EXTINCTIONS: A NOVEL

EXTINCTIONS: A THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of a full-length work of prose fiction, and an exegesis of 25,000 words. ‘Extinction’ acts as a hinge between the two components. Both parts are concerned with endings and beginnings, with life, death, loss, reproduction and biological continuity. For the exegesis, these concerns are metaphorical and critical. How do we begin a creative work? What does it mean to be original, or to be a copy? In the novel, these concerns are refracted through theme, character and plot. What does it mean to grow old? To lose your wife? To lose a child? What does it mean to be adopted? Can we ever really begin again?

The novel Extinctions is a work of prose fiction. On one level it is the story of a middle-class family struggling with loss and repressed truths and aligns itself with familiar tropes in contemporary realism. Yet the novel offers another more complex story of interfamilial relations in the 21st century, in a darkly comic register. The narrative strains at the edges of realism, using temporal compression and extended analepsis to orchestrate a series of crises and revelations that propel the protagonists towards change. The novel further unsettles generic conventions through the inclusion of historic images and documents, which function as windows for the reader to look outside the novel into the (increasingly) adjacent archives of history, architecture and design.

My thesis is also the story of an egg. In the exegesis, the ‘discovery’ of the egg of an extinct species initiates an inquiry into the function of finding and losing in beginning and ending creative work. In the novel, the daughter Caroline is curating an exhibition called Extinctions. She is travelling to Scotland to secure the Auk Egg, at the same time as she is examining her life and identity as an adopted child. For Frederick Lothian, her father, the Auk egg is a potent symbol of familial loss, decline and death.

Gillian Beer’s term ‘double stress’ (originally applied to the work of Charles Darwin) captures the tensions within the single PhD: to sustain ‘the unknowable’—that open-ended process through which writing emerges—while demonstrating theoretical exactitude and critical depth—‘knowledge’. Through the extended use of the concept
of extinction, as well as literal and figural eggs, my thesis demonstrates a constitutive role for metaphor and allegory in managing these double accents. Metaphor enables connections between realms of discourse and registers; it offers the writer the opportunity to forge networks of adjacencies that can underwrite both theoretical and the creative elements. For example, the figures of ‘egg’ and ‘shell’ link Frederick’s profession as an engineer to his daughter’s exploration of her origins as an adopted child. In both novel and exegesis, literal and metaphorical eggs connect natural history, museums, narrative theory, adoption, family, engineering and architecture. Ultimately, the egg connects father and daughter back to their brother Callum, whose status as subject or object has been held under question by his father.

Like magic, the egg enables the bringing together of apparently random strands: the question of origins, the myth of organicism, the history of objects and the manner in which they stand in for, contain and enable thought. But egg or no egg, a novel must still cover over what the exegesis lays bare. Realism demands that things just are: no visible scaffolding, no clunky trap-doors, no hats with holes in the top. Both the novel and the exegesis answer realism’s demand with a resounding ‘no!’ Rather together they assert that there is always the possibility that things might be different, that things could be more than what they appear to be, and that rather than destroying the pleasure of reading knowing how things work might make better magicians of us all.
Declaration:

The thesis is my own composition, all sources have been acknowledged and my contribution is clearly identified in the thesis.

The thesis has been substantially completed during the course of enrolment in this degree at UWA and has not previously been accepted for a degree at this or another institution. This work does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.
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Contents

Abstract........................................... ii

Declaration......................................iv

Acknowledgements..............................v

Contents.........................................vi

List of Illustrations.............................vii

Extinctions: The Novel.........................1

Works Consulted.................................270

Extinctions: The Exegesis.....................271

Bibliography........................................348
List of Illustrations
(in order of inclusion)

Novel


Collection: writer’s father.

p.29/30 Marcel Breuer: Steel Club Armchair B3. 1925

p.32 Marcel Breuer seated in the Wassily Chair. 1926

Designed by Philip Johnson. Yoshi Milo Gallery, New York.

p.45  Postcard, Imperial Hotel Tokyo. Blog: *Paradise Leased*

p.47  Photograph, Tokyo, after the fire (the Imperial Hotel is to the left). *Architalk: A personal commentary on Architecture in Boston and Beyond.*


p. 62  Envelope: Trussed Concrete Steel Co. The Kahn System, web archive.
*Architalk: A personal commentary on Architecture in Boston and Beyond.*


p.81  Photograph: Vladimir Shukhov: Adziogol Lighthouse.

p.86 Photographs 1 & 2: Bridge at River Tay. Photographer unknown. Web archive. (On the 28th December 1879 the Tay Bridge collapsed during a violent storm as a train was passing over it, killing all on board.)

p. 90 Advertisement: Venus Pencils, Empire State Building; Fortune Feb. 1934
Hoboken Museum, https://www.hobokenmuseum.org
(accessed 2 January 2010).


p.128 Skeleton of Great Auk, Original source unknown,
http://www.taxidermy4cash.com/rlaukskele.jpg
Original source unknown (accessed 1 October 2008)

p.135 Extract of Letter, Mr. Symington.
p.141 Photograph: Martha, The Last Passenger Pigeon, Smithsonian Collection,
www.mnh.si.edu/onehundredyears/featured_objects/martha2/html
(accessed 1 January 2011).

p.147 Photograph, American Bison Skulls, mid-1870s, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.


p. 269 Photograph: Passenger Pigeons, Image from the Collection, Wisconsin History Museum.

Exegesis

Photograph: Auk Egg, Collection: Aberdeen Museum,
http://www.abdn.ac.uk (accessed April 9, 2008)


Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805), Broken Eggs, 1756
Oil on Canvas, 28 ¾ x 37 in., Collection Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession Number 20:155.8.

Allan McCollum, Lost Objects Series,
http://allanmccollum.net/amcnet2/album/pompeidog.htm
Extinctions
Who is prepared to deprive life of a significant dénouement?

Jean Améry
Tales of extinction often begin near the end, and this one is no exception. The past is invoked— a prior Eden where wildness reigned and the dark earth was rich and generous, the air thick with the beating of feathers. We know from history what will happen next. How did we come to accept such an ending?

Over the page, just round the corner, is the massacre. After the clubbing and shooting and plucking and boiling there is a hiatus, a pause that deepens into a permanent silence. Years, decades later—it is seldom more—that silence is remarked, and there begins a search for the Last Ones. Expeditions are dispatched. Local knowledge is invoked. And when it is documented that all is gone, that not one remains other than the odd mute captive, writers are conscripted to pen salutary tales. These remains are gathered up. There follows a mourning of the remnants, of the last few metres of a patterned cloth that will never be printed again.

These Last Ones are best captured through image, rendered in painting or etching or photograph — an old bird alone in a wire cage in a Midwestern zoo, a single male lowing mournfully in a concrete enclosure in Budapest; or through dramatic re-enactment — a cumbersome bird beaten to death on an island off the coast of Newfoundland, a Quagga brought to its knees on the Africa plains. Some stories are exemplary, propitious, like the American Martha, the Last Passenger Pigeon, whose Centenary will be marked in 2014 by the Cincinnati Zoo, where she died in a cage she shared with Incus, a Carolina Parrot. She too is extinct, but who remembers her?

Not me.

Gather up your feelings as you pass through this space. But remember, all is allegory.
Columns

Column by column in a cloud of dust
They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them somewhere else, to grief.

Auden, *The Shield of Achilles*
Out the window there was nothing that could be called poetry, nothing wind-swept, billowing, tossing or turning in a streaky sky, nothing other than a taut blue sky and the low drone of air conditioners. In car parks across the city women pulled on soft cotton hats and cowered under brollies. Babies kicked and squalled, itchy with heat rash. Fridges groaned. Water dripped from old rubber seals. Milk soured. Fans turned. The grid strained.

Light, an excess of light, as if there had been some kind of global mistake, a wrongful accounting.

At midday the UV index hovered on perilous, dispensed like a terrible penance. If the man in Number 7 could remove the tiled roof of his two bedroom unit and look up into that vaulted sky it would not be out of the question to spot an evil archangel belaying through that dreadful gouge and dropping right into the lounge room where he sat, newspaper folded back, pen uncapped, reading the columns.

Frederick Lothian picked up the remote and pointed it at the cream cylinder on the wall. Chlorine molecules rose around him, heaven-bent. Unaware of the presence of angels (either avenging or beneficent) he shuffled through the pages. Ossibus et capita inhumato. Fred had returned to Latin around the time of his wife’s diagnosis and he still found it a comfort. It had been surprisingly easy to find a tutor with the same passion for a dead language—a call to the University and a consultation with the phone book and he had his man, a retired Classics teacher from a private boys school. They were both Catholic by birth, Frederick lapsed, the Professor by nature skeptical, but they had enjoyed their time together, which was largely spent mourning the introduction of Novus Ordo and the abandoning of the Latin mass.

One Saturday the Professor’s name appeared in the columns. An aneurysm on the golf course? A stroke in the shower? There were no clues in the columns. If the Professor had not been divorced he could have called the man’s wife. There were no
children either. He believed there was a dog called Minos, but
where could you go with that? And what did it matter how you
died once you were dead?

This was what Frederick Lothian thought on Saturday the
17th of January; what Frederick thought he thought; what he
liked to think he thought.

The phone rang twice, and then stopped. Credo in unum
Deum, Patrem omnipotèntem factòrem caeli et terrae, visibilium
òmnium et invisibilium.

Sometime in the 1980s Martha had dragged him off to pray
with a group of Tibetan Monks. The similarities between
Buddhist and Gregorian chant were astonishing, but when he
tried to tell Martha she refused to listen. ‘You’re ruining it,’ she
snapped. After Martha’s death he returned briefly to the church
and took to hanging around after Mass to discuss his ecumenical
epiphany with the parish priest, but the stupid man had glazed
over and moved onto a group of parishioners fund raising for a
new toilet block at the Primary School.

The cistern flushed and filled in the next-door unit. He
angled the paper towards the window. Despite the excess of light
outside he had no northern aspect to speak of. He blamed his
dughter. It was Caroline’s fault he was here. He hated the word
‘retirement’, but not as much as he hated the word ‘Village’, as if
ageing made you a peasant or a fool. Herein lives the Village idiot.
At 69 he was getting on, but did it have to be rammed down his
throat? He tried to inhabit only those sections of the complex
designed for the more able-bodied citizens of St. Sylvan’s, but he
still managed to run into ancient women on Zimmers and signs
reminding him to Mind the Step, to go This Way for Wheelchair
Access and That way for a Courtesy Buggy. Old had infiltrated
his being, and that had to be the reason his left knee kept giving
way and his right eye was clouding over in bright light and
emitting the odd salty tear, as it was doing right now onto the
columns.

He took off his glasses to wipe his eye. Out the window a
blurry figure was making his way across the open quadrangle in
the direction of the dining room. Frederick stood up and put on
his glasses. Was that Tom Chelmsely? What was he doing out
there in the heat? Look at the poor old fellow, with his frame and
leather braces and his bent old back, hanging on by a thread to his Villa. Any minute now Tom would be up for reclassification, and bundled out of his two-bedroom semi-detached into a tiny single brick box with a television, a kettle and a pop-up toaster. Look at him. It was a wonder they had ever let Tom buy into the Independent Area.

Frederick sat down. It was just too painful to watch Tom hobbling on the Zimmer in the fierce heat. Why would you bother going all that way for an indigestible meal? There was no shade out there and the temperature must be well over forty degrees. Fred had been to one or two meals at the dining room and he wouldn’t be going again. Tom could have called for a gopher to take him to, but then that might have given the social workers a leg-up when they came to re-assess his meds and mobility and check off boxes and add up the columns and announce that Mr. Thomas H. Chelmsely was no longer capable of reaching down to wipe himself or squeeze out his own teabag, and he and all that was his were to be shrink-wrapped and trolleyed without ado across the green to the Supported Living Units, which were just a hop, step and a jump from the High Care Facility, where they were all headed anyway. They might as well have erected the Villas over a sawdust pit in the ground, because that was how close death was at St. Sylvan’s. No archangel beating above you with soft Latin wings, but a dark stinking shit-hole right beneath your feet.

Fred swept a finger down the narrow columns of type. A name was usually enough to warn you off. You could be pretty sure there were no dead children around named Walter or Enid—or Frederick for that matter, unless you were French. Frédéric. It was kings and queens when he was born, but now it was more likely to be someone from the television. His name was finished. He could well be the Last of the Fredericks—it was hard to imagine celebrities embracing little blond Alfreeds or Enochs, although Caroline’s best friend had called her first child Daisy and continued the weak theme by calling the second Rose. It was hardly appropriate from the point of view of Australian landscape or character, but then the mother’s name was Fleur, so what could you expect? How could a little girl get on in this part of the
world when she shared a name with an imported exotic annual requiring hand-watering and supplementary feeding?

He heard the metallic *thunk* of an instant gas hot water system. An aged and decrepit body would be stepping across the flat tiled floor into a shower cubicle (no perilously high baths tubs or raised rims to clamor over in this Village), gripping the sturdy metal rail on the wall, readying themselves for the brisk application of liquid soap to crêpey flesh. Frederick shuddered.

The columns beckoned mournfully. The codes were easy once you mastered the iconography. To be avoided at all cost: little pairs of booties, ballet shoes, dummies and motorbikes. Wreathes, logos, and Masonic imagery were generally safe—anything that signified late-middle-aged grown up rule-bound behavior. His eyes snagged on a line.

> *Our darling boy, four years old and lost. Wait for us, sweetheart.*
> *It won’t be long. Mummy and Daddy will be there soon …*

Ambushed. There was only one notice for four year-old *Thompson, David Michael*. The boy would have died late in the week, on Wednesday or perhaps Thursday. Not Friday though—today was Saturday and that would be far too soon to come up for air. This would be the first notice, from his mother and father. *Soon* was a disturbing choice of words. Surely they weren’t planning on dying? And why those three dots at the end of the sentence? What did they mean? Why would you use them in the columns? They should be banned.

Few books had made it out of the boxes stacked around the house, but he had managed to shelve a few foreign language dictionaries and the odd grammar reference. All was not lost. It was a Greek word, of course: ἔλλειψις, *elleipsis* meaning *omission* or *falling short*. ‘*An ellipsis could indicate an unfinished thought … or at the beginning of a sentence, a trailing off into silence … which could also be indicated by a long dash known as an Em dash— which was known as aposiopesis …’

Known to whom, he’d like to know? He’d never heard of *aposiopesis*, and he was certain no one he knew had either. Did
anyone use these words anymore? What was the point of *aposiopesis*? He wasn’t anti-intellectual— just the opposite. He was a highly respected Professor of Structural Engineering (Retired). He had studied Latin. He of all people knew that a specialized language was essential in real-world professions, like engineering. The men who designed and built the world had to have a terminology to deal collectively with challenging structural problems. Without specialized languages buildings and bridges would simply topple over in a breeze. Aircraft would drop out of the sky. The hulls of ships would split open and sink into the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. People would die.

Could a similar defense be mounted in the case of *aposiopesis*, which (he flipped pages furiously), according to *The Dictionary of Rhetorical Terms* meant *becoming silent*, and indicated *the inability or unwillingness to continue*?

The example given was equally baffling: ‘But I thought he was …’ What kind of an example was that? Here you have some poor fellow lost for words, unable to go on, and the experts turn up and offer him the use of an obscure word of Greek origin composed of five or six syllables. Wasn’t that a contradiction? Or was it irony? Could you call it a conundrum? Whatever it was, there ought not to be any ellipses allowed in the columns. What were David Michael’s parents thinking?

He shook out his paper. Tomorrow there would a flood of notices from family and friends, playmates, distant relatives, the volume receding gradually over the following days, like the water level on the lake at L’Isle St. Claire.

April 1946, almost sixty years ago. Young people thought that sixty years was a long time, but it was nothing really. It was like the day before the day before yesterday. Virgil would have been sixty-five in June.

*Pasquale, il mio amore,*

*sempre baci, Carlotta.*

You had to give it to the Italians. There was a community who were faithful to their roots, marking the death in print of an ancient lost brother in Calabria, or the tenth anniversary of the passing of Nonna in a stony Village in Piedmonte. Neither that stupid parish priest nor his very own wife understood the function
of the Latin root, its capacity to illuminate from the grave something alive and vital. He was not ashamed of his attraction to the columns, not at all. It is animal to die. It is reasonable to face death. Everybody dies. My wife has died. My brother Virgil is dead. My mother died. My father, thank god, has died. My son—

Frederick sought out the bare wall near the kitchen. He had yet to get around to decoration. Breakfast, lunch, a walk on Mondays and a turn on the bicycle followed by an occasional frozen dinner was about all he could manage. Mondays were the keystone of his week. Remove it, and the whole structure would collapse. Every Monday, rain, hail or shine, he walked at the river. If anyone asked Fred Lothian what he'd been up to, Fred Lothian would be ready with a breezy, easy answer. ‘Oh, I walk at the river in the mornings.’ They would nod encouragingly. Good job, Fred. Up early, keeping active, that’s the way. He studied the cream render and the single photograph hanging from the sole hook in his entire Villa. He had inherited the hook from the previous owner—no guesses what happened to her. He walked over and stood right in front of the photo of his daughter and imagined the previous owner standing exactly where he was, gazing at a photo of her own children. The real estate agent had swept his arm around and muttered vague nothings when he asked why the owner was selling, but the Manager let the cat out of the bag. It was quick, he said, a coronary in Sitting Dance (yes, apparently you can sit and dance), in the break between The Russian Jig and The Irish Washerwoman.

It was a formal portrait of his daughter, no different from millions of others all over the world, a successful young woman in her black gown, glossy hair cascading from under her cap, clutching a degree rolled up and tied with a red ribbon. He and Martha flew to meet her in Honolulu for the Graduation Ceremony. It was a last-minute decision and accommodation was tight so they had to stay at a themed hotel that cost him a fortune. ‘I never want to see another Hula Hoop or Lei in my life,’ Martha declared in the departure lounge at the airport. At least she had the good grace to wait until they left to complain. Caroline spent the entire time reminding them that the hotel was an insult to the indigenous Hawai’ian culture and he never ought
to have booked them in there. She was too embarrassed to ask her friends to meet her at the bar. ‘All of them have just finished a Masters in Anthropology. I don’t think they want a cocktail in half a coconut served by a barefoot native.’ It was tacky, she was right, but did Caroline have to make such a fuss? He told her she could go to the backpackers if she liked. That shut her up.

He studied the photograph. There was absolutely no doubt that she looked like her mother, his wife Martha. As Caroline grew older the likeness had taken root, as if physical proximity drove mother and daughter towards resemblance. Wasn’t there a word for that? What was it? No doubt another Greek obscurity. Caroline’s younger brother had taken after him. ‘I’ve been trumped,’ Martha said as he grew. Frederick was nothing like his own father, thank god, but looked a lot like his mother—pointy, sallow-skinned. But looks were one thing, temperament another. Caroline and her mother were given to smoldering feuds that lasted for days, if not weeks. Caroline’s brother had a furious, spiking temper which passed quickly.

*He had had a temper, he used to have a temper. Were given, used to be given, shall have been given,* he parsed. He was still troubled by the distinction between the Perfect—which he understood now to be the tense employed for complete actions in the past—and the Imperfect, which was used for unfinished business.

- My wife looks like my daughter.
- My daughter’s brother used to look like his father.
- My wife is dead.
- My son—

Caroline flashed him a frozen grin. Another lie. Caroline was still sulking after a blow up with her mother that started on the first day in Hawaii and lasted all the way through the Graduation ceremony to the dinner afterwards. What was it about? What did it matter now?

Frederick sat down at the table and smoothed the newspaper with the palm of his hand. Michael Thompson was only four. Four year olds shouldn’t be allowed to die. Where was his mother? How did he die? It was an accident, he was sure of it. If it were cancer the parents would thank the hospital and the wonderful doctor who had been with them all along, and no
flowers please, but donations to a charity of your choice. An accident then, a summer accident on a summer’s day, on a perfect day for drowning in a backyard pool.

Michael is in the playroom with Thomas The Tank. His mother has her hands full with the washing machine and a blocked drain. That damn plumber will not return her calls. The phone rings somewhere in the house. Michael looks around and sees the fly screen is ajar. He walks out to the wheelbarrow next to the safety gate and begins to climb. His father was there early in the morning, clearing the filter of leaves and in his rush to get to work he has left the wheelbarrow near the gate. The latch lifts up. The gate swings open. A lizard kicks hopelessly in the deep end. The boy leans right over to touch it and the waters part, then close over, as they did for the Israelites.

Above L’Isle de St. Clare there are huge, grey billowing clouds. A ten year-old boy stands on the green field, as stiff as a scarecrow, while his coat whips around his frozen body and his father bears down like a tank.

