain on my behalf: when you're young, you think you can live your life on other people's taxes.

After lunch we retired to the lounge-room. I could see my relatives had resigned themselves to staying for the long haul. I texted Pete to see what he was up to. He got back in five minutes. He was in the city; he asked if I wanted to catch up. I replied, yes.

I got up and put my jacket on. I announced that I had to get going, as I was meeting a friend. My cousin looked at me, like I should invite him. I felt bad but couldn't bring myself to do it. I said goodbye without looking at him, and left.

Pete was waiting for me in a car park off Lonsdale St. I wanted to go to a café, but he said Vanessa was waiting for us in a Chinese dumpling house off Hosier Lane.

'Is she okay that I'm joining you?' I asked.

He gave me a sideways glance, then laughed. 'She's actually a very nice person. You'll like her if you get to know her better.'

I shrugged. We walked down a narrow laneway; upturned spikes stuck out of the window ledges to stop pigeons roosting there. The dumpling house was at the end of an alleyway; a group of school kids were lining up next door at the steps of the martial arts institute.

33

Vanessa was sitting at a table near the door. She stood up when we entered; we greeted each other, shook hands. I apologised for interrupting their meeting.

'That's fine,' she said. 'I just thought it was nice to meet up for lunch. Nice to get out of the house. Go somewhere different.'

I looked at Pete. He was staring into his lap. For the first time it occurred to me that Pete and Vanessa were seeing each other.

Vanessa asked me how I went in my exams. I told her that I wasn't sure, but I wasn't too bothered either way. Pete intervened on my behalf.

'Leo wants to be a writer,' he said.

Vanessa made an effort to suppress a smile. She could see I was embarrassed. Not even my family knew of my secret ambition; their disapproval was inevitable. Tony was the other person I'd confided this to, and Pete had sworn he wouldn't tell anyone.

Vanessa broke the silence. 'We've been discussing something.'

I looked at Pete, expecting a confession.

'I don't know if Pete's told you, but I've got a house down the Great Ocean Road. It's up on the hill, overlooks Kennett River.

'Sounds amazing,' Pete chipped in.

'We were thinking that you guys could stay down there for a week or so.'

'Sure,' I said.

'Might be a nice way to finish up your year.' Vanessa looked at Pete for confirmation. Her face looked strained. Pete took her hand, squeezed it. Almost immediately, he took his hand away.

'We could invite Tony, maybe Rachel, whoever you want,' said Pete.

I smiled, nodded, but didn't say anything. Did this mean that Vanessa was coming down with us? As I looked at them I couldn't help thinking, that if Vanessa had been our age, then I would assume they were in a relationship. As it was, even if they had kissed right in front of me, I still would have found it impossible to take seriously.

We finished eating and went to the counter to pay the bill. It took cash only, but as we were fumbling about for our wallets Vanessa offered to pay. 'It's my treat,' she said.

We went out into the alleyway.

‘Pete’s going to show me his secret hide-out’ Vanessa said.

‘Sure,’ Pete said, then put his arm through hers and kissed her on the mouth.

Vanessa looked about, embarrassed.

‘You mean in the tunnels?’ I said.

‘Sure’, Pete said. ‘It’s not far from here.’

For a moment I couldn’t believe what I’d heard. As far as I knew, Pete had never taken anyone there before. It was his secret.

A middle-aged businessman passed by, gave Vanessa a sneering look and said ‘pathetic’ under his breath. Pete swore at him; the man turned around, not willing to let it go. He had sagging cheeks and great flaps for ears, eyes dull and sunken, but he was thickset and looked capable of putting up a fight.

Pete went up to him. He stuck close to his back, made fun of his suit and exaggerated his ponderous walk, every now and then adding a silly little skip. When the man turned about and confronted him, Pete jumped right up to his face. He got such a shock he lost his balance and had to grab Pete by the arm to avoid falling over.

‘Hey Fadge, what’s the problem?’ Pete said, glaring like someone deranged.

The man lowered his head and tried to shuffle forward but Pete refused to budge. ‘Fadge, where are you off to now?’ he shouted, grinning.

The man’s face had broken out in fierce streaks, sweat gleamed on his forehead. After fumbling for a few seconds, he choked, ‘Can you please get out of my way?’

But Pete stayed put. When the man tried to side-step him, he anticipated his move and blocked the way. The man was panting now, his legs shook, his eyes flashed like a

bewildered beast; he raised his arm, thought about striking out with his hand, then lowered it, trembling and ineffectual.

I looked at Vanessa; a discernable smile had formed at the corners of her mouth. People had begun to stare. Knowing Pete was capable of anything, it was impossible not to be enthralled. He suddenly let out a deafening ‘squawk’, flapped his arms and danced in front of the man, who stared at the ground, impotent, his dignity crushed. It was a stupid display, but we applauded, more out of relief than anything.

Pete let the man pass, but not without a final, ‘See ya later Fadge,’ and a burst of merciless laughter. The man got away as fast as he could.

Pete came towards us, put his arm through Vanessa’s again. We walked up Little Bourke.

‘Is it far from here,’ Vanessa said suddenly.

‘No,’ Pete said. ‘Not far at all.’

We soon turned down ACDC Lane. Vanessa went behind a car and crouched. A stream of urine advanced from under the bonnet, engulfing a snail that was sheltering under the tyre.

34

The entrance to the tunnel was barely visible from the street. It consisted of a small iron grate, just enough to get your body through.

‘Just as well it’s so small,’ Pete said as he led us towards it. ‘Otherwise every Tom, Dick and Harry would know about it.’

‘You don’t often hear that expression,’ Vanessa said. ‘Especially not in kids your age.’

Pete looked put out. ‘It’s something my dad says.’

‘Funny that,’ Vanessa said, ‘how we end up copying our parents whether we like it or not.’

‘Who are you like? I asked. ‘You mum or your dad.’

‘They’re both dead,’ she said then took my arm. We watched as Pete slid away the grate.

‘I would’ve thought it was hard to move,’ Vanessa said.

‘People move it all the time,’ Pete said. ‘This is the main gallery.’

He slid down on his stomach. His feet soon touched the bottom. He looked up at us smiling. ‘Are you coming?’

‘But I’ll get my clothes dirty,’ Vanessa protested, but without any real aim.

‘You won’t get another chance,’ Pete said. ‘I got you guys a special invitation. The guys down here don’t usually like strangers coming down.’

‘Anyone would think we were going to someone’s house!’ Vanessa said, laughing.

‘It is someone’s house,’ I said.

‘You mean someone lives down there?’ Vanessa asked.

‘Yeah, a lot of people do.’

‘I suppose we have no choice now do we?’ Vanessa said. ‘We should feel quite privileged.’

She let go of my arm and crouched down on her tummy. Pete helped her slide backwards, until her head disappeared into the hole.

Once we were all inside the tunnel, Pete felt along a wall.

‘You wait til you see this’ he said.

He flicked on a switch. Several lights came up down the length of a narrow corridor. The air was slightly musty, but aside from a few take-away containers, cigarette butts, food scraps, bottles and cans the space was clean.

‘Come on I’ll show you the gallery,’ Pete said. He walked on ahead, barely able to contain his excitement.

‘But how do they manage to keep this place a secret?’, Vanessa said, turning to me. ‘Have you been here before?’

I shook my head. ‘You’ve got to be invited,’ I said.

We turned a corner; and then another, followed by a flight of steps. Each time we entered a new section, Pete reached up and flicked on the lights. The entire tunnel was wired up.

Pete went on ahead of us into the darkness. I could see that he had stopped and was waiting for us.

‘I hope he knows where he’s going,’ Vanessa said, looking at me once more.