He had stayed at work to finish a lecture, and when he got home Martha was in the kitchen with Caroline propped up on the bench, licking a cake-bowl. Martha was pregnant with Callum and was wearing an enormous knitted sweater and wooden Scholl's for her varicose veins. Frederick leant forward and brushed her lips. She tasted of flour and butter and sugar and eggs.

‘Oh, Fred, you had a call from your Aunt in Scotland. She said she’d call back later tonight when the rates are cheaper. I couldn’t understand a word she said.’

‘She's my Great-Aunt, not my Aunt. She is my mother’s mother's sister. My grannies’ sister. My Aunt is my father's sister. My Aunt has dementia and lives in Lincoln.’

Martha shook her head. It was all too confusing for her. Why was she calling now? Aunt Marjorie called on his birthday. He dreaded her calls. Her voice dragged him down into the thick tongue of his family, into a time that no one in his new life would understand, when there was only one place to live and one way to speak, and the rest of the globe was just a pipe dream to have in bed with your little brother.
Marjorie lived in Aberfeldy, in a sandstone bungalow with a pea-shingle roof. He went there as a boy, when his Gran died. Gran had moved up there when she fell out with Pop. The day after Gran died, his mother came and took him out of school. They caught the bus and the train all day and all night until they came as far as Pitlochry, as far as the train would go, and then they walked the last miles holding hands, with their hats pulled down against the wind. He must have been thirteen or fourteen, because Mam was still alive. They sat in Marjorie’s house with the Gran’s coffin in the parlor and the fire in the flu heating up the dung they still used to render the inside of chimneys. It was thick and snug and he cried for his Gran, even though he was a big boy and she had left him all alone in Lincoln.

He went up again as a grown man, to tell Marjorie he was getting married and moving to Australia. He went to say goodbye.

Back then, goodbye carried more than a chance of forever. People did not come to visit you on the other side of the world, or call you every other day, not unless they were rich as kings. They were my happiest years, Marjorie told Freddie that last time he saw her, those years with your Gran. We were like girls again, laughing and knitting. On a shelf there was a row of old books she bought in the second-hand shops on the High Street. She parcelled them up to his children on their birthdays, lovely leather-bound copies of Robert Louis Stevenson and Lewis Carroll.

Fred wrote to Marjorie twice a year, around his mother’s birthday and at Christmas, and always enclosed two twenty-pound notes. She never thanked him for the money, and he never mentioned it. They both knew it was nowhere near enough to make up for what he had taken away. Between birthdays, Christmas and the odd sleepless night, he managed not to think about Great-Aunt Marjorie, about what it might be like for a very old woman cut off and left behind.

‘Did Aunt Marjorie say why she called, Martha? Give Daddy a taste of that, young lady.’

‘No,’ said Caroline, hugging the bowl to her chest. ‘It’s mine.’
‘Just one lick. Daddy’s been at work all day. He’s hungry for cake!’

‘Carrie, give Dad a little taste. Don’t be greedy.’

‘No. He eats everything.’

‘I do not,’ he objected. He glanced at Martha. She raised her eyebrows. Their daughter hated to share anything, but food was the worst.

‘I think your Aunt might have really lost her wits. She said, ‘Tell Freddie to wake up the bees.’ I had to ask her to say it three times. Do you have any idea what that means?’

‘Caroline, hop down and go wash your face.’ He lifted her off the bench and watched her leave the kitchen. ‘My father is dead.’

‘What?’

‘Morris is dead. It’s something they used to say in my Gran’s day. When the master or mistress dies you have to go to the hives and whisper to the bees. You have to whisper the master is dead.’

Martha was studying his face for signs of emotion. He had to hide what he felt, in case she thought him cruel. He felt the most extraordinary sense of release, like a gull cut free from a fishing line.

On the phone he let Aunty talk and talk, until his ear softened to her voice. *It was a stroke in the end, Freddie.* So many afflictions beset Morris it didn’t seem to matter how he died, just that he was dead. Martha listened from the couch with her legs tucked under her, madly knitting a jacket for the baby. Her fingers went too and fro, as if she were conducting a tiny orchestra. Each time she tugged at the fine white wool, the ball jumped off the ground. ‘Thank you, Aunty,’ he said. ‘I’ll make all the arrangements.’ He was crisp and distant, but his father was dead and he had to shepherd his elation carefully. But Aunt Marjorie hated his father too. *The way he stopped your Gran coming down when Virgil died. That was terrible sin, I tell you.*

When Aunt Marjorie died he arranged for that as well. She left her little cottage to Caroline and Callum. It was worth very little, but it was sold and he put the money aside. They might want to study overseas, in America or England, or even Europe. Caroline had spent all her portion on Hawaii, but the other half of the money was still somewhere in a bank, rolling over slowly.
Fred knocked his cup down to the tiled floor with the back of his hand. He found a grubby little cushion for his weak knee and sunk into it gratefully, as if he were on a wooden pew at church. He was crying now. Crying like a child, crying because he had loved Martha and this was Martha’s cup.

When they were young his kids would come home from the supermarket clutching brand new toys. They would have stamped and whined until Martha gave in at the checkout, mortified by their bad behavior. Martha was weak that way. The toys broke as soon as they were unwrapped, or were abandoned under a bush in the front garden just in time for the next trip to the supermarket. Mass produced rubbish all of it —a white furry rabbit, a pink furry monkey, some small bug-eyed doll trapped in a plastic bubble. He bought Danish wooden blocks for his son, and later, army-green sturdy Meccano. He had tried so hard to guide his children towards quality wooden toys and insisted that Martha resist their tears, but did she listen? Of course not. He found an English craftsman in a catalogue and ordered pieces of doll’s furniture for Caroline. The tiny teak wardrobe and chests of drawers arrived in small pine boxes, nestled in straw like bird’s eggs. Martha promptly declared the furniture far too good for a little girl to play with and despite howls of protest from Caroline, boxed them up in a cupboard for when she was older. So what did they end up playing with? The same rubbish as all the other children.

But it was not their tears that had enraged him: he could see that now. It was the private conviction that the whole situation was of his own doing. He ought to have put his foot down.

He craned his neck under the table. The handle was stuck beneath the couch. He would need the broom. People will attach themselves to the most arbitrary of things. He knew that now. Attachment was not a logical business.

He cursed as he poked about in the gap beneath the couch and the wall. It was one of Martha's blue and white Norwegian oddments, a design with the little girl in the pinny and plaits. *Lotte*, it was called, and it was Caroline’s favorite. He gave her that cup to use the last time she came to stay. After months alone
in the house, looking through boxes, turning things over, trying to reach Martha through Martha’s things, he knew everything he could know about what was left of Martha. The Lotte set was missing three dinner plates, two side plates, and now one cup. If he had known that before, he could have helped her complete the set. Martha always had trouble finishing things. Her energy would dissipate, her focus would wobble, and he would have to corral her into action again. Just one more semester. Just one more round of chemotherapy.

There it was. He retrieved the handle and clambered up from the floor. His knee throbbed. The cup would go straight out into the large green wheelie bin— the pickup was Monday. But how many times had he almost let go of some scrap of Martha’s, only to hesitate at the final hour? He had packed up the family home and moved without throwing out a single piece of Martha. Her clothes had to go, of course, along with her shoes and her handbags and all those empty perfume bottles she kept amongst her bras and panties. There had been no point discussing any of this with Caroline because she would have spent weeks folding and sorting and weeping and wailing and then she would have wanted to take it all home with her and soon she would have started to wear the clothes his wife has once worn. Imagine, dinner at their favorite Japanese restaurant with his daughter in Martha’s sweater, reaching into Martha’s leather bag for Martha’s lipstick. Unbearable.

He shepherded the broken cup into a large yellow manila envelope and put it on the table. It sat there, bulky and enigmatic.

*Fragments of Martha Lothian’s Lotte cup,
broken by Frederick Lothian, her loving husband, on Saturday January 17...*
*Gone but never forgotten.*

Frederick Lothian, you are a liar and coward.

He stood up to stretch his throbbing knee. A handful of black and yellow birds were squabbling over a red flower in the ground cover. Wasn’t it too hot for birds? And weren’t those little bushes supposed to blossom in spring? It was Martha who had learnt the names and habits of plants and animals when they
came to Australia. Then, as now, he really had no idea what was going on out there.

‘What a wonderful back garden,’ visitors said when they saw Martha’s show of banksias and grevillias.

‘She’s nature, I’m culture,’ he liked to quip, until one day Martha asked him not to.

‘You have no idea what you are saying, Fred, and until you do I’d like you to stop.’

Sometimes his wife was a mystery to him.

It looked like Tom had changed his mind about lunch. Clever man. He was making his way back towards his Villa. Now where was Martha’s sewing basket? It made a perfect footrest for his poor knee. Who else but Martha’s mother would think this was a suitable Christmas present for a daughter in Australia? Apparently English wicker never made it to Australia. When Martha opened the box she sighed that special sigh she reserved for her mother and declared it horrible. ‘Of course it’s horrible,’ he said, ‘but any minute you’ll be ringing Miriam in Hoboken and telling her how much you adore it. It’s exactly what I wanted, Mother, you’ll say, how did you know?’

Until he got married he had absolutely no idea that women were such terrific liars. It didn’t matter where you were, at the shops, at school drop off, on the phone. *How are you? Oh so much better! You loved it? Me too! Did it fit? Perfectly!* Sometimes he would go with Martha to pick up the kids from a play date and have to listen to his wife gush over some ghastly addition to the home they were visiting. Family rooms were all the go at the time, and nasty pine spa baths and English cottage gardens spread out beneath a contradictory tropical spray of plumbago, monsterioso and banana palm.

‘How can you say those things?’ he said in the car on the way home. ‘How can you look straight in their faces and lie like that?’

Martha shook her head dismissively.

They’re good people, Fred. Their children are our children’s friends. What would you like me to do? Tell them they have no taste? That they ought to be planting natives? Employing an
architect? Oh, by the way, Fred’s best friend Ralph Orr is a famous architect! Would you like his number? He’s a modernist. I’m sure you two would hit it off!'

‘But how will people know if there’s anything better out there if you keep pretending you like everything, Martha? Even that appalling vinyl bar with the gold buttons—and not just like, but adore.’

‘Poor Fred,’ crowed Martha. ‘Do you think it’s our job to impose your ideas on them? To ruin their pleasure in their own home? Well guess what? There are more important things in life than our educated opinions and your careful attention to style.’

Oh Martha, how right you were.

Fred stood at the window and stretched his knee. Would you look at that? Tom had turned around again and was shuffling back up the path towards the recreation centre. His spine was just like a Maillart bridge, one long arch.

Should he call someone? He’d give it a few minutes—Tom was such an independent fellow, he wouldn’t like the fuss. Fred flipped open Martha’s basket and took out the cable knit sweater, then settled his bad leg on the basket. The instructions had given her hell, but then his wife wasn’t much of a pattern reader. Unlike him, Martha liked to make things up as she went along,
which might work wonders with the parents of your children’s friends, or a stir-fry, but it was really not the go when it came to knitwear. Every so often he took this sweater out of the basket. The plump yellow Quick-knit No. 12s were paused with their needles crossed—abandoned in media res. He tugged fitfully at a single loose thread of chunky red wool that was protruding through the side of the wicker basket. It was the exact colour of persimmons. On and on went the thread, as if she had laid it there for him, like Ariadne for Theseus.

They only had five-hours in Tokyo on the stopover, but he managed to get Martha and the children through Immigration and put them on the Keise line to the Narita Temple. Once they were off the train they thrust their frozen hands into their down jackets and walked under the archway and up the stairs to the red pagoda. The black branches of the persimmon trees formed spidery lines against the white snow, like ink on paper. The red fruit glowed against the black and white, like a hand-tinted photograph.

When he met Martha he knew nothing of families, and very little of love. A family was something to fear, like a long, dark tunnel cutting through a mountain. Who knows if you would come out the other side?

The children ate udon noodles from steaming lacquer bowls in a tearoom near the station, smiling happily and nodding at the woman behind the counter, before returning to the Terminal for the long flight to New York. Red-cheeked, wide-eyed, their souls as quiet and steady as stars at night.

Here dwells the monster hid from human view
Not to be found, but by the faithful clew.

The monster could still paint a pretty picture. He struggled out of the chair and pushed the sweater back in the basket. What was Tom doing now? He had gotten himself off the concrete path and was in amongst the ground cover. A telephone call now would only draw attention to Tom’s frailty, and that could trigger a review and forced removal, and that would be the end of his neighbor Tom Chelmsley, who was as close a friend as his current life permitted—not that he had actually sat down and talked to
Tom, just a friendly wave here and there and the odd hello when Tom was reversing his Morris Minor out of the garage, but all in good time. The main thing was, they were there for each other. Martha never appreciated the subtle ways men communicated. She complained that it was she who had to make all the phone calls, she who had had to write all the letters and send the Christmas cards to keep in touch, she who had to schedule the dinner parties. When Ralph’s oldest girl took off to Sydney with that boy, Martha hounded him.

‘But Martha, Ralph and I don’t need to call each other,’ he told her. Ralph was his best friend. They were all best friends. They saw Ralph and Veronica and the kids most weekends. His friend didn’t need any more pressure now, not with Katie taking off like that.

‘But Fred, he’s in a bad way. Veronica says he won’t speak to anyone. He just sits in his office smoking cigarettes and drinking whisky. At least call him.’

‘Ralph will contact me when he is ready,’ said Fred stiffly. He would not be told when and how to talk to anyone. ‘I think I know my own friend, Martha. Men don’t like people prying into their private lives, trust me.’

Slowly and deliberately he twisted the red wool around his index and middle fingers. Tom would be embarrassed if he called for a gopher. He was doing everything he could for his elderly neighbor. He watched for Tom’s kitchen light at sunset. He listened for the television to go off at night and the radio to come on in the morning. He wouldn’t want Tom to be lying alone on the floor with a broken hip, unable to reach the emergency buzzer on the wall in the lounge. Apparently Tom refused to wear one of those necklaces the Social Workers pushed at you when you moved in. ‘No thank you,’ Fred had said to the woman when she suggest it to him, ‘I’m not quite at that stage yet.’ But he had read the brochure on fall-prevention they left in his Villa in case he needed to have a word with Tom, and then he disposed of both it and the laminated sign on the back of his bathroom. He was young, relatively speaking, and Tom was tough as an old boot. He and Tom would be fine.
He examined his fingers. If he left this wool for long enough they would turn blue or black, or whatever colour the body went when the vessels were starved of blood. His fingers would putrefy and drop away and he would be like one of those Roman statues: bloodless, stripped of colour, without fingers, arms or head.

The wool came from down south, in one of those hippy shops that sold beanies and dream-catchers. It was just the two of them. Caroline had just moved in with Julian, and Callum was staying with Aaron Bessell. They drove down in the new red Peugeot 405, Car of the Year. Miriam left Martha a tidy sum when she died, unlike his own father who left him nothing but debt and a Council flat full of rubbish. Callum had inherited the old SAAB. He had pestered and pestered him ever since he got his license. He had worn him down with wanting, and in the end he gave it to him because it made sense. It was the logical thing to do. It was exactly the kind of car a young man studying architecture would want —old-school Europe with cracked cherry-red leather seats and as safe as houses, because it was Swedish. Everything they made in Sweden was safe. They would have got nothing on a trade-in, nothing.

His fingers were blue. The wool was red. Bright red.

That was when Martha began to change. She was always picking up hobbies and causes, but when they got back she began to act out of character. It was her mother’s money, he was sure of it now. First she hired a cleaner—not that they couldn’t afford one before but she had always refused on principle. ‘Now I have my own money,’ she said firmly, ‘that makes all the difference.’ At the time it seemed like a reasonable thing to say, but in hindsight he ought to have rebuked her. ‘But it’s always been our money, darling. Yours as much as mine. We are a team.’

Then Martha went to Melbourne on her own. She had never done that before. She said she wanted to stroll down Brunswick Street and sleep in a bed by herself. She wanted to think. She came back from Melbourne and announced she was enrolling in a degree in Child Psychology. Callum was horrified. He had only just started the second year of his course and was appalled at the idea of running into his own mother on campus—it was bad
enough having a father at the University. ‘If you talk to me, I’ll kill you,’ he said to her.

‘A delicate imbalance of power.’ That was how the new Martha described their marriage. They were at Ralph and Veronica’s when she said it, and if he remembered correctly it was the same night they met Paul Mondale.

With the children almost grown, and with Katie gone, dinners were far and few between.

Everything was different then.

‘So Paul,’ asked Martha, always prying into other people’s business, ‘what’s a clever young architect from Melbourne doing working with an old codger like Ralph?’

‘It’s a great project and our company’s glad to be on board,’ said Paul, ‘Ralph’s reputation is second to none in urban renewal.’

Martha filled her glass. ‘Do you have a family, Paul? Or are you having too much fun being single?’

Fred gritted his teeth. Martha loved to flirt with younger men. It was humiliating for her. And she was drinking more than usual since her trip to Melbourne.

‘No family yet, Martha. I’ve been with my partner for nearly eight years, though. We met in the US when I was doing postgraduate studies.’

‘Would you like to have children?’

‘You don’t have to answer that, Paul,’ said Fred. ‘My wife is always sticking her nose into other people’s business.’ Besides, he didn’t want to mention children. Since Katie they rarely talked about their children, their achievements, their plans, the lives they had ahead of them.

Martha swung around to face him.

‘My husband has a horror of the personal. Fred rarely starts a conversation. He prefers to communicate telepathically. Apparently it’s all the go amongst blokes of his generation.’

Paul snorted. Yet another man who found Martha amusing.

‘Actually I’d love to have ten children,’ Paul said, ‘but I’m gay, so I’m not sure how Corey and I are going to manage that. Hopefully we’ll find a way. And what about you, Martha? How long have you and Fred been married? Did you meet in the States?’
Ralph stood up and gestured towards him, and then clomped down the stairs. Fred followed dutifully. Ralph was wearing those ugly stacked-up R.M Williams riding boots. The footwear of the squattocracy, Martha called them. Ralph had a thing about being short, although he’d never admit it.

‘Well, there you go,’ Ralph said as he flicked on the light to the cellar. ‘What do you know? He’s gay. I’ve worked with Paul on two projects here and in Melbourne and I had no idea.’

‘What does it matter, Ralph? And why would you be surprised? Architecture’s full of gay men—not like engineering.’

Take that, Ralph

Fred picked at his nail. Callum was in his second year, so it must have been 1992. He gave a paper at a conference in San Francisco at the end of the ‘80s. Was it 1989, or 1990? He walked out of a particularly tedious session to buy the weekend papers, then took a coffee up to his hotel room and read the obituaries. Columns and columns of young men were dead. There were directors, writers, actors, artists, dancers. He walked around the steep streets. He picked up the small magazines on the benches of coffee shops. He read the signs pasted to street poles. In San Francisco he had witnessed something terrible, something everyone should know about, but when he came back to the empty suburban streets of middle class Australia and to his carpeted office at the university, Frederick forget what he had seen. Then a member of his own Department lost his son—Lawrence Hardigan, from Electrical. Was there an edge of shame in the hushed voices in the photocopy room? *He was an only child too—imagine losing your only child.* Lawrence and his wife went into early retirement down south somewhere. Why hadn’t he contacted Lawrence? Why hadn’t he reached out to him? He had no answer.

Paul died a few years later, around 1995. Fred came home from work and found Martha crying, which was nothing unusual. She looked up through her tears. ‘Ralph just called,’ she said, ‘Paul is dead. I knew he was HIV-positive, but I didn’t even know he was sick. No one told me. Poor Corey.’

Martha had stayed with Paul and Corey on her trips to Melbourne, but after the phone call she stopped traveling. She
stopped studying. She stopped talking. Everything stopped with the phone call.

‘Why the pretense?’ snapped Ralph that night in the cellar as they looked through the racks of wine. ‘Why did Paul have to pretend?’ Ralph shook his head and pulled out two dusty reds from the rack. When they got back to the table Martha, Paul and Veronica were head-to-head.

‘Here’s Batman and Robin!’ said Paul. ‘Martha was just telling me about Harry Harlow—the guy who did that monkey experiment?’

‘Paul’s mother is a psychiatrist in Melbourne,’ said Veronica. ‘She specializes in the Menopause. You should have told me that, Ralph. I could have got you in.’

Martha laughed. It wasn’t like Veronica to make jokes about Ralph.

‘I don’t think Paul had ever told me about his mother’s work,’ said Ralph. ‘Paul hasn’t shared much at all about his personal life.’

Paul studied Ralph’s face. ‘Ralph Orr, you are not going to tell me you didn’t know I was gay?’ He laughed. Veronica and Martha joined in. ‘Did you want me to wear an armband with a star on my arm?’

‘Now hang on there,’ protested Ralph.

‘You met Corey at my house. Remember? He was that good-looking man cooking dinner in our kitchen, the one who kept putting his arm around me?’

‘When you said he was your partner I presumed you meant in business,’ sniffed Ralph.

Martha snorted. ‘Oh come on Ralph, I had no idea you were such a fuddy-duddy. Ralph Repression Orr and Frederick R. Lothian. What a pair.’

Paul turned towards Fred. ‘You and Martha must have the most amazing conversations, Fred—telepathically I mean! Your interests are so different. Engineering and child psychology.’

‘Pardon?’ said Frederick. He was not listening. It had just dawned on him that his oldest friend Ralph was more than a bit like his dead father.

That’s when Martha said it.
‘Actually Paul, I like to think of our marriage as a delicate imbalance of power.’

Usually when Martha made some kind of joke, even at his expense, Fred had to make sure he laughed louder than Ralph, which was not always easy because his friend had dedicated himself to appearing more hearty and masculine than any other man at his table. But this time Ralph was silent. He was staring at Martha. Fred looked at his wife. She was looking at Ralph. Her face was flushed. Martha had drunk too much, he decided. It was time to go home.

Fred squeezed his fingers. He could have taken a blowtorch to them, or a hammer and a nail and he would have felt nothing. The last time he saw Ralph was at Martha’s funeral. His former best friend had come in with his pot belly hanging over his trendy jeans, a new wife on one arm and a black ribbon on the other, as if there was no such thing as personal history. Frederick had wanted to hit him in the face—he might have killed him if not for his own daughter, if not for Ralph’s girls, if this wasn’t the funeral of his wife.

He held the wool up to his nose. Lanolin? He foraged in the basket and pulled out one of Veronica’s clumsy linocuts. *Merry Christmas 1983 with love from Ralph, Veronica, Katie, Lucinda, and Lauren. Banksia Articulata, with apologies to Margaret Preston*. Those were the years when Veronica was always in a frenzy of craft. Before dinner (cannelloni, paprika chicken, steak Diane, and later, spinach pie and chick-pea burgers) she would have to clear the vast rough-cut jarrah dining table of wax and paper, copper stencil sets and batiking inks.

Frederick caught the tail of the wool and began to wind it back onto the old card.

Veronica called from South Africa. She just couldn’t get back for the funeral, it was all happening so quickly, but it was impossible to get a flight. She was crying into the phone. Fred was enraged. It was his wife who was dead, the mother of his children, not hers. And all these years, Veronica had abandoned Martha, and after all the support Martha gave her with Katie. Veronica began to tell him that the important Community Art project in the townships was finally starting to gel. He had no
idea of the number of children without any parents, and the statistics on HIV infection were just staggering, and the inability of the World Health Organization to get these American companies to reduce the cost of the anti-viral drugs so that at least the pregnant women could give birth without— ‘Please, Veronica,’ he interrupted. That day on the phone he had no room for tragedy on a grand and anonymous scale. When it came to grief Ralph’s ex-wife was no different to other people. Martha would have understood perfectly: far less complicated for Veronica to throw herself into helping victims in a far-away tragedy than to come home and face your own damage.

Frederick tied off the tail of the wool. They had thought they were a different species from their own parents. Their parents would die out and take their misery and prejudice with them and be replaced by a brand new generation who were free of their blinkers and their leather straps. They would never stand in the way of their girls and boys. They would not damage their children as they had been damaged. Their children would not be expected to make up for their parents’ lost opportunities.

He would be kind to Martha’s former best friend if she ever came back to Australia. When it came to grief everyone had to find their own form, everyone had their own limits—everyone except Ralph Orr. Ralph knew about form all right. Form was Ralph’s thing. Everything was aesthetics to Ralph—the view out the window, the photo on the wall, the worn-out body of his poor wife Veronica. Ralph knew nothing of limits, of boundaries, with his big new house, his smooth young wife, his ridiculous baby (at his age) and his three lovely daughters—two. Two lovely daughters.

Frederick opened the kitchen bucket with his toe, but he just couldn’t do it. The wool on the card went back in the basket. I’ve made a start, he told himself. He picked up the sweater. The knitting hovered midway between the wicker basket and the rubbish bin. Frederick turned towards the window. Tom was standing on the edge on the path, teetering like a man on a wire, his frame nowhere in sight, then pitched straight forward and hit the concrete. ‘Oh God,’ Fred heard himself say. Tom was lying perfectly still, face down, like a fallen statue. Get up, Fred
whispered. But nothing moved, no bird, no cloud, not a pale finger or a twitching toe. Fred stepped back from the glass. His hand shook as he dialed.

‘It’s Tom,’ he said faintly into the phone. ‘Tom Chelmsley has fallen over.’

‘Where?’ shouted the woman in the office, assuming he was deaf, ‘exactly where is Tom now?’

‘There,’ said Frederick faintly, pointing out the window. ‘There’s Tom.’

He watched the doors of the administration building on the far side of the quadrangle. Two figures walked briskly across the lawn. The taller woman knelt down and pressed her finger against Tom’s neck, while the other spoke into a mobile phone. A single white tissue moved fitfully across the green turf. At the end of the path, some way from Tom, was the upturned Zimmer frame. It lay on its side, like the abandoned vehicle of some foreigner who breaks down in the outback and forgets the cardinal rule: leave your vehicle and you are lost forever. On Saturdays there was no real doctor in the Village, so they would have called the hospital. Soon an ambulance would drive in through the open gates, mount the low verge and cross the green. Fred looked up at the clock on the wall. Had anyone else had seen Tom fall? Who else was sitting inside their Villa, waiting to test the gap between call and response, waiting to see how they might fare if they happened to topple to the ground like a broken pillar? Tom’s dining chair would be empty. His cream of chicken soup would be forming a thick skin. Someone at his table would suggest giving Tom a call—just in case—the unspoken on all their lips. No one in the Village was late if they could help it.

In the distance a siren wailed. That was the least they could do for old Tom—put on the siren. He had heard of dying men and women loaded into ambulances in the dead of night without even the flashing of a blue light. But then that was how it was when you were old. The whole drama of accidents and emergencies was abandoned forever and in its place a familiar script with a predictable ending.

An ambulance taxied silently across the quad, all signs of urgency muffled. The salesman for his unit had made a feature of the open design. ‘Every corner of the Village is accessible by
vehicle,’ he announced. At the time Fred had been unsure of the beneficiaries. Removalists? A tree-lobbing service? It was all clear now.

The ambulance men were putting some kind of white padding to the side of Tom’s head. Was he bleeding? Was Tom already dead? All about Fred were chairs, but not one was suitable for the kind of sitting that he needed to do. The long arms of the Papa Bear Chair reached out to embrace him, but he recoiled. A terrible thing had happened to his Hans Wegner’s Chair. The teal wool had split in deep gashes and chunks of dense, grey horsehair were bubbling out, like brains. One of the upholstery buttons hung by a thread, like an eyeball wrenched from its socket.

Frederick caught a glimpse of chrome under a pile of debris. He pushed aside a pile of crumpled shirts and dusty issues of The Journal of Civil Engineering and tugged at the metal arms. The chair was stuck between two white plastic Kartell modular bookcases (one cracked in three places by the idiot movers, the other chipped at the top). He struggled to free it. You would recognize that silhouette anywhere. It was Marcel Breuer’s revolutionary B3 anywhere. Frederick found a damp tea towel in the kitchen and got down on his good knee to wipe the tubular steel, then set about rubbing the thick rectangular straps of
brown leather. This chair was a modern classic, there was no doubt about it. Martha bought it for him at an auction in Sotheby’s in 1976 when she took Caroline and the baby home to meet her ancient grandmother in Hoboken.

Fred wet a towel in the bathroom and wiped the leather. It was crying out for wax. Would you look at that design? Martha had bought this chair because she knew what it meant. This chair represented modernity and resilience. This chair had sat in his study for nearly thirty years, testimony to the distance that he, Frederick Lothian, had put between himself and the stupefied leather armchairs of his father’s generation, all pocked and studded and stuffed and weighted down by dark Victorian forces, stinking of cigars smoke and whisky drunk out of cut crystal tumblers. Martha had bought him the chair because she understood its historical context. ‘Without historical context’, he always told his wife and children and anyone else who would listen, ‘there are only commodities.’

He pulled the chair towards the window. It was good to see it again, but it troubled him. When Martha began her degree she started to criticize him for what she called his truisms. ‘You and your truisms;’ she scoffed. ‘Without context there are only commodities. Exactly who do you think you are, Fred?’ Karl
Marx? Max Weber? And what would you know about historical context?

‘No comment,’ replied Fred.

The chair had rust on one leg. He would have to get that looked at by a professional. Politics and modern history were his weak points—and poetry. Like many educated people, Frederick had his opinions, most of which were set in concrete so as to render them more like truths. But where poetry and politics were concerned he feared a lack of foundation, which left him vulnerable to challenge. Deep down he knew that opinion—like concrete—was most resilient when they were founded and reinforced.

Caroline was always begging him to read her poems. ‘Show your mother,’ he muttered, keeping his head bent towards a stack of term papers. ‘I have to get this marking done.’

What was he supposed to do? Pretend that a whole series of sentences ending in question marks meant something to him?

Who am I?
Where am I?
What am I?
Do I mean?
Do I?

He took a step back from the chair. Such simplicity. In contrast, could there be anything in the world as complicated and useless as poetry? What function did it serve? What did it do? A chair meant what it was—or was what it meant. It was indisputably, irrevocably here. It was not pretending to be something it was not, which seemed to be the whole point of poetry. Here, in the most unlikely of contexts, in No.7 St. Sylvan’s Estate, was an original Marcel Breuer masterpiece, the first chair made of tubular bent steel. This very chair had formed the basis of his famous first year lectures, for his introductory course: ‘Shock and Stress in the Twentieth Century: an Engineer’s perspective.’
'Good afternoon, and welcome to the first in a series of lectures that introduces you to engineering concepts through the example of ordinary objects.' He pushed the round black button of the Carousel. ‘Before you is a chair, but it is no ordinary chair. The Wassily chair is an example of what engineers call the \textit{minimax solution}: the minimum use of material for maximum outcome. Nature abounds in examples: the head of the femur (push) seeds (push) kites (push) dinghies (push) and tents (push). Only with the invention of the continual steel extrusion pipe was such a chair possible.’

The last picture was taken camping at Walpole. Callum was standing in front of the tent wearing a silly cap on his head. His nose was burnt. He was holding a tennis racquet. He was smiling.
Driving to and from camping trips he always tried to keep the children engaged. Did you know that the invention of the highway and the automobile changed the design of bridges forever, Callum? There was no need for a span to support the weight of a train, so the bridges could be lighter, and dispense with heavy iron and steel and use instead guess what? Reinforced concrete, which is able to deal with both compression and tension. Are you listening, Caroline? Caroline?

Fred turned the chair upside down. The label was a comfort: *Thonet Möbel.*

One Saturday morning he brought the children up into the study. He was going to explain the Breuer chair. Katie, Ralph and Veronica's big girl, was there too; she must have been babysitting and stayed the night. Callum was wearing his hockey gear, ready for the game. Caroline was still in her pajamas, as usual.

He checked the stairs to make sure his wife was out of earshot. ‘You’re not lecturing them again, are you, Fred?’ Martha yelled up the stairwell. He closed the study door and took up position behind his desk, then decided to stand so he could bring the focus back to the chair.

‘So, what we have here is Wassily Chair, No. B3, designed by Marcel Breuer in 1925, just eight years after the end of the First World War, thirteen years before I was born.’

‘That makes you one hundred and ten, right Dad?’ said Callum.

‘Is that where Pop lost his arm, World War 1?’

‘That’s right, Caroline. In the trenches.’

Caroline had always been more interested in family history than Callum.

‘How did Pop get dressed with only one arm, Dad?’

‘I’m not sure, Callum.’

‘Where did his arm go? Did the Germans get it?’

‘I don’t know, Callum.’

‘Imagine if one of the Germans lost his arm, and this other arm comes flying through the air and lands in his lap. Or he catches it. Can they attach an arm, Dad? They can, can’t they?’
‘Shut up, Callum,’ said Caroline.
‘That’s enough, both of you,’ he snapped.

He was grappling with the problem of how best to represent the moment when something altogether different appears. ‘I want you all to imagine an infant, growing into a toddler. The child has been unable to express himself, until one miraculous day he discovers that he can talk. Can you imagine that day? You don’t have to put your hand up, Caroline, we’re not in school. What is it?’

‘Dad, what’s this got to do with Pop’s lost arm?’

‘I’m not talking about Pop’s lost arm, Caroline. I’m talking about that moment when a child first learns to talk.’

‘But are you talking about the entire finished chair? Because if you are and if you’re comparing a chair to a baby who can’t talk and who just all of a sudden starts saying whole words and sentences, then that doesn’t make sense.’

‘What do you mean, Caroline?’ He preferred not to stop in the middle of an analogy that was already strained. Analogies were another of his weaknesses. Years of lecturing had taught him that if you stray too far from the object you lose sight of it completely.

‘This B3 is a whole chair, but babies learn to talk in bits and pieces. I can remember when Katie’s little sister was starting to talk and mostly she grunted out garbled stuff. Mum sad that that’s how she learns to talk and it takes a long time.’

‘So what?’ said the boy.

‘That’s enough,’ he said, glaring at him but really aiming for his daughter. ‘It’s just an analogy, Caroline, or a metaphor, which is a word that as a budding young poet you might like to investigate. Look it up when I finish.’ He nodded towards the two volumes of the Shorter Oxford Dictionary sitting on his shelf, rather wishing he could reach for them himself.

‘We did that at school, Mr. Lothian. A metaphor is like a simile but without the like.’

‘Thank you, Katie, and I’ve told you, you can call me Fred. This is the 1980s. Adults are not ogres. Now, have a look. Come closer. Can you see that this chair is inspired by a bicycle? This was the very first chair to be made of tubular bent steel, which is remarkably strong and can also absorb shock. What have you got
on your hands, Callum? Is that chocolate? Don’t touch the
leather. Go wash in the bathroom. This is the era of the invention
of flight and skyscrapers, and the discovery of new materials like
steel and Ferro-concrete, all of which bend and flex and absorb
stress—what is it now, Callum? I told you to go clean your
hands.’

‘Dad, what’s stress?’
‘Stress in an expression of force, either internal or external.
Now go wash those hands.’

‘Mum says that Dad makes her stressed,’ said Katie.
‘And Dad, maybe a new language would be better.’
‘Better than what, Caroline?’ Was there no end to the
interruptions?

‘Better than your anal-logic.’
‘Analogy, the word is analogy.’
‘It’s like the maker of the chair—and Dad, I’m pretty sure
that you were just making a simile, not an analogy or a metaphor,
about the design and the ways babies talk?’

‘Please finish up.’
‘What’s his name? The maker?’
‘The designer’s name was Marcel Breuer.’

‘It’s like Moselle Brower had to use all the things around him
to make something different. He could already speak because he
wasn’t a baby, so he didn’t have to make up actual words like
‘metal’ or ‘leather’ because they were already out there in bikes
and planes and skyscrapers, but he had to look around and find
all the words and bring them all together to make a new sentence
that had never been put together that way, but which made
sense.’

Caroline was thinking very deeply and it annoyed the hell
out of Frederick. Katie was looking at Caroline as if she was on to
something. Callum came tearing through the door, with his arms
flaying.

‘Yeehaa! Go get ‘em cowboy!’

‘Callum! Stop it! That is a good analogy, Caroline, or simile.
Whatever it is, this chair is like a succinct sentence made of bits
of other words. Now, how about you get out of your pajamas and
do some homework? Katie might give you some help with your
homework before we take her home. I hear from your father that
you're a whizz at maths, Katie. As for you, Callum Lothian, you've got the attention span of a flea.’

The nickel-plated chrome was cold to touch. He ought to have let the children sit in the chair that day. But it was too late now. It was too late for everything. How old would Katie be now? Katie was three years older than Caroline. Caroline was thirty-seven, which would make Katie forty now. It was just over twenty years ago. He ought to know the year. Martha would have known the year, and the month, and the day. How is that that we live these lives of such intense detail, where moment to moment we have these people we love all around us, and we have to act and think and decide about so many things, and then it is all gone? All that incredible detail is lost, and we are just dirt. *Humus*, from the Latin, meaning *earth* or *ground*.

Martha always worried about Katie. Katie wafted through the glassy ambiguous spaces of Ralph’s open plan house in cropped tops and little bikini bottoms, with little pieces of orange and red raffia plaited into her hair like tropical butterflies. She carried a sheath of paper under her arm. Like Callum, she liked to draw.

‘She’s far too old to be wandering around dressed like that when there’s visitors,’ Martha said on the way back from a Friday night barbecue. It was summer, because Callum was asleep on the back seat with a beach towel over him. Caroline was wide-awake and pretending not to listen. ‘I don’t know what Ralph and Veronica are thinking. Ralph always has a house full of guests.’

‘She’s only fifteen, let the girl be. It’s perfectly normal. You’ve become so proper, Martha. I see young people every day at work. I know how they dress—or don’t dress.’

Martha raised her eyebrows at him. Fred had to be loyal to Ralph. Ralph was his best friend. But in truth he didn’t like the way Ralph spoke about Katie. ‘Look at her,’ said Ralph with a nudge when Katie came in from the swimming pool. ‘Hard to believe she’s just a teenager.’

‘I don’t believe you notice anything about your students, Fred. All I know is she shouldn’t be sitting on her father’s knee.'
Did you see them tonight?’ Martha said. ‘It makes me very uncomfortable.’

Fred had seen Ralph grab Katie by the waist and pull her onto his lap. She draped herself over him and tickled his neck. ‘Get off the couch,’ said Veronica quickly. ‘Your bathers are still damp.’

‘They should rein that girl in,’ Martha said. ‘Veronica needs to step up and challenge Ralph. He’s such a bull, that man.’

‘Not now,’ he said quickly, looking in the rear vision mirror. Caroline was listening.

‘Watch the road,’ said Martha. He had veered to the left and come close to a parked car. ‘Are you sure you are all right to drive? I wish you would let me drive. How much have you drunk? Take the back route just to be safe.’

There was always too much drinking at Ralph’s place. They were careful to drive home the back way. Ralph kept a cellar and had an encyclopedic knowledge of wine. Evenings began with the host announcing he was going downstairs to find something special and would any of the men like to join him? Fred would follow dutifully and they would return with a clutch of bottles, which Ralph would present with and a lecture on the regions and winemakers, stopping just short of telling them exactly how much each bottle had cost. Towards the end they all drank far too much and argued bitterly. Australians were too dependent on welfare, announced Ralph. Where was the incentive to work? Salaries were far too high in the construction business. Unions had far too much influence. And we seemed to be letting an awful number of these foreign migrants come in.

‘I do worry about it…’ Ralph said, shaking his head and leaving *aposiopesis* say all of the things he was not quite willing to say.

But Martha wouldn’t let it go. ‘And what exactly do you worry about, Ralph? Is it the caliber of these migrants? Or is their colour? Perhaps you think they might be gay? Or are you concerned about their lack of appreciation for modernist architecture?’
‘Martha!’ admonished Fred. She was drunk again. And he certainly didn’t want Ralph to think he had been talking about him to his wife.

‘Well, excuse me, Martha!’ retorted Ralph loudly. Veronica sat up and touched Ralph’s arm.

Ralph pushed her away. ‘It’s all right Veronica, don’t worry, I’m not going to hit anyone.’

Veronica got up from the table. ‘I’m going to the kitchen.’

‘Not till I finish, you’re not,’ said Ralph. Fred glanced at Martha. But Ralph was not stopping there. ‘Fred, back me up here. You’ve seen these two storey monstrosities going up everywhere. None of them are architect-built. They are rezoning and battle-axing the entire city. These so-called economic migrants are coming down here all cashed up and they haven’t got an aesthetic bone in their bodies. You know what I’m talking about, Fred. Corbusier would turn in his grave. They would never allow this in a European city.’

‘We’re not in Europe,’ snapped Martha. ‘We’re in Australia, remember? And just up there is Asia. Come on, Veronica.’

When Ralph left her, Veronica went off to South Africa with barely a word to anyone. They got a letter in the mail, addressed to them both. ‘I have been very unhappy for many years,’ she wrote. ‘The house is too sad to live in. I remember our years fondly, when my three girls were together with Callum and Caroline. I had such dreams for all my children and for our two families. I’m sorry to leave you, Veronica. We will talk when I am sorted out. The girls will keep in touch with you. Give my love to Caroline. You are so lucky to have her. Fred, you must face what has happened, for everyone’s sake.’