‘He’s been down here hundreds of times.’ It was true, although he didn’t bring his school friends here, Pete had up til now always kept this place a secret from us. Not even Tony knew about it. But Tony talked about this place regularly. For Pete, the tunnel was a kind of utopia, a vast labyrinthine theatre. It was Pete’s best-kept secret.

As we approached, I could see that Pete was waiting for us, for the first time looking solemn. He was planning something, I could tell. When we were no more than a few steps away, he suddenly flicked on the lights. The space opened up into a gigantic cavern.

Vanessa was in awe. ‘My god,’ was all she could muster, as she looked about, taking it in.

‘Isn’t it amazing,’ Pete said. ‘This is what we call the Gallery.’

‘Yes,’ Vanessa murmured. ‘It is absolutely extraordinary.’

Every square millimetre on the walls and ceiling was covered in graffiti. It was like a modern-day garden of delights; an endless panoply of dreams and nightmares.

Pete explained that each artist was allocated a section of space. Pete knew most of them by name.

‘There’s Cosmo, Blarny, Phibbs, Kute, Zenz, Stitch,’ he continued with a long list of names, a roll call of the who’s who of graffiti art.

Dragons with girls’ heads, clowns with octopus bodies, flesh eating flies, a giant robot with caption reading ‘buy no hope’, girls with rounded thighs carrying guns, an image of a shrouded man with menacing devil face, a fat business man carrying a suitcase of babies heads, a naked girl crucified, Che Guevara standing on a blue horse, cavorting mermaids and mermen, Nelson Mandela, dancing girls in red tights, naked bodies, cowboys, monks, Hush Hush Pandas, pirates, a child cutting a doorway into the wall with her fingers made in the shape of a pair of scissors, space ships morphing into a human skull, a green frog with caption saying REASON, a skull with hands growing out of the

cranium, a dancing mouse, a blue tiger, a small bird flying out of the mouth of a dead girl, a love heart floating above a sinking ship.

‘It’s even better than the faces you see scrawled into the colosseum,’ Pete said. ‘You see that’s what’s so great about down here; it’s ugly, and ugly things always give birth to what is most beautiful.’

Next Pete showed us his patch. A whole section devoted exclusively to stencils of his friends, people he’d known, or seen, relatives, teachers, there were some of his homeless friends who’d lived in the tunnels; all of them resembling faces of the dispossessed. Then he pointed out my face, alongside Tony, Zoe, Rachel, Arino and various friends from school.

For the first time I could see what was so special about Pete’s work. Their power came from being seen together. These dark, grainy silhouettes seemed more affecting than all the other art on offer down there. He had created ghosts of real people, a version of Hades out of everyone he knew, or had encountered. I told him what I thought, that what he’d done was truly incredible, better than anything I’d seen, and I meant it too.

Vanessa stared for a while; she too was impressed. But she said little, and sat down on a milk crate.

I asked her if she was okay.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Just sometimes I get claustrophobic that’s all. But I’ll be alright.’

She motioned for me to keep going. I noticed that there were some corridors at the end of the gallery, with the lights turned on. I asked Pete what was down there.

‘People live there,’ he said. ‘Not permanently but come down here at night. Some people have made their homes here for years.’

I found that difficult to believe.

‘Alright, I’ll show you then.’

Pete led us down a series of the corridors. Occasionally we had to duck out heads under stone buttresses; entrances to other tunnels appeared either side of us, veering off into the darkness. Alongside the dull noise of the traffic, we could hear cats howling. Rats scurried everywhere whenever Pete turned a light on.

‘Where are we?’ I asked.

‘Right below Swanston Street.’ Pete said.

We were ascending now, the air was dryer, the walls clad with wooden panels, on the floor we stumbled across the occasional mattress, old tyres, discarded helmets. Occasionally Pete would turn and tell us the names of the tunnels we were entering, Barracuda, ANZAC, Serio (named after an anarchist who was killed by cops in a police raid), Serpent Alley, a winding tunnel hewn out of stone by labourers in the 1880s, Sammy (named after a homeless kid who drowned in the tunnels), The Chamber, a long wide cavern where underground meetings were held, Miss Lally, which passed by an old gravesite rumoured to be that of a murdered prostitute, Camelot, with its multi-room chambers; some tunnels were long and narrow, others opened up into enormous caverns wide enough to drive a truck through.

We turned left, entered a narrow bluestone tunnel reinforced with metal pylons. Up ahead we saw speckled light in the distance. Then we heard a voice.

Pete called out. ‘Hey, It’s Pete!’

A voice called back. ‘It’s Zvok’.

The guy called Zvok moved tentatively towards us. He was small, had pockmarked cheeks, energetic eyes, a tattoo on his hand. Behind him, another person emerged from the darkness. She was also short, wore several gold earrings and introduced herself as Inca. I had never met them before, though I had heard Pete mention them in conversation. They lived in the tunnels, coming out during the day to eat, to meet friends, to catch some sunlight. Zvok was also Pete's main drug supplier.

Pete hugged them both then introduced us. Vanessa seemed to hang back; I looked at her, she seemed distracted, pale. Maybe she was disturbed by all the strange sounds; up above, the noises of the traffic, the rumblings from air ducts, vents and cavities that carry subterranean murmurs from the other side of the city.

'I have to get out of here' Vanessa whispered to me. She looked frightened.

'We're not lost,' I tried to reassure her. 'These guys live here.'

Vanessa grabbed my arm.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

'No,' she said. 'I've got to get out of here, now.'

Pete was talking to the others. He didn't notice anything was amiss.

'Pete, I said. 'We need to get out of here.' I gestured towards Vanessa. Pete came over and held her hands; she was clearly having some kind of panic attack.

Pete told the others Vanessa was freaking out then came back towards us.

'They know of an exit about twenty meters from here. It'll take us into a drain near the train track.'

Zvok and Inca led the way. We followed them in silence, Vanessa clinging to my arm as we walked. After a few meters the tunnel widened, but we were now treading in

water about an inch thick. Before long we were climbing a vertical ladder. We had to stop for a while as Zvok slowly pushed the manhole cover aside. As the sky came into view, I began to breathe easier; I hadn't realised how anxious I had become. We climbed and stood in the alleyway. A cool wind brushed our faces; below through the manhole, we could still hear the rats scampering through the water.

35

The next time I saw Pete he didn't mention the tunnel, or Vanessa's panic. I think he regretted revealing that place to us. But we also had other things to think about. We awaited our exam results with an air of gloom. Everything was on hold until next week, when they were simultaneously sent out and uploaded on the net. I didn't care too much; my parents were expecting me to do well. My mother mentioned me going to Melbourne University, but that was the last thing on my mind.

On the Monday I had been called to go to Petrels office in J block. On the way I passed a tangle of identical corridors and doors. A group of students were hanging about outside Ms Harris' room, the ancient history teacher. Their faces were sleepy; no one talked to each other.

Petrel was looking out the window when I entered. The view was plain, overlooked a tennis court and a disused shed, a place that formed the basis of a number of salacious rumours.

Petrel smiled when she saw me. Her warmth was disarming. She sat in a leather-armchair; on either side of her the bookshelves were devoted almost exclusively to penguin classics. Her office was untidy, more chaotic than I had seen it before,

papers were scattered about on the floor, and the filing cabinets were open and looked like they had been filled haphazardly.

I sat down on a chair opposite her.

‘How are you?’ she asked.

I said I was alright, nothing to complain about.

‘Is everything okay at home?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

She was taken aback by my defensiveness, then said there was no reason, it was a question she asked routinely. Not that that explained much. After that, she started talking about the pigeons outside, how they congregated on her ledge, and make a dreadful mess. On her bookshelf I saw a photo of a young boy about eight.

Petrel uncrossed her legs; she was relaxed, which made her face look rounder. She got up and went to her desk, then came back with my essay. She dropped it my lap; I saw a large A with 19/20 circled at the top.

‘Excellent work,’ Petrel smiled. ‘At first I suspected that someone else might have written it for you, someone older. It shows incredible maturity.’ She gave me a searching look, but I said nothing.

‘Why do you skip class so often,’ she asked suddenly.

I said I didn’t know.

She reiterated that my essay showed that I had great promise, providing I applied myself.

‘What do you want to do when you leave school, or haven’t you decided yet?’

I said I didn’t know what I wanted to do.

‘Presumably you want to go to university?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m going to take some time off, get some experience of the world.’

She frowned. ‘Yes, so long as you do want you believe in that’s fine. Providing you don’t get led astray.’ Then she added: ‘From the books you’ve mentioned in class it’s obvious you have a deep interest in literature. Perhaps it’s something you might like to pursue yourself one day. I don’t mean to be strict with you, but I have lots of faith in your abilities. You might be under the influence of those others boys you hang about with, it’s so often the case at your age. It’s so easy to throw away your education, but believe me you’ll regret it later on.’

She sighed and looked out the window, the pigeons were dozing.

She turned to me again. ‘I tell you what,’ she said, and put her hand on my shoulder. ‘I’m willing to not penalise you for absenteeism, because I know what a decent start to life a good result in school can make, not just to your ability to get into university, but for your confidence, your sense of self-hood. But you’ll have to promise me to at least think about going to university.’

I nodded. I looked at her bookshelf, then across at her desk; it was piled high with essays, books and stationary; how many hours a week did she spend right there, poring over our disinterested musings? Something in my face must have betrayed what I was thinking; when I glanced back at Petrel she looked sad. She must have known that her words of encouragement had fallen on deaf ears.

‘Ok... you can go now,’ she said. I could hear the resignation in her voice.

I got up and made for the door, then turned to say goodbye, but Petrel had turned her attention to opening a file on her computer. I closed the door behind me without saying anything.

36

Pete came round to pick me up the following Sunday. The car was a Renault sedan; it was brand-new, with a sunroof and cup holders built into the seats. It belonged to Vanessa. Zoe was sitting in the back with Nic, a guy from eleventh grade, who'd been hanging out with us since the beginning of term. Squeezed in the middle, was Ali with his twenty-something girlfriend. She had a small mouth and sad, drooping eyes, didn't talk much.

My mother came outside to see us off. She was worried that Pete was driving and he'd only just got his P's.

'Don't worry, it's got airbags,' said Pete.

'Not that it will help if we drive off a cliff, Tony added.

My mother was not amused. She frowned even when she kissed me on the cheek; I reassured her several times that we'd be alright.

Pete was anxious to get going. I said goodbye to my mother, who told Pete to drive carefully.

37

The drive to the shack took about two and half hours. Pete predictably hadn't lived up to his promise to drive slowly, but he didn't drive like a madman either. Not

long into the trip we began talking about school, about who we thought would fail, who might go to uni or take a year off. Pete made a point of mentioning that Rachel would be coming down. After the initial frenzy of conversation was over we lay back and watched the sky, the jagged rocks that sheered off into a churning ocean. Every now and then someone would ask for the time, or talk about the last time they'd been down the coast. After an hour we fell into a long silence.

The house was on a hill, visible as a white speck from the road. But we nearly missed the turnoff as the sign had fallen over and the driveway was narrow and veered off sharply behind some trees.

We drove up a steep track for about ten minutes. Tony was waiting for us in the driveway, sitting on a boulder. Rachel was next to him, standing.

'Where have you guys been?' Tony beamed at us.

Pete got out and picked up a rock and pretended to throw it at him. Rachel began laughing. 'Don't you dare.'

Pete was the only one who had a key. He treated the task of opening the door with some seriousness.

'This key can get a bit jammed,' he says.

But the door opened easily all the same. Once inside we put down our bags and headed straight for the balcony. The view was extraordinary; the ocean in all its terrible beauty so close you felt like you could scoop it up in your hand. To our left, a sweep of forest canopies curved down through a narrow valley, before rising up again on the side of a mountain.

‘There’s a forest walk on the way to the beach,’ Rachel said. ‘I’ve already been down there.’

‘When did you get here?’ I asked.

‘About an hour ago.’

‘I’m sorry we’re so late,’ I said. ‘I would’ve rung but I couldn’t get any mobile reception.’

It was a lie. She didn’t seem to notice.

I went into the lounge room, where Pete and Zoe were making themselves comfortable. The house was sparsely furnished. Unlike Vanessa’s house, there was virtually no artwork on the wall, apart from a couple of colour street shots of people in New York. There were a couple of lounge chairs facing the view; a bookshelf full of mostly crime books, the kitchen was neat; a San Marino coffee maker took centre stage. A sliding glass door led onto a large balcony that overlooked the ocean. I stood looking at the beach for a few minutes, watching people as they wandered aimlessly about. Then I looked down. The balcony was much higher than I expected. It was a sheer drop down to the paved driveway. I began to feel dizzy, and stepped back.

38

I wanted to hang at the house, but Pete and the others were keen to explore the beach. We got into our bathers in the lounge room, while the girls went into one of the bedrooms. Pete made a point of perving on them, but Zoe shut the door.

Rachel showed us the way to the beach. The track was overgrown. I walked in front with Rachel, and had to keep holding branches back so they wouldn’t whip the

person behind me in the face. The reeds and scrub along the track were golden brown and half dead, lining the embankment. In one section there was a sheer drop onto a ridge of grey, corrugated boulders.

After twenty minutes we found a wide beach. About thirty meters out was a wreck, the old dreadnaught. I could see a couple of children, like tiny sparrows, diving off the rusted metal hulk and disappearing into the sea.

Zoe and Ali took their shoes off.

'It's freezing,' Zoe screamed as a wave ran over her feet. But she didn't seem to mind.

Although it was a Sunday, the beach wasn't busy but we had to walk some way towards the rocky section of the beach before we could find a place that was more secluded. There was a small alcove, between a rocky outcrop just below the cliff face.

We laid out our towels and undressed. Zoe and Ali took off their bikini tops; Rachel kept hers on. I had never seen her body before. She didn't have the same body as Zoe or Ali, who were both skinny, but still very attractive. Her skin was pale, and she had freckles on her chest. She lay down then turned over suddenly. She had a tattoo on the small of her back, Chinese calligraphy, which I wanted to ask her the meaning of. After a minute, she asked me to put sunscreen on her back, and on the backs of her legs. I deliberately rubbed a little too hard, in case she thought I was enjoying myself.

I stared at the sea; covered in crosses and furls, it resembled a never-ending graveyard. The waves advanced along in rows before crashing down into the sand.

We talked about superficial things. Ali asked if we'd seen any decent bands lately. Zoe wondered whether her boss at work would leave her husband. Me and Tony remained quiet.

I knew Zoe was a committed greenie; and I asked her if she had enrolled to vote.

Pete scoffed at the idea.

'Voting is a waste of time. All power corrupts, don't you know that.'

Pete got up to go for a swim. He tried to urge us to follow, but Zoe wanted to wait until she was hot.

We watched as he waded in then dived into an oncoming wave. Zoe talked about his studies, said he was an idiot for blowing his studies right now when it counted.

'Why don't you tell him that,' I said.

I already have, but he won't listen.

'Well, he's likely to pass everything anyway,' I put in finally.

She began to scorn his artistic talent then used an expression that she had clearly borrowed off Pete. 'Art is all about bluff.' I began to wonder why she wanted to be with him, even though she clearly didn't respect what he did.

Out in the sea, I watched the jet skis darting between the windsurfers and the swimmers. On the beach nobody was moving, apart from an old man picking up the rubbish off the beach and putting it into a bucket.