At the time he was incensed. ‘Just like she faced it all,’ he said to Martha, ‘over there in South Africa.’

‘It wasn’t easy for Veronica,’ said Martha, and left the room.

Martha was right. Ralph was a bully, and Veronica had put up with him for years, raising those children, and then Katie dies and he up and leaves her. She was always working, always busy, either ferrying plates to the kitchen, or rinsing off glasses and checking on the desert with Martha in tow. He could not
remember a single occasion when he and Ralph had cleared the
table or done the dishes. And they never worried about what the
children were up to while the adults were upstairs drinking and
eating. As far as the men were concerned, the children were doing
their own thing, which was just what children ought to be doing.

Caroline was about twelve or thirteen.
‘Where’s Mum?’
‘She’s in the kitchen helping Veronica with the dishes,’ Fred
said. ‘What do you want her for?’

‘I just need her,’ Caroline said under her breath. Ralph had
unrolled a draft of the new city plaza in his office and wanted
Fred’s input on a pedestrian pass.

‘Can you come, Dad?’
‘What’s wrong, Caroline? I’m busy here. Don’t tell me you
and Callum are at each other again?’

‘I need you,’ she hissed and pointed towards the cantilevered
wooden staircase. He followed Caroline downstairs and into
Katie’s room, where he found the girl face down on the bed. Fred
rolled her over. She was breathing.

‘She sculled heaps of red wine from the cellar. I think she
drank two whole bottles. She kept saying, ‘It serves Dad right.’”

Fred picked up an empty bottle from the floor. He righted a
second bottle on the bed. A pink stain was spreading across the
white sheet. The first thing Frederick thought was, Ralph will be
livid. And then, we have to wake her up.

He carried Katie into her en suite bathroom and propped her
up on the toilet seat. She slipped forward, but he managed to get
between her skull and the tiled floor.

‘Go get a bucket from the laundry and a cup from the
bathroom or kitchen,’ he said. ‘Don’t let your Mother or anyone
else see you. Where are the little girls? Where is Callum?’ It was
important that no one know what Katie had done, especially
Martha and Veronica.

‘They’re watching TV,’ said Caroline, and ran off to the
laundry.

‘Katie,’ he said urgently, slapping her lightly on the face.
‘Katie, wake up. You’ve drunk too much. You have to vomit.’
When Caroline came back he told her to turn on the shower and fill the bucket with cold water. ‘Watch out,’ he said. He stepped back and threw the bucket of cold water over the girl’s head.

‘Dad!’ said Caroline. The bathroom floor flooded and Fred’s clothes were damp but it worked. Katie flung her head upwards, and opened her eyes. Frederick helped her down to the ground and threw back the lid to the toilet.

‘Hold her hair back,’ he said. Caroline held Katie’s long hair in two hands.

‘Katie, I want you to make yourself sick. Do you understand? Or else we have to get your parents and take you to the hospital. You need to get rid of the alcohol. Can you hear me, Katie?’

Katie lifted her face to look at him through strands of wet hair. She jammed her fingers down her throat, her glassy eyes staring at Fred. Then with a violent turn she leant into the toilet and threw up an ocean of stinking red liquid.

Frederick waited till she was dry retching. He turned on the shower and flushed the toilet. ‘I’m going to leave you with Caroline now,’ he began to say, but Katie staggered up, wiping her mouth with her hand. She stepped right into the shower fully clothed and slid to the floor. Her black hair fell across her face.

‘Shall I go get Mum?’ asked Caroline. ‘We need Mum.’

Katie helped herself upright and began to take off her top.

‘I don’t think there is any reason for your mother to know about this’, said Frederick. Or anyone else. ‘Or Katie’s mother either. You make sure she gets out okay and dries off. Then get her some clothes and make her drink as much water as you can and then put her in bed.’

‘But why, Dad?’ Caroline said in a furious whisper, although no one could have heard her over the shower. ‘Why can’t I tell Mum and Veronica? Katie needs her Mum. Why is it a secret?’

Frederick stripped off the stained cotton bedspread and pushed it into the washing machine in the laundry. He carried the empty bottles out to the bin near the pool and hid them under a bag of kitchen waste. One night, years in the future, Ralph would go to the cellar looking for the ’55. They would be celebrating something big—Katie’s engagement, Callum’s latest
commission, Caroline’s first child, forty years of happy marriage, and that’s when he would tell Ralph about the night Katie drank two bottles of his Penfold’s Grange, and what could he do but laugh? As he came back into the house he looked through the window into the den. Not E.T. again?

The phone was ringing in the Villa next door. Would it have made any difference if he had gone to get Ralph and Veronica? What if it had been Caroline who was drunk, and Ralph who hadn’t told them? Why wouldn’t he let Caroline get Veronica that night? It had something to do with protecting Ralph. Ralph was very drunk that night. When he drank he became argumentative and mean to his wife. Martha would try to protect her friend. There would have been a terrible scene with Ralph and he would have had to stand up for him, because Ralph was his friend, and then Martha would use that in her campaign against Ralph. If he hadn’t done what he had done, then Martha would have won.

Clearly, he had been wrong. Ralph had never been his friend. And Katie was dead.

Katie began to lose weight in her final year of high school, after the incident with the wine. Around the same time, Caroline went on a diet, refusing to eat dinner for a whole week until Martha told her if she didn’t eat she would have to go on the school trip to Europe. Caroline hated school trips. Martha spent hours on the phone in the evening talking to Veronica about Katie, nodding and sighing, and dropping hints about family therapy.

‘Poor Veronica. Ralph is so pig-headed,’ she said when she put down the phone. ‘He thinks these kind of problems can solve themselves. He’s told Veronica he doesn’t believe in therapy.

‘Neither do I,’ said Fred. ‘These therapists are all charlatans. Do you know what they are charging per hour? No child of mine is ever going to therapy. Not that they’ll ever need to.’

Then Katie no longer wanted to babysit for them. She began to sneak out of home when everyone was asleep to meet her boyfriends and drink at parties. She left school weeks before her
final year exams and moved in with an older boy who played in a local band.

Martha was furious with Ralph. ‘He keeps saying the boy’s a creative genius – takes one to know one, apparently. Veronica says he’s actually lending the boy cash for new amplifiers and keyboards. Can you believe it?’

‘I agree with Ralph on this one, Martha. The boy is talented. He’s not the no-hoper you make him out to be. His family was clients of Ralph’s—you remember the Buckler House? He went to an excellent school. He stuck at piano and clarinet and was in the State Youth Orchestra. His band is apparently doing very well.’

‘What has the Buckler House and sticking at clarinet got to do with anything, Fred? I can’t believe you.’

Over the next twelve months Katie disappeared and was replaced by a thin, sick girl who couldn’t sit still and wouldn’t look you in the eye and who couldn’t be left alone in the house because she would steal your money and jewellery and camera and anything else she could hock. It was Caroline who found out it was heroin—someone at school was a cousin of the musician—and Martha told Fred. He had to break the news to Ralph because he and Veronica weren’t speaking, and because Martha said she would leave him if he didn’t tell his so-called best friend the truth.

‘Your so-called best friend has a daughter using heroin and what does the so-called best friend do? Absolutely nothing.’

So he went to Ralph, who refused to believe him. ‘Leave now!’ he yelled. ‘And you and your precious wife keep your nose out of our family, do you hear me? We will deal with this our way. Now leave.’

There were no more Friday dinners, no more consultations on design briefs. They finally got Katie into a private centre for girls with eating disorders, which was hardly the main problem by then. One day she checked out and took off for Sydney, and a few years later she was dead.

He got up off the ground and looked at the chair. It was cleaner, but the rust would not budge. And a phone was ringing again. He opened his front door. It was coming from Tom
Chelmsely’s place. Where was Tom now? Probably being trolleyed into the emergency ward of the public hospital. People didn’t belong in hospitals, just as this chair did not belong here in this Villa. This chair should be in the lobby of the Seagram Building in New York, in front of the vast curtain of amber glass.

Thoughts do strike a person. It was not a metaphor at all. The sudden realization that he was unlikely to see New York City ever again propelled Fred forward onto the chrome arms of the B3. He fell clumsily into the leather sling and lay half in, half out, like a broken Jack-in-a-Box. In any other chair he would have damaged the discs in the base of his spine; he would be confined to a wheelchair and transferred out of his Villa into the Independent Living, and then it would be just a trolley ride to High Care. A poorly paid woman would hold his dick when he pissed, and wipe his ass when he shat. He would be confined to a bed. He would develop pressure sores, and his lungs would fill with fluid and he would contract pneumonia. Over the following days his breathing would become labored. He would be transferred to another ward. There would be further infections. All of this would be very difficult for his only daughter, and she would often leave the room in tears. After several rounds of IV antibiotics there would be a stroke. It would happen in the night, when no one was near, and if he was lucky he might never have to know that a vast part of his function had been swept away, like so much paper after a
ticker-tape parade. There would be a meeting with the Palliative Care team—a quiet discussion in a room, where more tears would be shed—and then without much of a fight (there is such inevitability in these stories) there would be acquiescence and agreement.

Over a number of days, with the help of the wonder-drug morphine, Fred Lothian would give up the struggle against the rising fluid in his lungs. His breathing rate would grow shallow and fast and then he would cease to be.

Martha had ceased on a Sunday.

Died peacefully in her sleep.
Beloved wife of— Mother of—

Two or three hours ago Tom Chelemsely had been on his way to chicken soup at the dining room.

A well-designed structure could absorb the shock of earthquakes, bombs, even a small tsunami. Frank Lloyd Wright had balanced the Imperial Hotel on sub-soil. He had used the example of the Lloyd Wright Hotel in *Engineering for Disaster 2.01*, but taken it out of the lecture after a student complained. Lloyd Wright had floated the building on expansion joints above an underground lake to protect the structure from quakes and
shudders, and it alone was still standing after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923.

But what would protect the human body? Who had protected Linda Yu?

He had never meant to think of Linda, but now that she was here he could not turn away. He invoked her name gingerly, fearfully, as if he was lifting the lid off something perishable that had been left out in the baking sun. Something that got so much worse over time.

The girl arrived in his office in tears. He sat her down and closed the door. This was new territory for Fred. Girls were an anomaly amongst Engineering students. After gentle coaxing, she spoke up.

‘I want to speak to you about your lecture on the Frank Lloyd Wright building in Tokyo. The hotel?’

‘Yes? Did you find it hard to understand? Did I speak too fast for you? Please, be honest. I won’t bite your head off.’

The girl was playing with a small, flat, blue leather wallet, turning it over and over in her right hand.

‘I found the lecture cruel. It was cruel and narrow in focus.’

Frederick was dumbstruck. Cruel? Narrow? ‘What exactly do you mean?’
‘Thousands and thousands of people died in that earthquake, Professor Lothian, almost one hundred thousand. Don’t you find it difficult to talk of only about one building that succeeded when so many failed? When so many are dead? What good did one building do for all those people who were burned to death? Most of the buildings in Tokyo were wooden. There were terrible fires.’

Frederick lifted up his hand. Enough, his hand said, enough of this nonsense.

‘I think you should take a deep breath—’

‘I have been doing research. People became stuck in the melting tarmac on the roads when they were trying to get away from the fires. They sunk into the road. Can you imagine the children?’

Frederick placed his palms flat on the desk and leant in towards his student. The girl spoke with a Chinese accent, but her English was faultless. It was time to set her on the right path.

‘Good building codes are what save lives in a disaster, Miss—’

He had checked her enrolment when she made the appointment, but he had forgotten her name.

‘Linda. Linda Yu.’

‘Miss Yu—Linda, you must understand that in many countries, including your own, a combination of poor design, weak regulation of building codes and corruption in the industry has led to millions of people dying in earthquakes of far less magnitude than the Japanese earthquake of 1923.’ He spoke slowly and deliberately, giving his words time to sink in. ‘Japan now has engineering practices second to none. Frank Lloyd Wright stood up to the developers and insisted on building redundancy into the design when they wanted to cut costs. That’s why the building survived. That was the point of my lecture. As an engineer you will have to be tough enough to stand up to all kinds of overt and covert pressures in design and budget. Do you think you can be tough enough, Miss Yu? Do you intend to return to China to work?’

‘Of course. I am Chinese.’ She was crying again.

‘Then you will certainly have your work cut out for you.’ He handed her a tissue and checked his watch. He was not used to tears in his office. Male students tended towards either mute insolence or repressed rage.
‘Can I get you a cup of tea?’ Hopefully, she would refuse. He had a lunch in the Staff Club starting any minute.

She sniffed and blew her nose. ‘I’m sorry, Professor. No thank you. Sometimes I’m not sure I’m going to make a good engineer.’

‘Rubbish,’ said Fred, beaming in what he imagined to be an avuncular fashion. ‘I checked your grades when you booked this appointment. You are doing brilliantly. Flying through. Almost top of the class.’

She played with the tissue. ‘I find the course itself manageable. But it’s not easy when there are so few other female students.’ She swallowed. She bit her lip. She flipped the wallet in her hand.

Frederick waited impatiently. Something was clearly expected of him, but he had no idea what it was. He looked at his watch.

She pressed on. ‘It’s not easy in Engineering for a girl, for a woman at this University,’ she said. ‘Particularly one from overseas.’ She stopped again. ‘From Asia. For an Asian woman the Australian boys can be—.’ She paused. ‘This is difficult for me.’

Frederick rubbed his hands together slowly.

‘You are absolutely right, Linda. The Department is aware of the need to attract more girls—young women. We are doing our best to change the—’ he didn’t want to say it, but he would, ‘—culture.’

Frederick stood up. ‘And now, Linda, if you don’t mind I have another appointment. I expect to see you applying to do a Doctorate when the time comes. I hope you are interested in concrete?’

Without waiting for her to answer he walked around his desk and gestured towards the door. ‘Thank you so much for coming to see me. I always appreciate feedback from students, particularly talented ones.’

Linda picked up her backpack.

‘A word of advice, Linda?’
The girl looked at him. Even without hindsight, there was no denying it was a desperate look.

‘Linda, get involved in a Club or a Sport. These young lads are all bark and no bite. If you get invited to something, don’t be shy. Promise the Professor?’

Linda nodded and closed the door behind her.

Fred changed the lecture before the repeat on the Wednesday, not because he doubted the significance of the Hotel in the development of earthquake-resistant design or because he was cold-hearted (the idea), but because one detail kept erupting like a stubborn infection. He just could not stop thinking about molten bitumen and children running barefoot from the inferno, then sinking into the burning roads, like flies on glue paper.

His phone screeched and he jumped. Who could that be? He and his daughter had set times to call. Other calls he ignored, just as he ignored the letters from the University requesting the former Professor’s presence at—; the invitation from the Royal Institute asking if he might attend the opening of—; endless letters from Roger Wu wondering if he might consider reading his recent paper on—; and finally a request from the Editors of – to contribute to a special edition of –. The machine beeped and he pushed replay.

‘Professor Lothian, it’s Roger Wu calling—.’

Not again. His former student was now running the workshops at the University, and doing as doing all kinds of interesting things with concrete, but none of it interested Fred. He deleted the message.
Not quite a week after Linda Yu came to his office, her face appeared on a flier on the concrete column outside the Department. HAVE YOU SEEN LINDA YU? in English and Mandarin. Fred was summoned to an urgent meeting.

The Dean was in a state. Linda was not normally in his tutorials, Fred explained, but yes, Linda had made an appointment with the Departmental Secretary and he had met her for a short time in his office, just over a week ago.

‘Nothing like this has ever happened under my watch,’ said the Dean. ‘Did the student indicate any kind of trauma, Fred? Was there any sense that she was struggling with her studies or with her tutors? Were there any personal issues? Did she try to reach out to you?’

Fred shook his head slowly, considering the Dean’s question. ‘Nothing, Rob, nothing like that.’

Fred was stuck in his chair while Rob paced up and down the space between the wall and his desk. ‘No one has seen her for more than four days, Fred. She hasn’t been back to her room at the College. The Police are involved and her parents are flying from Beijing. They are understandably distraught, plus we’ve now got the Chinese Consulate on our backs. Her parents are VIPs over there. The Vice-Chancellor is furious at the Department for not looking after our overseas students.’

Fred wished Rob would sit down in his chair like a normal Professor. But Rob was far from normal. He wore jeans to work and had started an interdepartmental Marathon Club. Rob Bartholomew had come from America at the beginning of the year and brought with him a whole new jargon. There were meetings every other week to discuss Gender Equity, Positive Discrimination, the Faculty Culture, and how to counter the Dominant Image of Engineering. All the staff was being asked to get out into the community, to speak to Year 12 students, to sell Engineering to talented girls. Rob helped himself to a tall glass of water and offered one to Fred. Fred shook his head. Rob was lean and stringy, with not an ounce of fat on him. He made Fred feel soggy and stodgy, like the winter puddings his mother used to make.

‘The issue is this: we know for a fact there has been overt racism and harassment. Linda Yu had been receiving notes.’ Rob
looked at him, narrowing his brows. Fred felt the colour leave his face.

‘What kind of notes?’

‘We found some in her room—unsigned, of course, but handwritten, so we’re working on it. A few nights ago she was lured into the tavern by a group of students. I say lured because I mean lured. They lied to her, Fred. They invited her under the pretense of a Club sporting event—an international table tennis tournament.’

‘But there’s no table tennis in the Tavern.’

‘Pardon? I can’t hear you, Fred.’

‘There is no table tennis at the Tavern.’

‘Exactly. Linda Yu spoke superb English. Her parents are some kind of aeronautical engineers responsible for the entire Chinese space program. They are national heroes. She’s their only child, of course. She must have been totally humiliated when she realized what was going on. One of the boys has come forward now. He’s not the ringleader, but he went along with it. We’ve got names, and we’re interviewing them all. This boy told us she was alone when she came, and she was distraught when she realized there were no tables set up and no other competitors. They made her drink a few glasses of beer and then she left in tears. This particular boy went outside to look for her and she was being sick in the garden. He says she went back to the College, but we can’t confirm that. She must have been in a terrible state. Are you okay, Fred? You look a little pale. It’s a terrible situation for all of us, I know.’

He handed Fred a glass of water and patted Fred on the back. Fred drank it in one gulp.

‘Parents entrust us with their children’s education,’ continued Rob. ‘The situation is delicate. The University bent over backwards to get this student here after she was accepted into some major American Universities. We’re really pushing the Department in Asia. Things have to change, Fred. Would you want your daughter to come into this Faculty? It’s Neanderthal. What exactly did she want when she came to see you?’

Fred cleared his throat. ‘It was about the lecture, Rob. She was upset about the lecture I had just given in Earthquakes—the first year course. I always use documentary photographs. I find
they humanize the issues. We saw slides of the 1923 Tokyo Earthquake and then I moved onto the sub-soil solutions proposed by Lloyd Wright in the Imperial Hotel. Linda came to me and said that she felt there ought to be more focus on the human side of the story.’

‘What do you mean, Fred? I don’t follow you.’

‘Well, it’s hard to say now, but she had clearly become obsessed with the disaster. She knew the death toll, and some of the more graphic details of how people died, and she wanted me bring that into the lecture. I was very sympathetic, of course, if a little puzzled. I explained that the aim of good Engineering in earthquake zones is to save lives. I was quite clear that this is an Engineering Faculty, not an Emergency Department.’

The Dean nodded slowly. He looked at Fred intently. ‘Linda was fragile, then?’ He jiggled his sneakered foot. ‘Would you say she had any kind of predisposition to—I’m not sure how to phrase this—’

‘She was definitely very sensitive, Rob, there’s no doubt about that. She said it herself.’

‘Did she, Fred? She used that word?’

Fred nodded slowly. Rob turned towards the large window behind his desk.

‘So, if you had to summarize, Fred? If you had to bring it down to its essence?’

Did Prof. Lothian have that special word the Dean was looking for?

Fred reached deep into his repertoire of specialist terms and emerged with something in hand. ‘In my opinion, Linda Yu was already depressed and unstable and concerned about issues well beyond the reach of the Faculty and the Course.’

Rob went back to his leather chair. He picked up a pen.

‘Thank you, Fred, thank you very much. I’ll keep you posted. Let’s hope we can get Linda back in class. I’ll see she gets some counseling. You’ve been most supportive. I’ll be sure to let the VC know.’

He held out his large, strong hand. Fred stood up and shook it, manfully.
Fred was shaking now. Why did he have to think about Linda, after all these years? Three days after his meeting with the Dean a horticulturalist found Linda's body in King's Park. The girl had taken an overdose of sleeping pills and walked into the bush. He received a careful note from her parents, thanking the famous Professor for teaching their only daughter.