After a while I got up and went for a swim. I was careful not to cut my feet on the many uneven rocks and broken oyster shells that lay half submerged beneath the water.

Pete waved, urged me to join him out in the deeper water. I was never very confident at swimming and was worried that I'd lose my contact lenses. Pete laughed every time I stopped and bobbed up when a wave approached.

Annoyed, I decided to swim out towards the wreck. Pete saw what I was up to and made a dash for it, sat on the rusted bulwark and waited for me to arrive. He gave me a hand to help me up. He could see how puffed out I was, and smiled.

'You need to swim a bit more, he said. 'Build your chest up. The girls like that.'

I ignored him, turned about to get a better view of the wreck. In the middle was a hollowed out section that looked like a small swimming pool.

'You should go down and have a look,' Pete said. 'There's all these subterranean portholes you can swim through.'

'No, I better not,' I said.

'Come on,' he said, 'Even the kids are doing it.'

We watched as a young boy, no more than ten, dived in and vanished, reappearing again on the other side of the wreck. Pete shrugged and dived under. When he remerged, he swam back out into deeper water. I lowered myself off the wreck and swam after him. There was a solitary container ship gliding imperceptibly along the horizon. The vastness of the sea was at once terrifying and exhilarating.

'My dad used to bring me here as a kid,' said Pete suddenly. 'We used to swim out as far as we could until all the people on the beach were just dots. After a while it's like the sea water flows in your blood, and your body's just a big clot floating in a bloody sea, dissolving ever slowly.'

Back on shore we dried off. It was past three.

39

Rachel jumped up and said she wanted to go for a walk. I offered to join her. As we walked, a couple of guys who had just arrived made a big point of staring at Rachel, and murmured amongst themselves, as we passed. She tried to ignore them.

‘What jerks,’ I said softly. Rachel smiled and said nothing.

At the far end of the beach was a broken down pier. It leant out in the sea awkwardly; its wooden railings hoisted up, bearing stumpy grey legs that seemed unaccustomed to the glare of the sun. We walked along it, reached the end then walked back in silence, the glare of the sun on our faces. We reached a rocky ledge and sat down, dipped our feet in a pool that had been left over from the tide. A couple of little fish were darting about, isolated from the sea, oblivious to the proximity of the immense world beyond. A little further away, sand flies flitted about a clump of rotting seaweed.

I tried to get into conversation, thought of something to say. I knew I wasn’t witty and charming like Pete. I wished he were with us, just to help get the ball rolling.

‘I love the way storms wash things up,’ Rachel said without looking at me.

‘There must be so much rubbish out there that we don’t see.’

‘You think?’ she mused.

‘Yes... off ships, washed out of the estuaries. Or just dumped.’

‘Yes, but the sea makes even the rubbish look interesting. Plastic cups can look natural with a bit of sea erosion. The sea is stronger than everything.’

‘One day we’ll be engulfed in it.’

She turned to face me. ‘Boy you are pessimistic aren’t you!’

I avoided her gaze, felt stupid. Somehow I thought she would have agreed with me.

‘You know, despite all the gloomy predictions people make, we’ll survive all the floods, all the catastrophes that come our way. Do you know why? Because it’s our instinct.’

The noise of a motorbike up on the road interrupted her train of thought.

‘Isn’t it stupid the way people have to destroy things that are beautiful,’ Rachel said, turning to me and frowning.

‘They probably don’t care,’ I said.

‘Well, of course not. That’s obvious.’

When Rachel had been with the others, she seemed joyful, conversing on one subject and then another without interruption. It all looked so easy. I began to imagine that perhaps I oppressed Rachel in some way. Whenever I was around her she seemed annoyed or a little sullen. We headed back towards the others.

Ahead of us some guys were heaving a speedboat over the sand; the boat kept coming off its blow-up rollers; it looked like an old turtle scraping itself back into the tide. When the boat was half way down the beach, the guys stopped and went and got some fishing rods and an esky from a car and put them in the boat. Then they adjusted the motor, which seemed to keep slipping off its attachment.

The sea looked darker now; shadows from the rocks behind had crept over the beach. By the time we made it back to where the others were sitting there were only a couple of kids now diving off the wreck. As the sun lowered, so too did the temperature,

and the sand flies were replaced now by the occasional mosquito that relished the long field of prey.

Pete was talking about his theories on art. He'd even taken out a sketchbook from his bag and was drawing a portrait of Zoe.

'Do you always carry that around?' Rachel asked.

'Not always,' Pete replied. 'Sometimes it's better to not have it. Just to observe.' He kept drawing. He was very good; with a few lines of a pencil, he somehow managed to draw out a quality, an inner loneliness, that I hadn't associated with Zoe before. It stripped Zoe of her mystique; she seemed a suburban girl of her age, her eyes seemed empty, her face painted with a contrived coolness. I wondered why Pete fancied her. Perhaps it was precisely this vulnerability that attracted him.

I asked Rachel if she thought she'd done well, knowing of course that she had. She shrugged; the question embarrassed her.

'None of it will amount to anything anyway,' Pete joined in. 'It only seems important to now, but in a year's time we'll all be doing whatever we want.'

He put the sketchbook down and put his arm around Zoe and began kissing her neck. Zoe responded by smiling and scrunching up her shoulder. Rachel looked at me, rolled her eyes, as though nothing could be more pathetic. I dug my fingers into the hot sand. All around were shells, pieces of seaweed, dried sharks eggs.

'I'm hot,' Rachel said suddenly and stood up.

'Yeah, maybe we should get going,' Zoe said, brushing away Pete's arm.

We dressed and wandered slowly back up the track to the house. As we were winding our way up the steepest part of the track, Rachel took my hand momentarily, squeezed my fingers then let go.

We found the others sitting on the balcony, looking laconic and bored.

40

It was Pete who suggested we go for a walk after dinner.

‘What out there? Isn’t it just all bush? We’ll bore ourselves to death,’ Zoe protested.

‘Course we won’t,’ Rachel said matter-of-factly. ‘It’s fantastic to be amongst the trees.’

In the end, it didn’t take much convincing, only Nic and his girlfriend decided to stay and lounge about on the balcony.

Leading off the main driveway was a dirt track, which lead up a slope; Pete took the lead and bolted ahead. On either side of us were ghost gums and tiny shrubs with blue and yellow flowers that nestled under large red boulders. Butterflies were out too, and mosquitoes were beginning to bite. Some of the trees had fallen over, and were now covered with moss and lichen. Every now and then we heard koalas and possums hissing, and above the screech of the galahs at regular intervals.

We climbed higher. Soon we came across a creek.

‘Do you know where you’re going?’ Zoe asked. She was clearly getting annoyed.

‘No,’ Pete said, without looking behind him.

He crossed the river, stepping nimbly on a series of stones that looked like they'd been placed there. Once he was over, he stood on a narrow glade and began rolling a joint, as the rest of us attempted, with varying degree of success, to avoid getting our shoes wet and we crossed the creek.

Once we had all made it over, Pete lit up a joint.

'You're not allowed to smoke,' Rachel protested. 'It would only take one ember to send the whole forest up in flames.'

Pete ignored her and gave the joint to Tony, who smoked it greedily.

'You know I heard some guy died up here not long ago,' Pete said, grinning.

'Really? Where did you read that?' Rachel said, and looked at me for support.

'It was in the news. They couldn't find his body, but after a few weeks some hiker found it in a gully.'

'It would've been eaten by animals by then,' said Tony.

'Course it was,' said Pete. 'Probably just a skeleton.'

A large grey kangaroo bolted out of the bush towards the creek and almost collided with us. Nobody said anything for a short while; it was clear we were all a little frightened.

'You got to be careful,' Tony said. 'Kangaroos that size can rip your guts open.'

Another kangaroo soon followed, but this time leaped alongside the river and vanished into some dense scrub.

'It must be feeding time,' Rachel said.

'I wondered what that intense smell was,' Pete said. 'It's all the kangaroo shit, it stinks cause of all the eucalyptus leaves they eat.'

The path veered right; we turned and saw an enormous outcrop of granite; the path lead straight towards it. As we drew closer the foliage pared away, the ground was sandy and speckled with grey-blue. I began to look out for koalas; I always admired their endless capacity for laziness.

‘Ah shit!’ Tony screamed.

‘Did you get bitten?’ Pete asked.

‘Fucking march fly,’ Tony said and began rubbing his arm.

The path took us to a slab of rock, resembling a giant tombstone, that had been tipped over on its side to form a wide ledge. Pete immediately climbed up onto it and stood there and surveyed the view below like an ancient explorer. Something grabbed his attention.

‘Hey, you gotta come up here and see this!’

We clambered up the rocks; the effort was worth it. A large boulder sat on the base of the slab, beneath it was a massive cavity. Several long white painted figures like paper cut-out dancers were clearly visible. We all stood there staring at them; none of us wishing to intrude on the majesty of our discovery.

Tony spoke first. ‘Do you think they’re real?’

Pete could barely contain his annoyance, ‘Course they’re fucking real. Why would anyone forge something like that?’

‘I just think it’s weird there’s no sign.’

‘That’s because people don’t give a shit about Aboriginal culture.’

There was a silence. Zoe sat down on the slab.

‘Why do you two always argue? You bicker like an old couple.’

Pete laughed. ‘Rubbish! We say what we like to each other because we’re not afraid of being honest.’

‘I’m not saying they look fake,’ Tony continued. ‘It’s just weird that they’re not mentioned anywhere.’

‘Maybe that’s so they don’t get vandalised,’ Rachel said. ‘There are so many idiots out there. It’s better beautiful things like this are kept secret.’

Pete took out his mobile and began taking photos.

Rachel glared at him. ‘You better not be putting those on Facebook.’

‘I’m not even on Facebook,’ Pete retorted. ‘I wanna find out more about them that’s all. My dad will know someone for sure.’

‘I want to get out of here,’ Zoe said suddenly. ‘I don’t think it’s right.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘It’s not right to just come up here and start taking photos. You don’t know what they’re there for? They’ve probably been there for thousands of years. Maybe they’re like, guarding something.’

‘I’m appreciating them, what’s wrong with that?’ Pete looked at me; I shrugged.

‘She’s right,’ Rachel said. ‘It doesn’t feel right. We’re intruding on something we don’t understand.’

Rachel and Zoe started to climb back down.

Pete laughed. ‘The people who painted these are dead. Now it’s up to us.’

Still, he didn’t want to linger. We joined the girls at the foot of the rocks.

‘Let’s go back to the house,’ Zoe said decisively.

I don't think any of us really wanted to leave. I had an impulse to walk off on my own, head straight in the bushes. I took a few steps but I couldn't walk any further. I breathed deeply for a few seconds in a shallow and pathetic attempt to inscribe the feelings of nature in my blood. In truth, the bush filled me with unease. I would never have the courage to walk off on my own; even on a path like the one we were on. The trees, the humid air, the sounds of nature made me dizzy and nauseous.

41

On the way back we came across a new track that followed the creek. Pete was adamant that we head that way instead. Zoe and Tony put up some resistance, but Pete wasn't listening.

'All roads lead to Rome,' Pete said and took off without us.

'See you back at the house,' said Zoe. She went back the way we came. Tony decided to go with her. Rachel looked at me, smiled; she knew I wanted to follow Pete.

'I'm going with the others,' she said abruptly and ran to catch up with Zoe and Tony who were waiting for her at the first bend. I wanted to go with her, but my loyalty to Pete meant I couldn't abandon him, even though I knew he probably couldn't have cared less.

The track took us on a giant loop. As the sun went down, the trees took on a sinister appearance. There were new sounds now, different animals began calling to each other in far off cries. Pete began to call back; his voice was soaked up into the oblivion of the forest. At one point he mentioned the paintings of Roberts and Streeton.

No paint can ever capture the intensity of the Australian sun, I thought. It also occurred to me that perhaps those painters were after something else, more reassuring, hospitable and noble, whereas in this heat, even the kangaroos look like they're tired and worn.

It was beginning to get dark. We began to walk more quickly; in sections the path became steep. Every now and then one of us slipped on dusty stones and had to grab onto the other to stop ourselves from falling. We passed a limestone wall with wave-like formations: hollows and flowing striations that looked like frozen water. There were more flowers too, little shrubs flourished in the proximity to the water.

After no more than thirty minutes we saw lights flickering ahead, which turned out to be a whole series of lanterns hoisted on poles at intervals along the path leading through to a campsite. As we came closer, we saw rows of tents equipped with gas BBQs and power generators, with fat 4-wheel drives parked alongside. People sat eating and drinking beer in their camp chairs. Some were watching TV.

As we passed by, he glared disdainfully at a group of teenagers, who looked like they were on a school camp.

'I can't think of anything worse,' Pete said. 'Can't they see how pathetic it is? Mind you it be great to sleep out in the open.'

'The only problem is we'd get eaten alive by the mosquitoes,' I said.

'We can invite the girls to an orgy. Human sweat puts them off.'

I laughed.

'Why not,' Pete continued. 'We're just animals.'

'Animals only do it to breed,' I said.

‘I’ve got nothing against breeding.’

We waited some more. The moon was now visible, the stars spilt over the entire night sky.

42

When we reached the house, we found the others smoking joints on the balcony, apart from Rachel, who was above that sort of thing.

‘Come and have a look,’ Zoe said when she saw us. ‘There was a sea eagle hovering over the beach.’

Although the bird was far off, circling a large area above the foreshore, you could see its distinctive black and white wings, permanently outstretched, gliding with serene dominance over the land below. I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

I’m not sure when it began but when I turned around, I saw that Pete and Zoe were kissing and fondling each other voraciously. Nic was already in the lounge-room, opening a bottle of Absolut.

He brought the bottle back to the balcony and took a long swig. He passed the bottle to Ali. She gulped some, winced and rubbed her mouth with her sleeve. Soon they were kissing too. Pete and Zoe moved into the lounge-room and began taking their tops off before splaying themselves on the couch. I turned around, and saw Pete squeezing his hands down Zoe’s jeans. It wasn’t long before Ali and Nic joined them on the floor alongside the couch. Now Tony went over, sat himself down on a chair, and watched. The others made no objection, as though the whole arrangement had been tacitly agreed up on beforehand.

I turned towards Rachel. I wanted to do the same with her and she knew it. She wouldn't look at me. Behind us came the rhythmic sounds and muffled breathing of people having sex.

Rachel stood up. 'Come on let's go for a walk. This is gross.' I looked up at her, trying to contain my disappointment.

'Sure,' I said and stood up. She took my hand and led me through the lounge-room. As I passed I looked down to see my friend's naked bodies sprawled over each other on the floor, arms and hands seemed to be everywhere at once, moving from one body to the next without any restraint. Even Tony, still in his underwear, was now stroking Zoe's chest with one hand while he stooped and began kissing her leg, before moving onto Pete's. Then he looked up at me, grinning.

'Why don't you two join us?'

'Leave them,' Pete laughed. 'They're in love, can't you tell.'

Outside it was almost dark. As soon as we shut the front door, Rachel took my hand and squeezed it.

'I don't want to have sex with you, okay?'

'That's fine,' I said.

'I just want to hold your hand, that's all.'

We stood there in silence; the sky was now dark blue.

'You're not like the others,' Rachel said.

'How am I different?'

'Pete's like an animal. He doesn't know how to control himself. Something terrible's going to happen to him, you wait.'