Dear Professor Lothian,

We thank you for your respected work in the field of engineering, and for caring for our daughter Zhu Zhu, who you would have known as Linda.

My husband was born in Tangshan, in Hebei Province. In 1976 an earthquake struck our home town, killing over 250,000 people. Amongst those killed were my husband's mother and father and grandparents, as well as many aunts, uncles and cousins and childhood friends. Our daughter's dream was to design and build strong, safe buildings in China's earthquake zones, and to protect the Chinese people.

Fred went to the bathroom. In the mirror he caught the wild eyes and lined face of an old man who could not be Frederick Lothian. How could anyone have ever loved such a monster? He opened the cabinet and took out Martha's pink toilet bag. As a rule Fred did not take medicine. As a rule medicine was for the sick and the very old. Fred swallowed two Valium and zipped up the bag.

Something very odd had happened. His head had been severed from his body, and was laying on the ground, mute and still, like the egg of some giant bird. He had taken drugs and fallen asleep on the couch and now he was trapped at the bottoms a giant aviary, surrounded by high-pitched screeching.

Fred struggled to bring himself upright. It wasn't a dream at all. It was those fucking budgerigars next door. He tried to wiggle his toes, but they did not wiggle back. He loathed birds in cages. He might have welcomed Tom Chelmsley into his life, but
he had done everything he could to ignore his neighbor on the other side, mainly because she was a woman and women always want to talk, but also because she kept budgerigars in cages and his aunt in Lincoln had kept budgerigars in cages and she was his father’s sister and he hated his father so he hated budgerigars. It wasn’t right to keep birds in cages. His Villa was squashed in so close to his neighbor’s that he could almost hear the little hooked beaks cracking open the tiny seeds in their special budgie mix to extract whatever it was the damned things liked to eat. He experimented with lifting up his head. Nothing. Caroline’s budgie was blue with black spots. But did budgies have spots? He had resisted her pleas for as long as he could— pets were a burden and children never looked after them properly— but then Theodore arrived from a neighbor whose bird had chicks, and he gave in. He was a chirpy little chap. Caroline put a bowl of warm water at the bottom of its cage and watched it primp and preen and flap about in the shallows. Then Martha decided the damned budgie should be was allowed to fly around the house in the mornings, which meant they had to close all the curtains and lower the blinds in case Theodore flew straight into the glass. Theodore. What a ridiculous name. One day it flew into his study and dropped a message right on the B3.

‘Martha!’

Caroline would stand in the middle of the lounge room with her index finger in the air, waving it side-to-side like a juicy bone and whistling lightly until the bird came. One windy morning Callum came rushing in from the garden and threw open the fly-screen door just as Theodore was swooping through the lounge and into the kitchen. Out went Theodore. The whole family drove around looking for Theodore. They put notices on telephone poles and signs at the local deli. *Theodore is Missing.* Caroline sat in the front seat weeping and wailing while they drove up and down the streets. ‘Theodore! Come home Theodore!’ Caroline called out the window, ever the drama queen. Even Martha had to stifle a smile. Their daughter loved to blow things completely out of proportion, and blamed Callum for the whole thing. Alas, Theodore was gone forever.
More tweeting from the neighbor’s direction. Fred’s usual defense was to pull the screen door shut, slamming it hard so the woman next door would hear, but he couldn’t move his body. It didn’t really matter, because slamming the door was a symbolic action. Door open or door closed, it made no difference to the volume of the twitters because there was not even a proper cavity wall between him and his neighbor. It struck him (at least his brain was functioning) that it was men like his former friend Ralph the Architect (why were they always men?) who had paved the way for the compression of space in places like the Village. Everything was quick-built and multi-purpose and flexible by design. There was a time when he had thrown his weight behind the promulgators of open plan houses and schools and offices. He had sided with trendy ‘visionaries’ like Ralph who insisted on one function bleeding easily into another—overlapping even, like his wives. But once you accepted the logic of living in a glass cube with flexible walls, it was just a short distance to the container box, and then the empty refrigerator carton, and the end of homes forever. You were left with the Community Living Centre (‘Gerry’, as it was affectionately known), where the dining room doubled as a games room (just stack the chairs and fold the tables!) and should you require a smaller space (bingo? a great-grandson’s birthday party?), simply slide the retractable stacking wall panels across the concealed floor tracking, like SO! Frederick was now a firm believer in mandatory gaps and impermeable boundaries and these beliefs placed him in direct conflict with the designers and builders of the Villages of the Western World.

At least he had his things to keep him busy. When he was able to move his body he planned to shift this couch and carry the clean B3 chair to the lounge room window. He might even unpack a box from the garage and give everything a good wipe.

Caroline had been horrified when she realized he was bringing the lot with him, but he was only doing it for her. If she would just finish with her dead animals in Europe he would give her the Saarinen table and chairs and the Menotti lounge and his two George Nelson clocks and the Eileen Gray table and all his other beautiful objects that stood for something. But what to do with his precious Dieter Rams Collection, which was packed into
six large wooden crates in the back of the carport/garage? They
were more of a boy’s thing. *Good design is as little design as
possible.* How could anyone disagree with Dieter, who over at
Braun had single-handedly designed Germany back into the post-
war small electronics market?

He and Ralph had spent many pleasurable evenings with the
Braun Collection. When a box arrived from Europe or America,
he would call up Ralph and they would take their drinks into
Fred’s huge garage and set up the trestle for the box. Callum
stood to one side while Fred wielded the Stanley knife and Ralph
shook the Braun from the foam filler. The pride of his collection
was the Braun SK6 Record Player.

‘Just look at this, Callum! All the way from Mannheim.
What a beauty.’

‘It looks okay, but what’s so great about it? It’s not like it’s a
Walkman or anything. Am I going to get a Walkman for
Christmas, Dad?’

‘What? Before these arrived on the scene record players and
radios were in huge wooden cabinets and took up half the house.
Remember that, Ralph?’

‘I certainly do,’ said Ralph. ‘Strictly speaking, they were
furniture, not electronics.’

Fred ran his hand along the metal and wooden case. ‘What
do think, Callum? It’s hard to believe it was designed nearly 40
years ago.’

‘Can we play a record on it?’

‘Of course not, the voltage and plugs are different in Europe.’

‘Can’t you change it?’

‘It’s possible,’ said Ralph thoughtfully. ‘As long as the drive
belt can be adjusted.’

‘We’re not changing it, Callum. This is in original mint
condition. We can’t just modify it.’

‘Please, Dad? Then we can get some records. I could put it in
my room.’

‘Enough, Callum. Help me pick up these plastic bubbles.’
He tried his toes again. A little bit of movement. Caroline might not be able to see the beauty in a thirty-year old electric men’s shaver, but surely she would appreciate the record player? He struggled to lift his eyelids, but they were so heavy he had to let them fall all the way down again. And then he slept.

He is in the Old Woods at Skellingthorpe, running down a path covered with briar and brambles. Dieter Rams is far ahead of him, walking between birch trees. Dieter is wearing black-rimmed glasses, fawn slacks and a dark polo neck sweater. He is moving so fast that Fred can't reach him, which makes Fred angry. He has something in his arms that Fred is desperate to see. Dieter stops and kneels down. Fred comes up behind him, breathing heavily. He looks over Dieter’s shoulder. It is the SK6, but it is much larger than the one he remembers. He begins to cry, but his tears will not flow. A single enormous tear, like a glass bubble, is clinging to the duct in the corner of his eye, until the surface tension is too great and the tear breaks away. The huge, glassy tear floats down to the plastic lid of the record player and shatters. Dieter Rams turns to Fred, furious at him for dropping a large tear on his record player. He is speaking in German and moving his hands. He takes out a cloth and begins to wipe the lid and now Fred sees what is lying under the cover of the SK6. It is Callum, aged twenty years and ten months, dressed in his blue and white hockey socks, shin-guards, shorts
and shirt, asleep with his arms folded across his body, just like Snow White.

‘Guess what they nicknamed it at the Braun Factory, Callum?’

‘What?’ said Callum.

‘What?’ said Ralph.

‘What?’ said Callum, a little louder.

‘What?’ yelled Ralph.

They were both laughing at him.

‘Have you finished?’ said Fred.

‘Sorry, Fred,’ said Ralph.

‘Sorry, Dad,’ said Callum.

‘Schneewittchensarg.’

‘What?’

‘Snow White’s Coffin.’

‘I get it,’ said Callum. ‘That’s a good movie—but not as good as E.T.’

‘Of course not,’ said Fred.

‘Of course not,’ said Ralph.

He would never take a Valium again. E.T. was to Callum as Snow White was to Frederick. He would have been seven or eight when the film came to Lincoln. Up until then the only movies he had ever seen were black and white show reels which cost a penny or two, but Snow White was a whole hour and a half of Technicolour. His father would never have paid for him to see it, but then a miracle happened at church. Just as all the families were picking up their coats and gloves and missals, Father McMahon scrambled up to the pulpit. St. Hugh’s had received a small bequest. The Parish would pay for all the children to go to the cinema to see Snow White as long as the children were over six — ‘not five, not six, but seven and over.’ Virgil bawled because he was only four, but the chosen ones covered their mouths with their hands to stop them shouting in Church, and then said a quick Our Father.

At the theatre the boys pressed up together in one long line, pinching and kicking and laughing and sucking on bull’s-eye sweeties, right up to when the velvet curtain lifted and the
gorgeous credits began. How is it that an image can press itself so firmly into the mind of a child? Fred was terrified of the wicked witch and her evil green transubstantiation. He was delighted by the dwarfs and charmed by Snow White, who was not only beautiful and kind, but had the gift of turning a ramshackle house full of small men into a proper home. If only he had a mother like Snow White. His mother was too sad to be happily tidying up the house. She was always picking things up and putting things away, and urging the boys to get it all done before their father came home from The Lord Nelson, but even with all that hurrying she never seemed to arrive at the moment when it was finished.

His sherbet fountain was gone by the time Snow White fell to the ground, but even if he had another, he would have had to stop eating. Snow White lay inside a glass sarcophagus with a tiny piece of apple wedged inside her mouth. When the Prince finally bent down to kiss the red lips of Snow White and dislodge the poisonous wedge, Frederick trembled and swallowed hard. Snow White was alive. She was back from the dead. Life could begin again.

Fred walked home down Steep Hill in a daze of Disney marketing. Snow White had taken over every shop window on the main street of Lincoln. Snow White wallpaper hung in long rolls in the drapers. Snow White record albums were propped up next to Snow White calendars. There were Snow White colouring books, toothbrushes, train sets, pencil boxes, Bakelite lamps, jigsaw puzzles, and ceramic figurines of the Seven Dwarfs. At school they made masks of the Seven Dwarfs. They coloured in pictures of the pumpkin carriage. They hummed along to the songs. They were encased and enfolded by Snow White.

Fred wiggled his toes, then his fingers, then sat up and turned off the air conditioning. It was cold in the Villa, cold like a coffin. He squeezed past the couch and stepped outside into the furnace. The quadrangle was deserted, but the full weight of his boxes and chairs and seats and tables was pressing up behind him, like a wave behind a sea wall. Just leave all this furniture in the house, Caroline said when he was moving, just rent the house semi-furnished. You'll never fit this into the Villa.
But he was keeping it for her. It was only a matter of time before she came begging. He would give her the Knoll Tulip chairs and the matching oval table by Eero Saarinen. The marble tabletop was far too big and heavy for his kitchen/dining/lounge area, and far too difficult to explain to the residents of St. Sylvan’s, whose taste in dining settings swung between Tudor England and what Martha called *Balinese Chunky-wood*. The foot of the upended table functioned quite nicely as a bedside table and was at present piled high with dirty teacups in need of washing.

Frederick went in search of the chairs that went with the table. They were stacked top-to-toe under wool blankets in the covered alcove outside the back door. They ought to be inside in a stable environment, but there was just no room in his Villa. The seats needed re-upholstering, but what would you expect after all this time? They had been sat upon all those years, hadn’t they? This was what Caroline and all her friends would never understand—modernism wore out like everything else. He peered at the upholstery. The navy wool had faded and the rubber padding was degraded into bunchy mounds. At one stage the boy had got to the chairs with black Dymo tape. ‘CHAR’ he pressed out in red tape. ‘TAIBL’ he stuck on the pedestal. For years Martha refused to remove the tape because she was ridiculously sentimental. Everything the children made she would cut out, fold it and store it, or put it in an album. ‘That tape will ruin the plastic,’ he protested. But she would not budge. He tiptoed downstairs when Martha was asleep and found the sponge he had left soaking in solvent. He dabbed it on the tape until it lifted off without a mark. Martha didn’t even notice they were gone, which was so Martha—a huge fuss, and then all was forgotten.

The table and chairs were fine examples of plastic-organic design, but they were much more than that. They marked the real beginning of his life. Each time his family sat for dinner—daughter, son, mother, father—he looked around the white laminated ellipsis and saw his future in the shape of a fresh, white egg, warm with hope. He tried not to dwell upon the unease he felt as he set the bottom chair on top and shook out the plastic tarp he used to protect them.
‘Do not stand on that couch! How many times have I told you?’

‘Caroline, get that hot cup off that table! Use the cork mats!
‘You’re not planning getting out those paints on my table, are you?’

He watched Martha picking up dirty cups, scrambling for the coasters, wiping up the spills, shaking her head, tightening her lips. trying to juggle the insatiable, imperious needs of her children and the demands of her husband’s precious things.

He had managed to get the one good Tulip chair to the ground when the phone screamed. It was after midnight in England, so it couldn’t be Caroline. Phones ring, he told himself. That is what telephones do. They ring for no reason—a wrong number, a mechanically generated fault. There was no need to panic. He was here in his unit on a Sunday just like every other Sunday. He had eaten breakfast and survived the columns. It was probably just Roger Wu hounding him again about some research project he had on the go.

But the day was only half over and a four year old was dead. Tom Chelmsley had toppled over right before his eyes. And now the phone was ringing all over the place.

The seat of the chair wobbled on its stem. It needed tightening but he had no screwdriver and no idea where the screws were.

Once upon a time there were no problems, only solutions. Theoretical solutions. Work backwards from a problem, he told his students. Model every possible solution until you come up with an answer. He and Martha had emigrated with the idea that he would establish his own practice. He would consult to the public infrastructure for the booming primary industries of this remote Australian State. Martha would run the office. But he and the recession arrived at the same time, and it scared him. They had a daughter, and he wanted to buy a house. He wanted to give his family what he had never had. When he took the offer of a teaching position and time off to complete his Doctorate, he knew he would never leave. He stepped right out of a world where things fall down into a safer place.

At the University every problem had an answer. In theory.
Take the problem of the past. The past shimmered on the other side of a vast swirling expanse and appeared to be out of reach, like Shangri La. But for an engineer there was a bridge for every situation, be it arch, beam, cantilever, or cable. The first step was to identify the topological and geological conditions—river, gorge, valley, mountain range. Then he, Prof. Frederick Lothian PhD, master of reinforced concrete and thin shell structures, would determine an appropriate method of spanning the chasm with a structure of logical simplicity and elegance. He would locate a point at which to anchor the bridge. Why go abroad? Why go anywhere at all? Why not start right here at Number 7? He would locate the other anchor point somewhere easily recognizable— the airport at New York City where he first set eyes on the lovely Miss Martha Salomon. For this particular bridge he would ignore the modern clichés—steel, silica, superplasticizers—and return to the basics. For the underwater sections he would employ the ancient and primal material of pozzolana cement. He had the Roman Vitruvius to thank for the unforgettable recipe: *One part lime, four parts sand and an admixture of milk, blood and animal fat.*

Since it was a bridge for only one person (Frederick Lothian) the question of structural efficiency (the load to weight ratio) would not be of concern. Once completed, he would step out of his Village-Prison and stride with singular purpose across his one-man bridge, all the way back to TWA Terminal, New York.

Once again it is December 16, 1966. He has just bought a pastrami sandwich and a copy of *The New York Times* from a kiosk in the transfer terminal. As he enters the stupendous concrete curves of the terminal he is reading the obituary of Walter Elias “Walt” Disney. Approaching the information pod he thinks of *Snow White*—the film, not the record player.

He looks up and spies a dark-haired beauty (this would be Martha, of course — it would be inappropriate to abandon reality completely) staring at the Information Pod. He stands next to her and searches for his flight. There is no hint of simulation, no air of stagey re-enactment.
He steals a glance. This time he will play hard-to-get. He pretends not to see the slight woman in the yellow cotton sleeveless seersucker shift. He does not stare at her thick dark hair, or admire her tanned legs and the fine bones of her wrists. Her arms are folded in front of her and the tips of her fingers are tap, tap, tapping on her forearms, like a healthy pulse. Side by side they stand, gazing into the dark ellipsis of Arrival and Departures.

‘How was London?’ she says suddenly, turning towards him with a stunning smile.

‘How did you guess?’ he replies, enthralled once more by the idea that a woman—a gorgeous American woman, at that—can be bothered trying to determine his origins. She winks and looks back up at the board.

The first time they met, Martha had tapped the logo on his silly BOAC travel bag. ‘That’s how I knew,’ she said, and made him feel like a little boy whose game had been penetrated by a higher order being. It is different this time. This time he concentrates on the board, searching for his connection to Chicago, where he is going to a conference on trussed tube and x-bracing. The great engineer Fazlur Kahn himself is speaking. This time he will not try to explain Khan’s trussed concrete steel to Martha. On the complex subject of tubing he will remain absolutely silent.

It is his first trip America. He is 28 years old. He had never been married. He has slept with a woman exactly seven times: four times with the wife of the Chief Architect of the new Liverpool Cathedral, and twice with a nice young woman in the construction office who was seeing another man and decided to go
for humor over prospects (her words, not his), and once when he was at University with a woman who he met at the Pub. Claire. Her name was Claire.

‘So, how was London?’

‘London was cold,’ he says with a slight smile, ‘cold and old the truth be told.’

She laughs lightly at his spontaneous attempt at rhyme, which she had not done the first time they met. This time around Martha finds him irresistibly witty, which (in his view) Martha failed to do throughout most of their marriage.

‘First trip to the U.S.A?’

‘Indeed,’ he said in 1966 and immediately regretted it. He’d never wanted to be the sort of man who said ‘indeed’. His father had tried to become that sort of man, and Frederick was hell bent on avoiding any of his father’s dreams.

‘Sure is,’ he replies instead, upbeat, modern, and off-the-cuff.

‘Nice tie,’ Martha said in 1966, flicking the tight navy knot at his neck, smiling that amused smile he would come to fear. This time there is no navy tie with little anvils to signify his membership in the Royal College of Engineers; this time he is wearing his egg-blue paisley silk shirt from King’s Road Chelsea, which he wears loose and nonchalantly unbuttoned.

‘Architect?’ asks Martha Salomon.

‘Engineer,’ he replies, with a knowing nod to her assumption. This time he would save the details for later. He should have known from Liverpool that nothing kills a woman’s interest in a man quicker than concrete. He had almost lost Martha in 1966, but he would not make the same mistake again.

‘Bridges,’ he said narrowing his eyes and looking up in the vague direction of the Departure Board, his mind turned towards matters of far greater import than an arrival and departure pod. ‘And concrete—thin shell structures.’

It was a miracle he had seen Martha at all in 1966. He was completely absorbed by the extraordinary Saarinen Terminal. It was a concrete heaven. Even the ventilators were a utopian mutation of nature and concrete formed into an organic paroxysm of simulated growth. A creamy, smooth, concrete forest, with walls like the skin of a mushroom.

Then he remembered E.T.
Caroline was in his study looking through the shelves. She took down a hardcover book bound in cloth, an old Thames and Hudson in the Masters of Modern Architecture series. It had been a birthday present from Ralph and Veronica.

‘Look at this, Dad,’ she said, walking over to his desk. ‘It’s that airport in New York. The TWA Terminal, New York.’ She began to read. ‘Japanese mosaic tiles cover the cantilevered desk and departure board in the ticket lobby. Photo by Yu·kio Fu·ta·ga·wa. Take it, Dad.’

Frederick took the book.

‘It’s E.T., Dad.’

The huge elliptical information pod at the TWA Terminal mounted on top of the elongated concrete neck bore an uncanny resemblance to E.T.

‘I’m going to show Callum. He’ll love this picture. Do you think Stephen Spielberg copied the idea for E.T. from this airport? Do you think he was looking for his flight time on his way back to Hollywood and he got the idea? What do you think? Is that how it could have happened?’