‘He is crazy, that’s for sure,’ I admitted. ‘But everyone seems to like him. You too, I think.’

I looked at Rachel, to see if I could detect a reaction. She frowned, and she didn’t deny what I’d said. She was always hard to read. You could see her thinking, but she rarely disclosed what was private to her. Through the noise of the crickets and the possums, we could hear the others, fucking, laughing, the incessant creaking of the floorboards.

‘Do you want to go back in now?’ I asked, hoping she might say yes after all.

‘No, let’s stay here,’ she said, then squeezed my hand again.

43

I woke early. I’d slept with Rachel, but we both had our clothes on and didn’t do anything beyond touching each other’s feet, which still managed to keep me awake for over two hours. I made myself some toast, ate it on the balcony and watched the tiny waves rolling onto the beach, sometimes seagulls stood still on the wind, before gliding low into the surf, but there was no sign of the eagle.

The others slowly emerged from their bedrooms. Having spent the night in each other’s arms, they looked tired, and unwilling to talk. Nic and Ali and Tony wanted to drive to the Twelve Apostles. Pete tried to dissuade them, telling them it was about three hours drive there and back.

‘And there’s not twelve of them anyway, only eight. One of them fell down a few years ago so there’s no guarantee the others will still be standing by the time you get there.’

But after they made themselves breakfast they drove off anyway. The rest of us: Rachel, myself, and Pete and Zoe made cups of tea and sat back out on the balcony. It grew overcast; soon it was pouring with rain. Pete joked about what a miserable time the others would have.

‘Is Vanessa coming down?’ I asked Pete.

‘I think so,’ he answered. ‘But if the weather’s like this, I don’t know.’

‘Have you slept with her?’

Pete looked at me surprised; I had even surprised myself by asking him so abruptly.

‘Why do you think that?’ he said.

‘It just seems pretty obvious to me, that’s all,’ I said, emboldened now, not caring that Zoe was within earshot.

‘You just say that because you think it’s odd, you’re prejudiced, she’s quite special, you know, in her own way.’

‘I’m sure she is.’

‘I haven’t slept with her, if you want to know.’

I believed him. He was guilty of exaggerating, but he almost never lied. It was something he prided himself on. Now I felt stupid for having pressed him.

It rained for most of the day. The others returned from the Twelve Apostles red-faced. The rain had been so heavy at times, they could barely see out the windscreen.

‘We didn’t even get put of the car,’ Tony complained.

A few minutes later, Pete received a text from Vanessa.

‘She’s on her way down,’ he said. ‘We’d better tidy the place up.’

44

In fact Vanessa didn't arrive until later in the afternoon. Pete was sitting beside Zoe on the balcony. Rachel, along with Tony, Nic and Ali had decided to go to the beach after lunch. Vanessa came into the kitchen without me hearing her. I turned around and saw her putting her bag down noiselessly; she clearly didn't want to disturb anyone.

Vanessa greeted me, smiling as always. She began to make herself a cup of coffee.

'I really need one of these,' she said. She must have seen Pete on the balcony with Zoe, but didn't make any effort to go and say hello to him. I asked her about the long drive down.

'Awful,' she said. 'I mean the view's nice of course, but I've seen that a thousand times, and it's not like you can look at it... can you... when you're driving?'

'Yes, one way to get yourself killed,' I said.

'Plenty of people have gone over those cliffs you know. Just last year a Frenchman with his daughter. She miraculously survived.'

The coffee began to percolate.

'Sure you don't want one?' she said.

I changed my mind and said yes.

We drank our coffee standing in the kitchen. It seemed impossible that Pete had not already seen her. He and Zoe had stood up and were now leaning on the railing looking at the view. Surely he must have noticed the smell of the coffee brewing and turned around?

Vanessa gulped her espresso, then came up to me and kissed me on the cheek.

‘You’re a good person, you know that? One day you’ll make a woman very happy,’ she said, then she breathed deeply and headed towards the balcony.

As she opened the sliding door, Pete turned, as if on cue, and put on a show of being surprised. He took Vanessa by the hand and pulled her outside.

‘You haven’t met Zoe have you?’ he said.

‘No, I haven’t,’ Vanessa said. ‘Are you Pete’s girlfriend?’

Zoe did not seem taken aback. In fact she barely reacted at all. ‘Is that what Pete told you?’

Vanessa appeared not to expect that answer. She hesitated, chuckled to herself and said. ‘No, I just guessed. Even though I don’t think he belongs to anybody.’

‘No I don’t think so either,’ Zoe said.

Vanessa smiled. ‘Yes, right. That’s what we like about him. It’s a rare quality.’

‘We don’t really talk about things like that,’ Zoe said.

‘Why not?’ Vanessa said. ‘It’s a great shame that all the interesting things usually get said about you when you’re not there to hear them. Your reputation can be smashed to pieces without you hearing a word about it.’

They moved into the lounge room and, after standing awkwardly for a few minutes, made themselves comfortable on the couch. I was the only one standing; they must have sensed I didn’t want to join them. At least nobody invited me to sit down.

‘Thanks for letting us stay,’ Zoe said after a silence.

‘That’s fine,’ Vanessa said, stretching her legs out. We weren’t using it. And I know what it’s like too... finishing school... you need some space where you can just... let your thoughts bubble away without all that pressure on you.’

‘Zoe loves a bit of pressure,’ Pete said.

Vanessa sat upright, clapped her hands together. She was enjoying herself. ‘Do you have strict parents?’ she asked Zoe pointedly

‘No,’ said Zoe.

‘She’s purely self-motivated,’ said Pete.

‘Really? That’s good. Very good. Not many people are I find.’

‘She’s ambitious as well.’

‘What do you want to be when you grow up, Zoe?’ said Vanessa

‘I’m not sure,’ Zoe said, then absently shifted her gaze back to the balcony, and the view of the ocean beyond.

‘A lawyer... something like that?’

‘Maybe.’

‘She wants to be an actress,’ said Pete.

‘I thought it was actor. I thought everyone was an actor these days. See I know a few actors.’ Vanessa leaned back again, stretched out her long legs.

‘It’s a life of great... uncertainty. Does that suit your temperament?’ She looked at Zoe intently. But Zoe had tuned out of the conversation and wasn’t paying her the slightest attention.

Vanessa gave her a nudge. ‘Hey I’m talking to you.’

Zoe, embarrassed, tried to think of something to say. Pete began laughing.

‘You’ve got to be joking. She’s a control freak.’

Zoe began to protest. But it only made Pete laugh all the more vigorously.

‘You just do what you believe in,’ said Vanessa. ‘There are too many sheep. Particularly as you get older. If it doesn’t work out it doesn’t matter... change your mind when you’re forty.’

‘It’ll work out,’ said Zoe, and bit her bottom lip. ‘Whatever you’re talking about.’

‘Told you she was self-motivated,’ said Pete. ‘Even if she doesn’t realise it.’

Vanessa suddenly turned her attention to me.

‘What about you?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘You mean me?’

‘You’re the one I’m looking at,’ she said, with a trace of cruelty. ‘What do you want to do? I’ve heard all about it from Pete, and now this young woman. But what about you? Why don’t you ever say anything about yourself?’

‘I don’t know. Go to uni maybe. I got plenty of time to think about it over the break,’ I said, but immediately felt foolish. Vanessa wasn’t going to let me off that easily.

‘Do you think you passed your exams?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I hope so.’

‘Of course he passed,’ said Pete. ‘He’s very clever you know.’

‘Be quiet. Let him speak.’ I couldn’t tell whether Vanessa was making fun of me or not.

‘He’ll pass I’m telling you,’ Pete continued.

Vanessa stood up suddenly and strode past me towards the kitchen. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘You can do what you like. I’m sorry I got like that. It was a bloody long trip.’

She began to make another coffee, but turned the tap on too hard, so that water splashed across the front of her dress and over the marble bench top.

‘Your husband’s not coming down?’ Zoe asked.

‘No. He doesn’t like the sea,’ Vanessa replied.

‘He doesn’t have to go into the sea. He can just stare at the view,’ Pete said.

‘He’s away, in Europe.’ There was a silence. ‘He doesn’t like it down here anymore. If you stay here too long you lose all your enthusiasm. It’s so relaxing it gets on his nerves.’

‘Why doesn’t he just read a book?’ I said.

‘He doesn’t read. He says he does, but it’s not true. He hasn’t read a book in years.’

‘You’ve got an amazing collection of crime books.’ I said, looking at the bookshelves stuffed full with hardboiled classics.

Vanessa asked me what I was reading. I began to enthuse about Don Quixote but she cut me off.

‘Do you speak Spanish at home?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m not Spanish.’

‘I thought you were.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘My dad’s parents are Jewish.’

‘Where from though? They’re European aren’t they?’

‘Yes... they were born in Italy but their parents died. And they were taken to England.’

‘I’m sorry... that’s awful,’ said Vanessa. She seemed genuinely disturbed.

There was a silence. ‘Let’s go outside,’ Pete said. He stood up and began to walk towards the balcony.

Vanessa, clearly annoyed, said, ‘don’t you want to hear about his family?’

‘It’s his business.’

‘No, it’s interesting... what happens to people.’

I didn’t want to talk about it myself, so I tried to draw a line under the conversation. ‘I don’t really know any more than what I’ve told you. My dad never talks about it. I don’t think he knows himself what happened to his parents.’

But Vanessa was intent on finding out more. ‘Aren’t you curious though?’

‘I suppose it was just so long ago it doesn’t matter anymore,’ I said. ‘My mum was forty-two when she got pregnant. And I’m the only child.’

‘Maybe they’re just trying to protect you?’

‘Yes maybe,’ I said.

‘Why didn’t they have children before?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘It’s like you’re a kind of miracle child,’ she said.

Pete laughed at that. ‘Yeah right,’ he said.

‘Don’t laugh,’ Vanessa said. ‘I know what it’s like. It was the same for me with Chloe. I didn’t think I could get pregnant either. I have a miracle child too.’

Vanessa came up to me and squeezed my arm then she went into her bedroom. She must have been gone about five minutes. Pete and Zoe went back out onto the balcony and began conversing in a low voice. When Vanessa emerged from the room, she had changed and was now wearing a long grey dress and yellow sandals. Her eyes looked darker.

‘I’m going for a walk,’ she announced, not looking at anyone in particular. I was the only one who took any notice.

‘Would you like to join me?’ she said.

‘Sure,’ I said, not wanting to offend her. ‘Are we going far?’

‘No no, not far,’ she said.

45

We ambled down the driveway towards the beach. I was half expecting to see my friends returning, which would give me an excuse to turn back. But halfway down, Vanessa turned into a track that veered off into the bush.

‘Have you been down here before?’ she said, turning her head to face me.

I shook my head.

‘There’s nothing down here,’ she said. ‘But it’s a nice walk. You get a good view of the sky. I like this time of day best. It’s when all the animals come out to feed.’

I explained that we had gone on a walk the day before and encountered a number of kangaroos, but she didn’t appear too interested. I walked behind her for a few minutes, listening in case there were any animals lurking in the undergrowth. She stopped, looked up at a ghost gum towering above us.

‘Have you been to his parent’s house?’ she asked suddenly.

I realised she had taken me outside so she could talk about Pete.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I went there for dinner once.’ After a pause I added. ‘He doesn’t usually bring friends back to his place.’

‘I wonder why that is.’

‘I think he’s ashamed of his parents.’

‘In what way?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘Are they rich?’ she said.

‘No, not at all,’ I said. ‘They’re very nice people actually, but they embarrass him. They completely dote on him. They’d do anything for him and almost treat him like a baby. Maybe that’s why he doesn’t like his friends to go there.’

‘But he took you there.’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Most kids are embarrassed by their parents let’s face it,’ she said. It was the first time she had referred to Pete as a ‘kid’. She began to walk on, after a few minutes she turned and began walking back the way we had come, tapping me on the arm as she passed me. ‘Let’s go back,’ she said. ‘I’m hungry.’

We walked back to the house in silence. Just before we reached the door, Vanessa stopped and took me by the hand.

‘I want to do something for him,’ she said, her face was desperate. ‘I’ve left him money in my will.’

I didn’t know what to say, I felt self-conscious, foolish. ‘That’s good,’ I said, then decided it must have been a joke. I began to laugh. Vanessa let go of my hand. She looked genuinely hurt.

‘What’s so funny? Don’t you believe me?’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘You’re laughing because you’re too young to understand anything. One day you will though, you’ll know what it’s like to want someone to be happy, especially when you know that you will never be happy yourself.’

‘I’m happy,’ I said.

‘I think you’re like me,’ she said. ‘You live in a universe separate from everyone else. One day you’ll wake up and realise that life has slipped you by.’

After she spoke, Vanessa fixed her eyes on me. I looked down, confused, but also pleased that somehow this woman had attempted to discern me, in ways that no other woman, apart from my mother, had ever done before.

I looked up and was about to ask her what she meant, but she had already opened the door and gone inside.

46

Pete was reading a book on the couch. I asked where Zoe was and he said she was having a lie down on the bed. Our friends had still not returned from the beach. Pete marked his page then put his book down on the coffee table.

Vanessa sat down on the edge of the couch. I noticed her legs were trembling.

‘You look like you’re at home,’ she said.

Pete sat up, looked at her apologetically.

‘I didn’t mean anything by that,’ Vanessa said, grinning. ‘Why shouldn’t you feel relaxed?’

Pete stood up, a disconcerted expression took hold on his face.

‘Why do you always do that to me?’ he said, his voice louder than before. ‘You always do that. You always try to make everything difficult.’

Vanessa kept silent. ‘I’m not doing anything to you. That wouldn’t be possible. You don’t think about other people anyway.’

‘Be quiet,’ Pete said, his face flushed. ‘You try and make a fool out of me in front of my friends. You do it on purpose.’

‘Do you mean Leo?’ Vanessa said, shooting a quick glance in my direction. ‘Leo doesn’t care about things like that do you Leo?’

I didn’t want to be drawn into the argument, so I said that I didn’t know what they were talking about.

‘See, he’s a diplomat,’ Vanessa said.

‘He thinks you’re crazier than I do.’ Pete was shouting now.

I wasn’t sure whether Vanessa was laughing or crying, but her whole body began to shake.

‘Yes that’s right,’ Pete continued. ‘You’re tragic.’

He went over to where his bags were pushed up against the wall. Then he looked over at me.

‘We should go,’ he said. ‘As soon as the others get back we’re leaving.’

‘But it’ll be night soon,’ I said.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ he said firmly. ‘We’re not staying here any longer than we need to.’

Vanessa watched him in silence, breathing heavily; her eyes looked like they were about to fill with tears. Pete looked at her; he wanted her to apologise. I did it for him.

‘I’m sorry for everything,’ I said.

‘What?’ Vanessa said; she looked dazed. ‘What? You haven’t done anything. Nobody has done anything. It’s my fault. It’s me, that’s all.’

We stood watching her, unsure of what to do. She stood up, but immediately sat down again.

I tried to think of something to say. ‘Are you staying here long?’ I blurted out.

Vanessa regarded me thoughtfully, like she was seeing me for the first time.

‘I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it. What does it matter?’ Then she screamed, ‘what does any of it matter?’

She moved towards the balcony. It was then that Zoe, still half asleep, came out of the bedroom.

‘What’s going on?’ she said.