Fred studied the photograph. He was having his own thoughts. ‘I’m not sure, Caroline. E.T. is organic in design, meaning it looks like some kind of plant or living matter, and so is the architecture in this airport, so there is a connection, but whether we can ever know if one thing caused another, well we just don’t know, but it seems unlikely.’

‘But what about chance, Dad? Can’t good things come by chance? Steven Spielberg could just have looked up and got the idea, like THAT!’ She snapped her long fingers. ‘And there’s something else, Dad. Have you forgotten that E.T. is Callum’s all-time favourite film? And this is where you and Mum met. Mum told me. She said I should come up here find this book. She said to remind you that E.T. came to earth in search of seedpods, just like you. What’s that about?’

Why would Martha have made some kind of bizarre reference to him being on a seed hunt? He stole a glance at his daughter.

‘What else did she tell you?’

But she had gone to find her brother.
Where was that book now? Before he moved to the Villa, Caroline had labeled a few boxes, before giving up. ‘MODERN U.S. ARCHITECTURE 1950/60/70’ was on top of a stack of boxes in his bedroom cupboard. Why did mothers think they had the right to tell their daughters everything? Was nothing private? He opened the box. Martha should never have told Caroline that they had met and fallen in love and married and parented because they both happened to be standing in front of an arrivals and departures board that resembled the fabricated extraterrestrial star of a children’s film. Children shouldn’t be exposed to the arbitrariness of beginnings, and especially not adopted children. When he confronted Martha about it later she was dismissive.

‘Well, how would you describe how we met, Fred? An act of god?’

‘What the hell was all that stuff about seedpods? Where did that come from?’

‘You’ve got no sense of humor, Fred, do you know that? Try thinking of it as irony. I was hardly the fertility god, was I?’

‘Why are you bringing that up now, Martha? We’ve got two perfect children. What more could we want?’

A giant cockroach climbed out of the cardboard box. Frederick slammed his foot down on the hard shell and wiped it off on the carpet. The damn thing was stuck. He tried again, and managed to dislodge it. Soft, grey sludge was hanging out the side of the insect, but it was still alive. It was crawling away in desperation, like a mortally wounded adversary in a cowboy
Martha wanted at least four children. He had wanted only one, so they could travel, he explained, and still have flexibility in their lives. Before she agreed to marry him she made him promise not to stand in her way. Four it was. After a barrage of tests and several early miscarriages, they adopted Caroline. Two years later Martha was pregnant.

He turned the pages of the Saarinen book. He did not remember the mosaic tiles—he ought to remember something like that, and he could not recall any colour either, although in this photo the tiles around the pod were orange or yellow. His whole memory of the TWA Terminal was in black and white, as if it had been filtered through an abstract idea of the past. He brought the book up to his face, in case there was a date on the information pod. It wasn’t a pod at all. There was absolutely no relationship between the display board and a pod. There was a small vase of orange flowers on the counter near the two attendants in the photo, but that hardly justified calling it a pod. People stood in lines beneath a sign saying ‘Ticket lobby’. Above the atrium there was a coffee shop called The Paris Café. On another level was a restaurant and cocktail bar—The Lisbon Lounge. He looked very closely. How extraordinary. The seats
were white with tulip bases. They were his seats. He and Martha had had a coffee there together, and then moved to the bar for a drink. He had a gin and tonic; she had a Manhattan. Later, they had hamburgers. He missed his flight to Chicago and they spent the night at a hotel near the Terminal. The radio station played Dylan’s new album, *Blond on Blond* from beginning to end, and then all over again. *All night long, your flesh like silk, your face like glass.* In the morning she left for her mother, and he went on to his conference.

Caroline heard a different version.

‘So what did you do when you met, Dad? Did you kiss straight away, like in the movies.’ Caroline giggled.

‘We exchanged addresses – in those days you were more likely to write a letter than make a phone call. On my way back to England I stopped in New York to see her again.’

Sex. They had sex and sex and sex.

‘What did you do, Dad?’

‘I took your mother to dinner at the Four Seasons, in the Seagram Building.’

‘Wow. So I bet it was summer. Or spring?’

‘Pardon? Oh, I see.’

‘Was meeting Mum exciting? Was it romantic?’

‘Of course it was exciting. Now get ready for dinner. Go help your mother. Go.’

A brisk knock on the front door and Frederick froze, like a setter with a bird in the bush. Another knock.

‘Anyone home?’ A woman’s voice. He didn’t know any women.

‘Who is it?’ He heard the voice of a scared old man.

‘It’s Jan Venturi, from next door?’

The budgerigar woman. What could she possibly want? He pushed the box of books into the corner and went over to open the door, leaving the security chain in place.

‘Fred? Hello, how are you? It’s good to finally see you close up—or at least a bit of you. Hello nose.’

He unchained the door and pulled it ajar, leaving his body in the narrow gap.
‘I can’t get the wheel of my recycling bin out of the gutter. I’ve been at it ten minutes and it is stinking hot. I was wondering if you would mind giving me a hand? I’m sorry to bother you.’

‘Of course, Janet,’ muttered Fred, meaning of course he minded and of course she wouldn’t have any idea that he minded. He fiddled with the door and found his slip-on shoes, and then made his way out to his neighbor, who was standing on the other side of the driveway, wrangling a large bin that was pitched sideways in the gutter of the road.

‘Terrible weather, isn’t it,’ Janet called. She was tugging at the bin with one arm while keeping another hand on the stack of empty yoghurt containers spilling out of the top.

‘Awful,’ agreed Frederick, hurrying over to help. How could anyone eat that much yoghurt? He hated yoghurt. As he walked towards her his left knee gave out and he stumbled.

‘Are you all right there, Fred? Do you need a hand?’

‘I’m fine, I just tripped on something.’

‘Really? What was it?’

‘A stick, I believe.’

‘A stick?’ Janet said, casting around. ‘We should get rid of that. It’s dangerous. Where is it?’

‘I kicked it over there,’ said Frederick, gesturing vaguely towards the grass next to the driveway.

‘I’ll just make sure no one else trips over it, then,’ she said, scanning the open space. ‘The driveway, you say?’ Janet left the bin and let yoghurt containers spill down onto the path. She walked slowly across the driveway with her arms behind her back and her eyes on the ground.

‘No, the lawn. But please Janet, let me find it later,’ he said, ‘don’t you bother.’

‘Call me Jan. No one calls me Janet except my budgerigars. That’s a joke, but the way. And it’s no bother. A large stick, you say? Over this way?’

‘Actually, it was a small-to-medium sized stick. And greeny-coloured. Like grass.’ Oh God.

‘Hmm,’ she said, head bowed, looking left to right, ‘a small-to-medium grass-coloured stick...’

‘Please, leave the stick to me and let’s deal with this bin. If you could just pick up those yoghurt containers?’
‘Fine, Fred,’ she said, ‘I was just trying to help.’

What an infuriating woman. And no one called him Fred, but he could hardly ask her to lengthen his own name straight after she had told him to shorten hers. He tried out her name: 
Jan. Hi Jan! There were many reasons not to chat to Janet—Jan, but the main one was she might want to become his friend, and Frederick did not want any friends. Jan tugged at her paisley scarf while Fred dragged the bin out of the gutter. He desperately wanted to ask Jan if she had seen Tom fall, and if she knew how he was, but he didn’t want Jan to know he had been standing inside watching Tom tottering around in the heat.

After all, it was a fine line between watching and doing.

It was called Mogumber when they went, but before that it was Moore River Native Settlement, where they brought the part-Aboriginal kids when they took them from their families. Later they set some of that film there, the one about the little girls who walked all the way back to Jigalong. He hadn’t wanted to bring Caroline to the Mission, but Martha insisted; she had arranged it all and found a guide to meet them there, and they weren’t changing their plans now. They followed the woman around the compound and through the abandoned wooden cottages where they once housed the children. The guide asked had checked the registers for relatives? She was looking at Caroline when she asked. Martha shook her head, and they all fell in behind the guide.

They stopped to look at old black and white photographs on a display board; well-to-do women in hats and gloves standing behind rows of barefoot Aboriginal children. It looked to him like the 1930s, but he wasn’t about to ask either the guide or his wife.

‘Christians,’ said the guide. ‘They drove up from Perth once a month to check on the children.’

‘At least there were some white people back then who showed concern,’ said Fred. ‘I suppose not all of them were heartless.’

Martha glared at him. Their guide shrugged. ‘It’s a fine line between watching and doing,’ she said.

‘Can we go?’ whispered Caroline. ‘I don’t like it here.’
‘Watch yourself,’ said Jan. She was wearing a padded scarf around her head, with her hair presumably tucked in somewhere underneath, as if she was halfway through spring-cleaning. Or perhaps she was recovering from an illness? Not cancer, surely? He couldn’t manage that. He wheeled the bin down the side of her unit. Jan gestured to the uneven paving at their feet.

‘Never mind the sticks, look at that! You could break your hip and that would be end of it. I reported this to Management weeks ago,’ she continued, ‘and still no action, the cheapskates.’

Frederick nodded in agreement. At least his neighbor thought the Village was poorly run. This might be a good time to mention Tom.

‘Speaking of sticks—’ she began again.

‘Did you get the letter about the latest extraordinary levy?’ he interrupted.

‘For re-tiling the pool, you mean? I prefer the beach. Tell me, Fred, where have you been since we last met? We were in the library, I think? Have you been back? I haven’t seen you there.’

And she never would. What they called the library was a dim alcove with a low teak table for the local rag and two small bookcases with his-and-her Tom Clancy’s and Georgette Heyer’s.

He helped Jan reposition the paver until it was level.

‘How are you enjoying the Village?’ Jan rolled her eyes and laughed.

He smiled. So Jan saw what this place really was; it was not a Village at all. A Village was a small town in England surrounded by woods. A Village was remote community of weavers in the foothills of Nepal. This was a concentration camp, a detention centre. They were all refugees from youth and middle age who had been cut off from the normal ebb and flow of life and were being prepared for a slow and painful death.

‘I’ve been busy moving in, actually Jan. It takes time to settle.’

‘It certainly does,’ she said quietly. ‘It takes some getting used to.’ Jan stood with her hands on her hips, looking at him. ‘Thanks so much for the help,’ she said. ‘I really appreciate it.’

Fred shuffled in his slip-ons and eyed his front door. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I suppose it’s time for me to—’
‘Why don’t you come in? I’ve made a chicken pie and a coleslaw and it’s not the sort of thing a woman should eat alone.’ Jan patted her belly, which appeared to be a small firm mound.

‘Oh no, I couldn’t,’ he said hurriedly. Couldn’t, and wouldn’t.

‘Oh, but you have to,’ said Jan carefully. ‘It was hard enough for me to ask, let alone having you turn me down.’

Frederick ran his tongue around his lips.

‘You have to come in, Fred, or else I will be unhappy all afternoon, and when I get unhappy I stamp my feet and flap my wings cry very loudly.’ She paused for effect. ‘And then the little fellows get upset and we wouldn’t want that, would you? You know how thin the walls on these places are.’

‘Little fellows?’ said Fred weakly.

‘The birds,’ she said, smiling. ‘Don’t look so terrified. You can at least take some pie home with you, can’t you?’

There was no way out of it now. Frederick waited as Jan fiddled with her keys. As the front door opened he heard an appalling flapping and screeching. The budgerigars. Frederick remained rooted on the spot. Once he crossed the threshold all would be lost.

‘I think I hear my phone,’ he said.

‘Really? I’m amazed you can hear anything over my birds.’

‘There it is again,’ said Fred, cocking his head slightly. ‘Do you mind if I duck back?’

‘I’ll take the pie out of the oven and let it cool. I’m pleased my birds do not bother you. I was worried when you moved in that you might complain. I’m not supposed to have so many birds, but how will they know if no one tells them? Off you go now, big ears.’

‘It’s stopped,’ said Fred. ‘He was defeated. It was pointless to either take offence or refuse the pie. ‘And he did have rather large ears, and he had always hated them.

‘Has it? Haven’t you got good hearing!’

Jan’s house was not at all what he expected. He had imagined a fussy, female kind of place, with doilies and mass-produced figurines in the sentimental genre, but his neighbor had a preference for simple, well-made wooden furniture and Asian art. There was a lovely mahogany Buddha on the floor near the
sliding door, and scrolls of Japanese and Chinese paintings on the walls. On the face of her windows Jan had hung thin bamboo blinds, which filtered subdued light into the room. A large row of books lined the wall of the lounge.

‘It’s nice,’ he said, without thinking.

‘Not what would you’d expect from an old woman, Fred? No doilies and antimacassars?’

His neck reddened.

‘My husband and I lived in South-East Asia on and off for over 15 years...Singapore, Bangkok, China. China was Sam’s last job. He was with a Japanese manufacturer who relocated their parts factory from here and needed a supervisor. I taught English at the local school and did volunteer work. We had a wonderful time. We traveled all over Asia — Vietnam, Mongolia, Japan, and then he got sick and we had to come home, and then, well, then Samuel died.’

Fred watched Jan’s face carefully. He waited for death to pass over and depart. Samuel. A biblical name, like Martha.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said finally.

‘Never mind,’ said Jan. She sat very still. She was waiting for him to say the right thing. He could reach inside and pull out some words, just like he had done for the Dean, or he could say nothing, as he done when he met Linda Yu.

‘Well then,’ she said finally, ‘I’m going to lay the table for two. You will stay, won’t you?’

‘Of course,’ said Fred. How could he leave?

‘I hope you’re not just staying because you feel sorry for me.’ Jan was putting out glazed plates with tiny hairline cracks. ‘That would be the wrong reason for eating my chicken pie. The Chinese believe you should never eat someone’s food just because you feel sorry for them. It gives you indigestion.’

‘Really?’ said Fred.

‘I made that up, but it makes sense if you think about it. Is this enough for you?’

‘Plenty, thank you.’ The pie smelled incredible.

‘I want to see if you can guess my secret ingredients. Start, please, before it gets cold. Help yourself to salad.’

Jan’s pie was positively aromatic. It was absolutely perfect. He could not fault it. The crust was buttery yet crisp and melted
away on his tongue, and the chicken filling was dense and juicy
and firm and succulent.

‘Well?’ prompted Jan.
‘Fantastic.’
‘No, I mean the secret ingredients.’
‘Onion?’ he suggested.
‘Hardly a secret.’
‘Garlic?’
‘Again, too obvious.’
‘Parsley?’
‘Closer, but no, there’s no parsley. You’ve dropped some pie
on your shirt.’ She handed him a napkin.
Fred dabbed his shirt, keen to return to his food. He had
never tasted a pie like this. Martha was a wonderful cook, but
after all those years even the best recipes wear out.
‘Sage?’
‘You’ll be going for rosemary and thyme next.’
‘I give up.’
‘There are two secret ingredients—three if you count ground
cashew nut.’
‘Cashews? I think I can taste them now. And?’
‘Fresh tarragon—dried is too overwhelming and kills the
other ingredients. And finally, saffron.’
‘It’s very good, Jan.’ He was trying to hide his hunger. It was
if he hadn’t eaten a real meal since Martha died.
‘Another slice?’
‘Please!’
‘Next week it’s your turn.’
‘I beg your pardon?’
‘Next week it’s your turn to cook.’
Fred masked his alarm with a fixed smile. ‘I’m afraid I’m not
much of a cook, Jan. I was always the sous-chef for my wife—the
assistant.’ A bald lie. Martha ran the kitchen with an iron fist
and Caroline in tow, and he had happily accepted the division of
labor.

‘I know what a sous-chef is, Fred. Are you telling me that a
big boy like you can’t cook? Samuel was what I call a book-cook.
That’s someone who needs a book in order to cook. I am more of
an improviser in the kitchen, more of a Charlie Parker.’
‘A book cook. I’ll have to remember that. My wife never allowed me to take the helm in the kitchen. You know what women are like. She insisted on cooking every meal. Or course, I can open things and mix them together.’

He did not like the way Jan was looking at him.

‘So what do you eat over there, Fred? At number 7?’

What did he eat? ‘Well, I have a toasted sandwich maker and plenty of cereal. Healthy cereal, like muesli, with fresh fruit and yoghurt. I love yoghurt. Like you! And I have...I have beans.’

‘Beans?’ said Jan quizzically. ‘What sort of beans?’

‘Large beans,’ said Fred weakly. ‘And small beans.’

‘Can you read, Frederick?’

‘Pardon?’ he said.

‘Can you read?’

‘Of course I can read.’ Did she have to be so blunt?

‘Because cooking is as straightforward as reading and following instructions. I heard from Tom Chelmsely that you were an engineer? You should be fine with the technical side of cooking.’

‘Tom had an accident. I saw him fall.’ It came out like a confession to Father McMahon.

Jan set down her fork. ‘I didn’t want to mention it until after the pie. Is that wrong of me? I’m very upset about it. Actually, that’s why I asked you in. I didn’t want to be here alone. I’m very fond of Tom. We have coffee most mornings. I cook for him. The poor man misses his wife terribly and he’s too old for cookbooks—not like you, Fred. Tom was married for sixty years. Can you imagine that? Poor Tom.’

Jan’s eyes were watering. Fred had a large, juicy piece of chicken on the end of his fork, just ready to pop in his mouth. He was starving. He lowered his fork and tried to concentrate on Jan’s face.

‘Even though I complain, I like it here, in spite of the management. There’s no maintenance, I feel safe, and I’ve got friends if I need company. I can come and go as I please. But there’s no escaping what’s around the corner, and it gets me down.’
He nodded, and glanced quickly at the buttery pie on the end of his fork. Was it too soon to eat? Could he eat and listen?

‘I think I must have been in the shower when he fell. They had taken him away by the time I came out—I had the radio going and I had to wash my hair and what with the birds I missed the whole thing. Then Bernadette from Number 10 called from the Dining Room to see if I would go and check on Tom because he was late for lunch and they’d started on the soup. What’s wrong? Are you all right Fred? It’s upsetting, I know.’

Fred jerked his head up. His gaze had fallen down to the pie again. ‘I’m fine,’ he said.

‘I usually go in and see Tom in the late afternoon. I take him a plate of food if he’s not up to going to the dining room. We have a cup of tea and I put on a load of washing. He really can’t look after himself but we don’t want the bosses to know that. They’ll have him out of there before you can say Jack Robin. When he didn’t answer his door I called the office, and they told me he’d had a bad fall and that it was you who called.’

Fred nodded.

‘Thank god you happened to look in the quad at just the right time. He could have been out there in the heat for hours. That’s the best thing about this place—you’ve got people looking out for you.’

Fred pushed his knife and fork into the finished position. He would not be able to eat his pie now.

‘You can’t be full? You can’t leave it on the plate.’

‘How is Tom? Have you heard anything?’

‘Nothing. I hope he hasn’t broken his hip. That would be the end of him in his Villa. And you’re never the same after the anesthetic.’

‘I think it was his head,’ muttered Fred. He really needed to go home and lie down. ‘I think he hit his head when he fell.’

‘That doesn’t sound good. What was he doing out there all by himself? Where was everyone? I can’t believe no one saw him. He’s not exactly the fastest man on a Zimmer; it must have taken him hours to get across the quadrangle. Why didn’t someone go and help him, or call a gopher to pick him up? I’ll put some plastic wrap on what’s left of that pie. Just bring the plate back when you can.’
He sat while Jan cleared the plates and wiped down the table.

‘Would you like tea?’

‘No, thank you, Jan. I really have to go. Lunch was very nice.’

‘You are most welcome. Next time I want to hear all about your engineering. What was your area? Structural? Mechanical? Electrical?’

‘I was at the University. Concrete.’

‘Concrete? Well, that must have been hard!’

‘Pardon? Oh, I see. I’m a bit slow at jokes.’

‘Obviously—not that it was particularly funny. I blame Sam. It didn’t matter what I said, the man laughed. He thought I was a real comedienne. I can’t tell you how much I miss that. Here’s your plate, Fred—watch the edges, I don’t think the plastic is stuck down properly. What I miss most is having someone who likes me to make them laugh, someone who thinks I’m funny. What about you, Fred?’

Jan pulled off her scarf, releasing a remarkable head of wild grey curls.

‘Did you think I was bald? An old woman can’t have a good head of hair?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Tell me, what do you miss most, Fred? Your wife’s gone too, hasn’t she? I hope you don’t mind my asking.’

‘Not at all. Martha, that was my wife’s name.’

‘What a lovely name. I’m sure she was a wonderful woman.’

‘Yes, she was. She was a wonderful woman.’

‘How long has it been?’

‘Two years or so.’

‘Only yesterday, really. Samuel has been dead for four years, three months and twenty-two days.’

Something had set the budgies off. It would be polite to ask about them—they obviously played a large part in Jan’s life, but he wasn’t really up to it. ‘I miss it all, Jan.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Jan, as if she didn’t mean it.

There were two photos on the wall near the front door. A fat baby was lying on its stomach, stark naked except for a blue beanie with a logo from a football team that Fred could not name.
The second was the same boy, Fred guessed, aged about three. He was wearing oversized football shorts and holding a Sherwin ball.

‘He’s a mad Eagles fan. That’s my only grandson, Morrison. He’s five now.’

‘Your daughter’s child?’ Fred wished he had missed the pictures completely, because soon the conversation would fold back towards him. He would be circled and targeted.

‘My only son’s boy.’ She paused. ‘He’s dead.’

‘Morrison is dead?’ His voice sounded shrill and hysterical.

‘No, not Morrison. My son, Paul.’

‘Your son is dead?’ What could he do but repeat her misery?

‘A year ago on Friday. He was dead for a week and I didn’t even know. He was a heroin addict. In the end I had to draw the line, for the sake of my sanity. We sent him to boarding school when we lived in Bangkok and Hubei. It was a terrible mistake. He fell in with the wrong crowd.’

‘I understand,’ said Fred. He thought of Katie.

‘We should never have left him.’

Jan was holding his pie in one hand, while the other was resting flat on her chest. He ought to say more, but what could he say? ‘It happened to our best friends’ eldest daughter —many years ago. Her name was Katie. Katie Orr. It was a sad time for all of us.’ To his horror Jan’s eyes welled with tears.

‘Thank you,’ she said quietly. She held out his plate of chicken pie and opened the front door. ‘The boy is with his mother now. But not for long.’ She raised her eyebrows.

There was more to the story, but it was definitely time for him to exit. ‘Thank you again, Jan,’ he said stiffly.

‘You are most welcome, Fred. I look forward to our next meal. And I want to thank you.’

‘Please,’ said Fred. Don’t thank me, he wanted to say, I don’t want to be thanked. I don’t want us to owe each other anything.

Jan waited at the door as Fred crossed the driveway towards his Villa.

‘Fred?’ she called out.

He gave a little wave without looking back.

‘Watch out for medium-sized pavement-coloured sticks!’
He stood at his front door, holding the plate with the slice of pie in one hand, his keys in the other. Lunch had left him feeling undone. Jan’s unit was the mirror image of his own, but they could not have been more different. He opened the door and braced himself.

It rose up to meet him as he stepped into his house: his couch, his books, his papers, the half-sorted boxes, the unwashed cups, clothes that needed washing, shirts that needed putting away. He fought his way in to the laundry to retrieve the remote for the split. He hated reverse cycle air conditioning. It was bad in summer, but far worse in winter. Warmth, he and Martha had always believed, emanated, it did not blow.

There was barely enough room in his small fridge for Jan’s pie. The shelves and door were stacked with half-eaten jars of jam and pickles and spreads and chutneys. He kept buying condiments to dress up his slices of ham and cheese, but could never find one that he really liked. The chicken in the meat drawer was out of date. There were cans of beetroot and jars of gherkins and prunes that Martha had bought and he had ferried across to his new fridge. He thought, when those prunes were picked Martha was still alive.

He was losing his marbles. He pushed the pie in on top of some jars. By his reckoning Jan would be in her late 60s, or early seventies. Did he look older than her? You and the lady next door, you’re our youngsters. That’s what the manager said when he moved in. Was it true, or do they say that to everyone to make them feel better? What time was it? He had lost track of time. He looked at the clock. He wondered what would Jan make of his original George Nelson wall clock. The eyeball had always made him nervous. It was a parting gift from the Chief Architect when he finished the Cathedral. Had the man suspected infidelity? Was it a message? Caroline hated it. She always said it gave her the creeps. If nobody really liked it, why didn’t he just get rid of it?

How could he explain his loyalty to objects? Yes, his pieces were classics, but holding onto them was also some kind of penance, something to be endured, like crawling on your knees at Fatima. He needed to talk to someone about this. But who? Caroline? Why didn’t he just call her? Nothing felt right. Tom had fallen over. The woman next door had given him pie. But he
couldn’t call her, because it was Caroline’s turn to call. If he called her now it would disturb the precarious balance of things. Caroline needed him at least as much as he needed her, and a break in routine might signify a shift, and at his age any shift had to mean a decline. That was why he refused to move out of the family home for so long. A whole year and a quarter he held out, enduring Caroline’s phone calls and whirlwind visits. She swept by and whisked him off to see over 55s canal developments, all of them a series of worn-out nouns modified by exhausted adjectives—Secret Harbor, Hidden Sanctuary, Golden Sands, Sunset Strip. After forty minutes or so she would slow down, pull in for a coffee, and wait for him to insist it was too far away. Deep down his daughter was in agreement: why would you move to the end of the earth to die, when you could do it in the convenience of your own home?

That was what he was doing now, here in his unit: he was dying. The Villa was a bridge between his real life, which had ended, and death, which waited behind a wall of paperbarks on the other side of the quadrangle. He had finished accumulating experiences, and now he was shuffling around in the past, peeking inside boxes and then closing them quickly. Moving to St. Sylvan’s had cemented his fate.

In the end Caroline gave up on the drives and sent him brochures and websites for new developments, begging him to look at the plans and choose. He read them to find out what they were up to in the Retirement Village game. Maximizing profits, and putting a strong case for three and four storey developments. Secure, easy-care. Most of the newer apartments had two bedrooms, each with their own en suite bathroom. He had assumed that this was to allow for visits from friends and family, but then a salesman explained that at his age most couples were more comfortable with a room of their own.

‘Lets everyone get a good night’s sleep,’ he explained. Was it true? Was this what older couples wanted? To leave each other alone?

He was out cycling when he saw this place for sale—single level, mature trees out the front, a little older than most, but close to the family home, which he wasn’t quite ready to sell. Not yet. He would have the house painted and re-carpeted and rent it out,
he explained to Caroline. He would keep an eye on the place, and if she ever was to, you know—

‘What? Settle down? Have a family?’

‘Caroline, it’s not out of the question. Don’t look at me like that.’

‘Dad, I am single and on my way to forty. I don’t like men any more.’

For a long time there was Julian. In the end he left her for a twenty-six year old post-grad. Julian was a theorist, whatever that was. Good-looking idiot, if you liked a man who wore ‘product’ in his hair. With this new research project it could only get worse. How would Caroline ever meet anyone, flying around the world in search of stuffed animals? And what if she met someone overseas? She might never come back. He might never see his daughter again, which was exactly what Miriam had said when Martha said she was marrying an Englishman and migrating to Australia. ‘Migration? Americans don’t migrate. We are the place people migrate to. Why would anyone want to leave America? I’ll never see my daughter again!’

Great-Aunt Marjorie must have felt like that when he left her that afternoon in Aberfeldy. He bought her lunch at The Palace, and helped her home in the rain. She was tiny and frail, like a little canary, and she held onto him for a very long time when he finally said goodbye.

‘Freddie, when you have all those little babies you bring them back to me.’

He promised, and he broke his promise.

The past was rattling its bones and ringing its jangly bells. Residents at St. Sylvan’s were scared witless of losing their memory, but wasn’t it so much more terrifying to put up with its eternal return?

They had the same picture in all the brochures. A still-handsome older man sits in the shade of a generous verandah, smiling contentedly as his grandchildren play in the large garden. On one side of him is his trim, well-preserved wife (good teeth, modern haircut), on the other the faithful Golden Retriever. The children are tearing barefoot across the grass, rushing towards the future, while the older couple are centre-frame, like the sun,
happy to sit there all day long doing a bit of straightforward remembering. *Darling, remember when...?*

But memory did not work that way. The path back to the TWA Terminal and to Martha Salomon was not a road or a bridge, or any kind of straight line. Memory was more Russian than that; it was more like Shukhov’s hyperbolic paraboloid. He had seen it for himself in Vladivostok. Shukhov’s structure was thin and light, like the tube walls of Fazlur Khan’s skyscrapers. Their strength came from interconnectedness and dependency, from the mesh, not from the two static pillars of the present and the past pretending to hold the whole thing up. *Terminus a quo, terminus ad quem.* The starting point and the end point.
‘If man was to live and work in cities in the sky,’ he told his students at the start of his lecture on tubing and skyscrapers, ‘then he had to learn to manage lateral load.’

But how was a man to withstand forces you could not measure?

Fred pulled back the curtain. Ted’s Zimmer frame was lying on its side in the grass. You could land a small plane on that grass—not a jet, although he would have liked to see that, but some kind of nimble bi-plane. It could almost taxi right up to his window. He would pick up his navy blue overnight bag and duck past the beating propellers, climb in and fly all the way back to Martha. But he would do it differently this time.
Were there really people in the world who could say, *No, I wouldn’t change a thing?* He would give anything to be one of those people.

Soon he would ring the hospital for news of Tom. Tom was the first, but all of his merry bands of Villagers were passengers in transit. After lifetimes of consuming and hoarding they had set off on their final journey and were traveling light. They had sold their family homes and redistributed the cash to help the kids with their ill-advised mortgages, freeing up leafy older suburbs for rezoning and battle axing. They were moving on so that others might move on in. It was the sort of altruism championed by real estate agents. His fellow travelers were making life easy for the kids, ruthlessly culling and cataloguing, and turfing the debris out on the verge. ‘We’d never want to be a burden’, was the smug mantra over lunch and a few white wines at the Gerry. But not Frederick Lothian. Oh no, no, no. He was digging in with his Breuer and his Braun and the books and the pictures and the paintings and the letters and the filing cabinets and the Samoan bark paintings, not to mention the Flokatis and the Kilims and Rose Levy Berenbaum’s *Cake Bible* and the Boda ironware and Martha’s mother’s copy of Blu Greenberg’s classic *How to Run A Traditional Jewish Family* and the chipped orange Le Creuset set that was a wedding present from Martha’s mother. The past was right here in front of him, piling up under the bed, along the walls, stacked one box on top of the other and woe betides anyone who tried to take it away. Occasionally a brave traveler from the Committee would stick their head in to see if that new fellow in No. 7 was up for a bit of O.T. in the function room— just to keep the joints oiled! How about a minibus to the Casino? They got a quick look at the furniture and the boxes, and their brows would knit and they would think the better of saying anything because really, it was none of their business if Fred Lothian had a crock of funny furniture, all of it the worse for wear, and if Fred didn’t want to play Meet Ball or Blackjack that was fine too, because it was his house and it was a free country. *Tooroo Fred!*

It would not be by bridge or plane that he would depart, but by an ambulance traveling well within the speed limit with its siren discretely muted.
He would not go quietly, though. He had made quite sure of that.

Fred folded the paper on the table and put it near the front door. Poor little Michael. He lifted last week’s newspaper off the answering machine, and turned it on. The light began to flash. He pushed the button. You have five messages.

‘Fred, it’s Roger Wu from the Department. I can’t believe you’ve actually got your machine on. You’re a hard man to reach. I’m wondering if you could give me a call? We’re running a project for the graduate workshop and we’d love your input. And the Department’s got a very exciting proposal for you. We won’t let you say no!’

‘Mr. Lothian, this is Damian Martins from Mateera Realty. I’m been trying to reach you in person but I’m not having much luck. I wanted to let you know that your tenants have broken their lease. I wonder if you could come into the office to sort out the bond and sign some papers to get it back on the market? Give me a call and we’ll make a time.’

‘Damian Martins here—’

‘Mr. Lothian, hello, it’s Jane from Mateera Realty. Damian asked me—’

‘Hello Fred, it’s me again. Roger. I’m going to—’
Delete. Delete. Delete.

Almost immediately the phone rang. Should he pick it up? Roger had been his last PhD supervision before he left the University, and even after all these years he liked to surprise Fred with a query about some technical issue. And Damian Martins was the last person in the world he wanted to talk to. Apparently he had once been a famous football player, but Fred had never heard of him. The phone persisted. It might be about Tom, he thought suddenly. He picked it up.

‘Frederick Lothian.’

‘Mr. Lothian?’

‘Speaking.’ He heard the shuffle of papers. ‘Is this about Tom?’ he asked.

‘Tom? I’m sorry?’

‘Tom Chelmsely? The man who fell? I made the initial call.’
‘This is Nicola Masterson, Mr. Lothian. I am the Manager of the Sir Charles Court Hostel. I am calling in regard to Callum.’
‘Callum,’ he repeated.
‘Your son is Callum Lothian? I have you here as the emergency contact.’
‘Emergency,’ Fred repeated.
‘I don’t mean to alarm you. Emergency is a technical term only—’
‘Caroline,’ he interrupted. ‘You must call Caroline.’
‘Let me explain. I have a note on file from Caroline saying that you should be contacted. It says here, let me see, next-of-kin is in London.’
‘London, that is correct. She has a laptop computer with her and a phone. I have the details.’ Frederick cradled the hand piece between his shoulder and neck and opened the kitchen drawer. He rummaged frantically through peelers and scissors and old Video Rental cards for his address book.
‘Are you ready?’ He opened the back cover and read off the twelve digits.
‘But Mr. Lothian—’
‘Thank you for calling, Ms. Masterson,’ he said.
‘Mr. Lothian, your son is—’
He pulled the socket out of the wall. Soon it would be dark and he could turn off the air conditioner and open the window. Jan’s birdies would go home to their perches for the night. The Villagers would pair up for their suburban walks. Over on the Decrepit Ward the nurses would be sorting out the evening meds.
He looked up at the metal eye. In London it would soon be morning.
‘Ring ring,’ he whispered. And then he closed his eyes.
Book 2

Bridges
Since Monday was the day that Fred always walked along the foreshore, he managed to get up before midday. He had hardly slept a wink. Thinking had usurped sleeping, although you could hardly call it thought. Thinking was not supposed to be disconnected from the person doing it. In Frederick’s profession thought had to be marshalled by the thinker, and carefully directed at something in particular, like an arrow at a target. Engineers were trained to think in context, to imagine in situ. This is what he taught his students. But these renegade thoughts that had taken over his head had not been trained by him. They were masked insurgents, they were hooded terrorists who came ashore in the cover of darkness, paddling in quietly with their bombs deep in their pockets and their bullets on their belts.

At the river he found a park under a tree. A pale blue VW Kombi pulled up next to him and the door flew open to release a large black dog. It was the sort of dog a family should own—a lopping, smiling, licking dog—a Labrador-cross? A girl and a boy climbed down, and then leant against the car door. She took a packet of tobacco from her pocket and began to roll a cigarette. Ralph used to smoke cigarettes like that. Fred always suspected him of being a secret pot smoker. Towards the end of a four-bottle night his former friend would make a big fuss about heading off to find the baccy, as he liked to call it, defusing its toxic reality with a bit of chummy vernacular. He would come back to the table with the leather pouch and fiddle around with the papers, turning the tobacco round and round until it was just right, and then running his tongue down the length of the white stick. ‘You’re not thinking of smoking that in here,’ Martha would say, and Ralph would just lean back in his chair and strike a match. Martha’s father had died of lung cancer when she was only nineteen. She hated smoking.

The boy came up behind the girl and took the cigarette, running his hand inside the back of her t-shirt. Fred caught sight of a band of pale flesh and the edge of a black bra strap. She laughed and looked at him, then pressed herself into the boy.
Fred turned away and saw the dog race to the edge of the limestone wall and brace itself, as if it was about to leap into the shallow water.

Warm, smooth, elastic skin. When was the last time he touched the skin of another human being? His own flaking exodermis was more like parchment than skin, more like the dry and yellowed pages of a text book that no one would ever read again about a country that no longer existed. But you couldn’t compare the human body to a country, could you? The disappearance of a country was a good thing, at least in the late 20th century. Who would want to bring back Rhodesia? That was another thing he couldn’t stand—the way everyone acted as if the past was golden. Most of the books he read as a child were cruel, stupid stories full of gollies and blackies and huge boiling pots ringed by naked cannibals, readying themselves for the arrival of a delicious European. Dead and gone forever—and good riddance too. Of course, Martha had never agreed with expunging the record. ‘That’s what they do in communist countries,’ she said when the local Library sent a circular announcing they were going through the collection with a fine-toothed comb and getting rid of offensive titles. ‘It’s a White Out. You’ve read Milan Kundera—or pretended to read him. This is how totalitarian dictatorships function. They just pretend it didn’t happen!’

Frederick disagreed. He didn’t want his daughter going to the library and coming home with some book that had piccaninnies playing in lily ponds, and natives tossing their boomerangs into the sunset. He didn’t want her to see those terrible words underneath the pen and ink drawings. Gin, lubra, half-caste.

‘That’s all very well, Martha, if you are reading those old books with the intention of talking about them in a class, putting them in context, so-to-speak, but what about when children go and choose their own books? What happens when they stumble across this material?’

‘Don’t ‘so-to-speak’ me, Fred Lothian, don’t ‘context’ me. I’m going to complain, and that’s that.’

The couple had dragged a large branch to the edge of the river. The boy heaved it into the water, and they both clapped
and whistled when the dog launched itself off the wall and paddled madly after it, and then scrambled up the steps with the log in its mouth. The boy took off his T-shirt and stretched. He was lean and thin and loose in the joints, as young men were meant to be. When he held his arms above his head, his board shorts slid down his narrow hips. When Martha was dying her skin began to soften and separate from her body in soft folds and drapes, like muslin, as if her own skin was getting ready to shroud her body.

As if, as if, as if— was there some genetic connection between old age and ‘as if’? He had had about enough of ‘as if’. It had begun when Martha died. It was as if he began to drift, as if he could no longer see things as they really were, but only through the fog of what they were not. At first he thought his turn from reality might be a paradox. Or was it a metaphor? He spent hours in the Reference section of the library and emerged none-the-wiser. Engineers were not supposed to concern themselves with figures of speech. The entire profession had sworn off it and devoted itself to the literal business of getting things done. They had handed the whole sticky business of metaphor—or whatever it was—over to the architects, who took to it like fish to bait.

‘We are employing the metaphor of flight in the concept drawing for the new airport administration wing,’ Ralph announced at one of his Friday dinners. Fred knew that architects loved to grab hold of the closest metaphor at hand to give their projects a bit of lift, but this time Ralph had gone too far.

‘But why is that a metaphor, Ralph? It’s an airport. Flight is what airports are about. It’s obvious. Why do you think they call it a new wing? These so-called metaphors are just a cheap way of translating complex briefs into something the client can drop into their PR material. Surely a great building speaks for itself through its design and structural resolve?’

‘Poor old Fred, you’re such a grinch. Isn’t he, Martha? I don’t know how he makes you happy. The idea of a wing has got nothing to do with airports. You should know that, Fred. It’s Roman—Vitruvius. It comes from the theatre. I don’t recall there
being any large airports in the 1st Century BC, but correct me if I’m wrong. A glass of Pommery, anyone?”

How could you actually use metaphors to think if you ended up thinking about something altogether different from what you started with? A metaphor was like the end of an electrical bundle that had lost its plastic coating and instead of nice thick, red lines of wire leading to a socket or another circuit you had a chaos of fraying ends writhing about one another, like the tentacles of a giant squid.

There you go, he did it again. Half these as if’s were not even surprising. The field was laden with cliché. Even he could see that.

The young couple were just ahead of him on the path, arm in arm, falling about each other like puppies. Their dog was meaningfully engaged in chasing down a tiny white poodle on a long lead, tangling up the owner’s legs and sending the poodle into a frenzy. The poodle was indistinct, like a cloud, like a dandelion in a breeze.
Stalked by the ghost of his own unoriginality. Every day it was the same. He woke up—if he had slept at all—with an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach and the distinct sense that there was something obscure, malevolent and obsessive laying in wait for him, ready to ambush him when he was at his weakest. Thoughts were ghosts. They were zombies. They wafted about in the white heat and dark stillness of St. Sylvan’s Retirement Village, tapping on windows, whispering forgotten lines, staging scenes that were supposed to have been deleted from the script long ago.

Once upon a time he would never be without a pencil and paper, in case he was called upon to calculate the axial and buckling compression of a column, or to figure an algorithm for the distribution of weight across a span. In the field of engineering thought led to action, at least somewhere down the line. But his pencil was gone. The House of Frederick was empty, hollow, osteoporeitic. Was that a word? It was now. He stole a glance behind him. The only way of knowing there had even been a real thought anywhere near was the feeling left behind, like mud on a boot proves that there was a walk in the rain, or the imprint of a finger on a glass, left by an intruder.

The couple from the Kombi were lying on the grass in the fitful shade of a Casuarina tree. He threw his leg across her and they hinged into each other, like a giant clam on the ocean floor. Their mouths opened and she ran her tongue over his lips. Frederick quickened his pace.

Sex. Sex was like New York: never again.

Sex with Martha had always been troubling. After the children were older (who had time for anything when you had very young children?) she would go through periods of studied passion. After working late he would come home exhausted, and tiptoe into the bedroom in the darkness, trying not to disturb her. Just as he sunk his head onto the pillow in relief she would throw on the reading light to reveal elaborate pink panties and lacy padded bras that elevated and exaggerated her small breasts. Where did women find such things? But these intermittent periods of erotic hijacking would give way to months of unbroken
droughts, where she would pull away from him and dismiss his attempts at foreplay.

‘I just feel like talking,’ she would say. ‘We never talk any more.’ Talking was the last thing Fred felt like doing after a day with his postgrads.

‘We never stop talking, Martha.’

‘I don’t mean about the children, or Ralph and Veronica, or my mother, or the fucking pool and how the Creepy Crawley keeps getting stuck on the bottom so the filter fills up with leaves from that tree you were supposed to trim last autumn, I mean really talk.’

Some nights he would find her awake in the dark. When he reached for her, she would flinch.

‘I’m sorry, Fred, do you mind? I’m thinking.’

A large march fly would not leave him alone. He pulled a strand off a peppermint tree. Who says things like that? Martha always had trouble with her thinking. But then women were so easily distracted. Martha loved to think, and there was absolutely no doubt that she was a clever woman, but she had never been able to apply her thinking in a sustained way. If engineering had taught him anything, it was that thinking had to be firmly laminated to the project at hand. Martha had never been able to finish that degree. She was absolutely incapable of attaining the focus and application necessary for a successful academic career.

‘I can’t think straight, Fred,’ she called out from the kitchen table where she was working on an assignment. She had left her books to stand at the door of his study. ‘It’s chaos in this house. Did you hear the washing machine beeping? Couldn’t you just go and open the door? Or the phone ring? It’s only fifteen minutes till we have to pick up Callum from the Bessells’. Did you even remember he was having a play after hockey? Why do I have to remember everything? Why do I have to worry about it all?’

But Martha liked to worry. Worry was what Martha did best. If it wasn’t the washing and the cooking, she would worry about the entire world. ‘Oh Frederick, the world is such a terrible
place,’ she would say mournfully, putting down her books and her papers.

‘Could you be more specific, darling?’

The giant fly moved as slowly as a zeppelin, but still he couldn’t manage to dispense it. If Martha had been a writer of fiction, or some kind of poet (god forbid) she might have found something to do with all those ideas that scrambled around in her head and came pouring out willy-nilly. She did it to spite him, he was sure of it. He would be in the lounge room, absorbed in reading a journal or writing a lecture while Martha was in the kitchen and then all of a sudden a thought—any thought—would pop into her head and she would have to think it out loud.

‘I think I’ll do a roast chicken for dinner, Fred. What do you think? Or maybe we should have pasta? But do we have any pasta? Let me see...No, all gone. We do have tortillas though. Chicken tortillas ... but are there any cans of tomato?’

‘Do you have to think out loud?’

‘Pardon?’

He gathered up his papers and put them in his brief case.

‘What did you just say?’

‘I think I’ll go into work for a while. I have to finish the paper for the Brisbane conference and I need to send it off. What time is dinner?’

‘You have your own office here at home, you know, Fred. You have a room all to yourself upstairs. I’ve never understood why you have to work in the lounge, right next to where I’m cooking. I can’t even listen to my radio because you’re just there. I hate you sitting just there thinking about pre-stressed concrete or hyperbolic structures or global fault lines while I’m over here chopping capsicums.’

‘It’s hyperboloid, not hyperbolic, and am I really disturbing you, Martha? Am I doing a single thing to disrupt you, just sitting over here quietly, working away?’

‘It’s the juxtaposition of you and I, Fred, and the hierarchy implicit in that juxtaposition.’

‘I have no idea what you are talking about, Martha. None what so ever. Did you hear that in your latest lecture?’
He squinted into the sun. He should have brought his hat. It was already far too hot for walking. It ought to be too hot for thinking too, but the thought had already landed heavily and stopped him in his tracks. Why hadn’t he got up to chop the capsicums? Why hadn’t he offered to go to the shops for the chicken? Why hadn’t he gone up to his study to work?

Why the truth? Why now?

The truth was, he hated being alone. That was the real reason he was in the lounge and not in his study. He found it almost impossible to work upstairs. He felt lonely in his study. He left the door open to hear what they were all saying, and then yelled at them to keep it down. He hated sleeping alone too. When Martha went off to Melbourne he was bereft.

When he was little he had always slept with Virgil, and when Virgil was no longer there, he pretended he was. He continued to tell Virgil off when he didn’t wash his hands before dinner. He kept two pillows on his bed and slept right up against the wall, so Virgil would have enough room. He held Virgil’s hand when he walked to school. ‘Look and look again,’ he whispered as they stepped across a road. He couldn’t remember when the imaginary Virgil left for good, but one day he woke up and the bed was empty.

He picked up a plastic water bottle and looked for a bin. Martha connected him to the earth, like a button to a jacket. That is what a family is for, he thought. A family pins a man’s thoughts to the earth, like a pylon grounds a bridge.

Frederick wiped his face. He was covered in sweat. One more terrible thought was slowly taking shape, a figure in the distance advancing on the path. And there it was, as clear as the dark lines on a plan drawing: what use are thoughts without someone to think about?

Despite the heat, despite the fly, he began to walk. It was a high tide and rust-coloured water lapped listlessly at the cap of the limestone wall. A pod of brown jellyfish pulsed in the shallows. The black dog tore past him on its way to retrieve yet another stick. A pile of dried blowfish was stacked up on the edge of the path, left over from a failed fishing expedition. Another fly
went up his left nostril. Two women came storming past in their black Lycra gear, red-faced, arms pumping.

‘I said to her homeroom teacher, can you please give her some extra work? When clever kids get bored they are bound to play up.’

‘Good on you, Emma. Poor Hannah, she’s struggling. I’m not sure what to do next.’

‘Even with a full-time aide? I don’t know how you manage, Kathy. I’m sure I couldn’t.’

A concentration of quivering water in the shallows at the edge, then a dark, elongated mass.

An enormous dolphin swam in a sineoid wave along the wall, its fin just breaking the surface, so close he could have reached out and touched the sleek skin. The dolphin began to pick up speed and Frederick followed, keeping pace until it slid to a sudden stop and lifted up its snub nose. The viscous eye watched as he sunk first to his knees and then onto his belly with his head and shoulders protruding just over the edge of the parapet.

‘Hello,’ he said, close enough to kiss it on the snout.

The dolphin blinked, raising and lowering its eyelid. Dolphins had eyelids? It blinked again, to prove its point. The dolphin held its mouth ajar in a half-smile, revealing a row of small, conical teeth, like blunt splinters. What was it thinking? Dolphins were clever, but did they stop to think? The dolphin shook its head, declining a conference on the subject. Perhaps it was waiting for him to do the talking. But what do you say to a dolphin you’ve only just met?

The dolphin pressed onward. Frederick clamoured to his feet and followed. He kept up in a stiff-legged jog, ligaments aching, lungs burning, his efforts punctuated by the puff and whoop of the animal’s breath. Its tail pulsed up and down, up and down. From the cantor of its backbone he saw that a dolphin bends vertically, like a dog or a horse, not at all like the tail of a fish that moves sideways to give it lateral thrust. Why had engineering taught him nothing about dolphins?

Just as Fred could go on no more the animal leapt into the air in a sleek, plastic laminated arch and headed into deep water, leaving him too exhausted to think, but feeling something
altogether original. He had glimpsed perfection. He looked out into deep water, in case it surfaced, and picked out a curved fin in the distance. It was heading west, towards the river mouth and the Indian Ocean. That animal knew where it was going. If only he did too.

It was mid-afternoon when he got home. Jan was standing at her front door. What was she doing out in the heat? He waved as he drove in and waited impatiently for the auto door. He needed water. He parked and got out of the car, and when he turned around she was still there.

‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ she said, coming towards him. ‘You’re all red in the face. You should wear a hat in this weather.’

Fred did not like the idea of Jan waiting for him. She wouldn’t expect him to cook for her, would she? That was the trouble with gifts and friends—they got you all caught up with returning the favour.

‘Tom Chelmsely’s dead.’

‘What? Shall we have a cup of tea?’ he said faintly, walking from the garage towards Jan’s front door. How could Tom be dead when only yesterday he was alive? How could he die when he was planning to visit him this afternoon. He was going to stop at the shops and pick up a tin of Walker’s shortbread. He was going to read Tom something he would like. The Thirty-Nine Steps. Clancy of the Overflow.

Jan met him half way to her house. ‘Tom and I spent most of last week at my house playing Euchre. I can’t believe he’s gone. I think I need to be away from old memories.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Can we go to your place instead? Do you mind?’

‘Of course,’ said Fred, turning around. Of course I mind. Did he have fresh milk? Sugar? Was the kitchen table clear? It was impossible not to see the interior of his unit through Jan’s eyes: the house of a madman.

Jan looked around his lounge room. ‘Your poor wife,’ she said.
What the hell did that mean? And why was she smiling like that? He ignored her and carried away the newspapers and cups and put on the kettle.

‘You have so many things in here, Fred. It’s much worse than I imagined. You’ve got to cull. This kind of furniture is really not suited to this style of unit. You need to think compact in these small spaces.’

‘My wife collected modern furniture, mostly Danish,’ he said stiffly. ‘I’m not quite ready to let it all go.’ That should keep her quiet. And what did she mean, worse than she imagined? Why was she imagining the interior of his house at all? He hated the idea of anyone imagining his house. Let her imagine her own house.

Jan ran her hand along the top of his Borge Mogensen cabinet.

‘There’s a strong Japanese influence in a lot of this modern furniture, isn’t there? It’s a pity that all the pieces are so large.’

She looked at her palm and rubbed it against her skirt. No, he hadn’t dusted lately.

‘My husband and I loved Japan, but you wouldn’t find this clutter in a Japanese home. Yes, please, milk and sugar. And look at all these boxes! What’s in them? Books? A Professor must have his books. You’ve even brought your old filing cabinet. Is it full of old papers from work? We’re retired now, Fred. That part of our lives is over. Filing cabinets are like tombs. Metal tombs. Sarcophagi. Is that the plural?

‘I have no idea,’ said Fred tightly. He carried a tray to the table. The milk was on the edge. He hoped she wouldn’t notice.

‘So many boxes. Buddhists say you have to be careful your possessions don’t end up possessing you. What have you got in all those cartons out in the garage? There are dozens of them. More books?’

‘Most of that belongs to my daughter. She’s overseas at the moment. The rest of it is Martha’s collections.’

‘What kind of things did she collect, besides furniture?’

‘Mostly post-war electrical, actually. Mainly German. It’s becoming very valuable now.’

‘Is that right? What kind of things are we talking about? What brands?’
‘All kinds of appliances. Braun is the most famous.’

‘How valuable? I must tell the ladies down at the Salvos. I volunteer once a month and we see all kinds of things. We’re not allowed to sell electrical goods, so if they are donated we have to throw them away. You do mean Braun as in the Braun men’s shaver? They made a good coffee grinder too.’

Fred nodded. The kettle was taking forever.

‘Samuel had one of their shavers, I’m sure of it. What a pity I threw it out. I would have sold it to the highest bidder. I couldn’t stand the blunt little hairs it sprayed all over the bathroom. I got him on to disposables. I know they are not good for the environment, but at least they don’t leave a mess.’

‘Would you like something with your tea?’ Not that he had anything to offer.

‘Your wife must have been an interesting woman. The things she collected!’

‘Martha had broad interests.’

‘I’d love a yoghurt, actually.’

‘A yoghurt?’

‘I remember you saying you lived on yoghurt. Yoghurt and beans. It’s a bit early in the day for a bean, so it will have to be a yoghurt.’

‘I’m so sorry, Jan, but its shopping day and I’ve run out of yoghurt. And beans.’

‘What a pity.’ Jan smiled at him like a cat.

The woman was unbearable. ‘When did you hear about Tom?’

‘This morning, very early. I asked Eileen to let me know if she heard anything. You did know that she and Tom were brother and sister?’

‘I had no idea.’ He had no idea who Eileen was, but he would rather keep that from Jan.

‘That’s strange, what with you and Tom being next-door neighbours. He never stopped talking about Eileen. So he never mentioned her? She lives down the other end in Number 16.’

‘He might have said he had a sister, now that you mention it. He said it was wonderful to have family here.’

‘How odd. Neither of them could say a good word about the other. Mortal enemies. You do know Eileen, don’t you? A small
woman with a walking stick, wears hounds-tooth skirts and flouncy nylon shirts with floppy bows at the neck?

Fred moved his head in an ambiguous circular direction.

‘Is that a yes or a no? She’s always neat as a pin. She and Tom came in together, but they didn’t see eye-to-eye so she stayed at the other end of the Village and they never talked to each other. They had a lot to say about each other, though. Apparently there was an Uncle with money. He had sheep and wheat properties out past Morawa. When he died he by-passed the niece—that was Eileen—and left it to his only nephew—Tom. Eileen was a very promising ballet dancer, but the family couldn’t afford to send her to Sydney for more training so she had to quit and get married instead. She never forgave the family and always blamed Tom.’

‘Fascinating,’ said Fred.

Jan laughed. ‘You are droll, aren’t you? Eileen is inconsolable now, of course. It’s all forgiven and forgotten. I’ll go over there this evening and take her some dinner. Why don’t you come with me? She has a passion for crochet unparalleled in the Village. Personally I hate crochet, but Eileen lifts it to a whole other level.’ She paused to take a sip of tea. ‘I think this milk’s on the way out. Eileen has a wonderful photo of herself as a young woman on Pointe shoes, in a tutu. It took me a while, but you can see it’s Eileen, even though it was more than seventy-five years ago. She’s over ninety, you know. Eileen has crocheted a pair of ballet shoes and then done something with starch to make them stiff and had one of the old fellows with a garage make a plinth to display them on. She’s done the same thing for some of the residents. She’s starching up tiny jackets and newborn booties that they knitted for their grandchildren, and mounting them on plinths. Can you imagine?’

No he could not imagine. His head was spinning.

‘I’m sorry if I talk too much. That’s what happens where you live alone; as soon as you get company you can’t shut up. At least I can’t.’

‘Tom?’ he said weakly.

‘Poor Tom. I called you to tell you but the phone rang out. Where were you at 6am? Unplugged? I thought you might have had a fall, but then I thought if I go and knock you might be
sleeping, or on the toilet. I'd be so embarrassed if you were sitting on the loo—when you get to our age I know how long it can take to—'

‘Did he suffer? Did Tom suffer?’

‘He was in a coma when I first rang, so I suppose he didn’t suffer, no, but that doesn’t make it any easier for the people who cared about him. I call that a palliative statement. Most people suffer, one way or another. Did your wife suffer?’

‘Yes’, he said defensively, ‘Martha suffered a great deal.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that, Fred. Was it cancer?’

‘A brain tumour.’

‘Samuel was cancer of the stomach, but he’d had dementia for some years. Terrible pain. It was worse because he didn’t understand why he was in pain.’

They drank their tea in silence.

‘You know, Fred, I hope you don’t mind me saying this—’

Jan paused. Would he have to respond? He was exhausted.

‘I just can’t imagine a woman collecting all this furniture. It seems so masculine, more like office furniture. It belongs in some New York apartment, not in St. Sylvan’s. And it’s so impractical with children. It seems so unlike a woman. How many children do you have, Fred?’

‘Do women have to be practical, Jan? Don’t you think that’s a bit old-fashioned? Of course, as well as her collections of furniture and, er—’

‘Shavers?’

‘—electronics, she collected ceramics. Martha loved knitting and cooking, too.’

Jan raised an eyebrow. ‘A real woman then, despite being impractical.’ She put down her empty cup and rubbed her temples. ‘I’m sorry, Fred, I’m being rude. I’m not myself today.’

Fred cleared the cups off the table, hoping that Jan would see this as a sign she should leave.

‘Do you want me to go?’

‘Of course not, Jan. Stay as long as you like.’

‘I can’t stay long because I have an appointment this afternoon.’
Fred rinsed the teacups and stacked them upside down in the drainer. The strainer in the sink was blocked with the remains of last night’s dinner—two chops and boiled peas. At the supermarket he had been ashamed of his basket. If he had had a cloth he would have draped it across the top, like Father McMahon would do when he finished with the transubstantiation and was left once more with red wine and a bit of flat bread. Last week at the supermarket checkout he had been surrounded by women with little children whining and pulling and pleading for Kinder Surprises while their mothers navigated vast trolleys of giant cereal boxes and strawberry swirl ice cream and shampoo and disposable nappies and watermelon and a new copy of Nemo because the other one had worn out, and goodness me, what do we have here— an old man holding up the queue, fumbling for his wallet, with a basket half-full of one loaf of white toasting bread, a bag of frozen peas, a single roll of toilet paper, a small square of low-fat mince covered with Gladwrap and two lamb chops, trimmed of excess fat.

He tapped the peas out in the bin, replaced the strainer and began to wipe the cups.

‘It’s in the city. I have to be there by 2pm.’

One of the pair had a chip. This afternoon he would go up to The Lakes and buy two new mugs.

‘I have to be at the Law Courts.’

The underground parking at The Lakes was always full on hot days. It might be better to wait until the morning and get there early.

‘It’s about Morrison. My son’s boy—my grandson.’

Weren’t there some loose cups in one of Martha’s boxes? Wouldn’t it be better to use them than have them sitting there?

‘I took a DNA test.’

But which box was it? The laundry or the bedroom? Or was it in the garage?

‘WHAT KIND OF PERSON ARE YOU?’ Jan’s face was flushed, and her mouth was open. Her chest rose and fell.

Fred stepped past her and lowered himself into the B3. His knees gave out ten centimetres above the leather and he landed hard. ‘What DNA?’ he said.
‘To prove I am who I say I am—Morrison’s grandmother. His mother took off to Bangkok and left the boy at home. He was left all alone, Fred. He’s only five. Five years old.’

‘When was this?’

‘Just last week. On Tuesday, actually. They found him after I called the police when I couldn’t get hold of them. I’d tried for two days. Her mobile was always out of credit or hocked, and she used to head off down south with Morrison to see her sister, but this time I had a feeling, and thank god I went with it. They had to break the lock to get in. She must have owed money and got scared. I should have gone over there myself as soon as I couldn’t reach them, but I had turned my ankle on that step outside and couldn’t take a bus. Tom wasn’t up to driving me and I didn’t know who to ask.’

Jan looked like she was on the verge of tears. Fred could not bear it when women cried. It was so—*demanding*.

‘I was too embarrassed to ask for a lift, Fred. Can you believe that? I could have taken a taxi, but I have this ridiculous thing about them. As soon as I get in a taxi I start thinking about murder. Do you remember when all those girls were murdered? They never found the person who did it, but they always thought it was a taxi driver. Every time I get in the taxi and look at the driver I know that he didn’t do it, but then I think of her parents, and how they must feel after all these years, with her still missing like that. They must be quite old now—old enough to need a daughter to look after them. My son died, but that was different: he murdered himself. But that poor girl. Can you imagine losing a child like that?’

Frederick rubbed his kneecaps. Perhaps. Perhaps he could imagine it.

‘I was too ashamed to even ask a friend to drive me. I didn’t want anyone to know what had happened to Paul, and now my grandson. The Stokes’s in Number 2 would have done it. They’re big in Rotary, and she’s got a knitting charity that makes dolls for Africa. Mind you, I’m not so sure that woollen dollies is what they need most of all—I sponsor two kids, but it’s the basics so they can get to school and eat.’

Frederick massaged his shins.
‘He was there for two days, all by himself. He lived on a block of cheese and dried pasta. He tried to add water to the pasta to get it to soften, and apparently after a few days it does begin to absorb water. He’s quite the scientist. Luckily there was no gas on, or he might have tried to cook something. She hadn’t paid the gas bill and they’d turned it off. The toilet was all blocked up and the place stank in the heat. The police said it looked like he’d tried to make his bed.’

Jan wore black mascara around her very green eyes. Martha never wore make-up. ‘A waste of money’, she said, but then Martha was very beautiful. It was easy for beautiful women to say things like that.

‘I think I might use the bathroom, Fred. I know where it is. I’d love another cup of tea—black is fine.’

‘I’ll put the kettle on.’

Frederick heaved himself out of his chair. His thighs and calves ached from his morning exertions. *I’ll put the kettle on.* That was the first thing his mother said when his father came home from the pub. He would burst through the front door like a Mark IV tank and Frederick would be shepherded into the bedroom with Virgil. They heard their mother in the kitchen, her leather heels clipping on the cold flagstones, trying to placate