Pete stared at her bemused. He followed Vanessa out onto the balcony. He stood close to her and put his arm around her waist. They both stared down towards the sea. From behind, perhaps because he was a few inches taller, he looked the elder of the two.

Zoe looked at me. ‘Have they had an argument or something?’

‘Not really,’ I said. ‘I think whatever is going on has nothing to do with Pete anyway.’

Zoe looked at me dubiously. ‘Are you sure about that?’

‘No, I don’t know anything,’ I said.

‘He’s always pissing someone off.’ Then she added, ‘but that’s why we like him, isn’t it?’

I didn't react. I looked over to where Vanessa and Pete were standing. She now rested her head on his shoulder. I couldn't tell whether they were talking or not. The sun sat low over the hills, casting long shadows across the balcony; I began to wonder where the others were.

Zoe went into the kitchen; she began opening some drawers.

'You don't know where she keeps her alcohol do you?'

'No, I said. 'I can ask her though.'

'Best to leave them alone,' she said then went to look in a side room.

I glanced over at Pete and Vanessa. They were still facing the ocean, standing there in silence. I don't know why, but I began to walk towards them. I could see that Vanessa was laughing; Pete took a step backwards, then he suddenly leapt onto the railing, sat astride it. He turned his head, saw me; he was laughing also. He sat up higher, put one foot on the railing, then the other, stretched his arms out in seesaw fashion, so he wouldn't lose his balance. Even though I was scared, could see the danger, I stood completely still and watched.

Still laughing, Vanessa jolted forwards, grabbed his leg with her hand. Pete looked down at her.

'Let go,' he said. He gave her a questioning look. 'Let go,' he said again, this time more forcefully.

Vanessa raised her other hand, wrapped both hands around his leg then shook him violently. Pete tried to grab hold of her shoulder. Vanessa wouldn't let go. She suddenly yanked his leg away. That's when he fell. He went down. There was no scream. He just hit

the ground, a soft sound, like a cushion dropped onto floorboards. I looked over the balcony. He was lying there: still, soundless.

Vanessa looked at me, her face completely calm, like she hadn't seen what happened. I pushed her aside and ran out of the house. As I passed Zoe I heard her say, 'what's wrong?'

I stood staring down at Pete. I couldn't breathe, or speak, or move. His eyes were closed, like he was asleep, but his mouth was open with a row of front teeth protruding. There was no blood. He looked like a dead person, how I imagined they would look. His body looked so small now, like it would be so easy to fold him up and carry him away, put him somewhere, away from the others.

Someone was screaming beside me. 'See if he's breathing!' It was Zoe; she yanked on my arm. 'Do something.'

I knelt down, put my head on his chest. There was nothing. I tried to take his pulse, like I'd been shown in first aid classes at school. There was nothing. I took off my glasses and put them over his mouth; there was a faint trace of condensation.

'He's breathing,' I said. Just then I began to cry.

'Let me do it,' Zoe said and shoved me aside. I stood there and watched as she took his pulse. Then she started performing CPR.

'Why does he have to be such an idiot?' She began to cry also. She took his pulse again. 'It's still beating,' she said.

'I couldn't feel it,' I said.

'No, it's there alright,' she said, and squeezed Pete's hand.

There was a voice beside me. 'He's okay isn't he?' It was Vanessa. She looked down at Pete, her face showed no emotion.

I couldn't bring myself to look at her.

'I've rung the ambulance,' she said. 'They'll be here in about thirty minutes.'

We sat beside Pete as we waited for the ambulance. Nobody spoke. Zoe held his hand the whole time. The ambulance came after only ten minutes. They had received a false alarm at a campsite down the road and so were in the area.

The medics who attended looked like they were in their early twenties. One of them, a girl barely older than me, began clearing his throat with her finger before taking his pulse.

'He's breathing,' she said. Then she spoke inaudibly with the other medic, a man with a goatee, who took out a kit from his bag. He lifted up Pete's arm, gave him an injection.

'Did he fall?' he said.

'Yes, from up there,' I said, and pointed towards the balcony.

'Had he been drinking?'

'A little,' I said. 'But that's not why he fell.'

He nodded then bent down and lifted Pete's head while the other medic placed a brace around his neck.

'I'm sorry,' he said after a few minutes. 'It doesn't look good. He's in a coma.'

Zoe screamed, began crying. I could feel my throat constricting. With a huge effort I managed to suck air back into my lungs. I sat down, to stop myself from toppling over.

‘We need to get him to a hospital straight away,’ the male medic said. He put an oxygen mask over Pete’s face. It barely took a couple of minutes for Pete to be placed on a stretcher and carried into the back of the ambulance.

‘Would you like to come with us?’ the male medic said, looking at me and Zoe.

‘I’ll go,’ Vanessa said.

‘No, let me go,’ Zoe said firmly.

‘Alright, we better go,’ the male medic said. He ushered Zoe inside the ambulance and closed the door.

The siren flared up, the ambulance moved off down the driveway.

Vanessa looked at me, her face still calm.

‘I’m going to follow them in the car,’ she said. ‘Would you like to come?’

I declined. She got into her car and started the engine, gave me a final glance before driving off.

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Pete was taken to St Vincent’s hospital. He was unconscious for six hours. According to the doctors there was a small amount of bleeding around the cranium, which they were able to drain. There was no need to be concerned. He needed to rest, and be kept under observation. He was allowed to go home two weeks later. Only a few of Pete’s friends turned up to visit him in hospital: Tony, Rachel, Zoe, Arino, a couple of others. Many of his friends were on their holidays with their families, and didn’t bother coming back. A few texted him get-well messages. Everyone, naturally, would have known about it.

But Pete would never let anything like that bother him. He was perpetually focused on the future. A week or two after leaving hospital he was back to his usual self. One day, when we were walking to the City Baths, I mentioned Vanessa. I asked him if he remembered anything about what had happened, those last few seconds on the balcony before he fell.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he said.

‘But she pushed you?’

‘So?’

‘Maybe she was trying to kill you. Should we tell the police?’

He laughed. ‘Don’t be silly,’ he said. ‘There’s no point going over it. Nothing happened anyway. I’m fine aren’t I? Just forget about it.’ Then he stood still, looked at me earnestly. ‘You must never mention what happened to anybody you understand?’

‘No, I won’t,’ I said. He made me promise a couple of times.

‘It’s something you can’t understand,’ he said, looking at me squarely. ‘People come together, and then they separate. It doesn’t happen for any reason. We only pretend things have a clear meaning because we frame everything into stories.’

‘How do you mean? I asked.

‘Reality isn’t like that,’ he said. ‘Things happen, just happen. There’s no point making it any more significant than what it is. I don’t know why Vanessa wanted to hang out with us, what it all meant for her, and I guess I never will.’

We reached the City Baths and stopped on the front steps.

‘Will you miss her?’ I asked.

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘But I did like her. I liked her courage.’

We went in through the front door of the baths. Pete turned to me.

‘You’re a good friend,’ he said. We continued towards the dressing rooms, checked out a couple of girls that passed us in the foyer; they returned our stares, smiling.

I never saw Vanessa ever again. As far as I know, neither did Pete. I don’t know what happened to her. Once I tried to look her up on Facebook, but there was nothing there. It was like she disappeared. I imagined she must have gone to live in Europe.

But not long ago, just before my twenty-third birthday, I believe I saw her daughter Chloe. I’m sure I recognised her from her photo. She was walking towards me on a backstreet in Fitzroy. She must have been seventeen by then, a young version of her mother, same colour hair, intense brown eyes, a confident mouth, her back perfectly straight as she walked. We locked eyes for a second. She looked down, pretended she didn’t see me and crossed the street.

# **The Dream Life Of Butterflies**

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**Raimondo Cortese**



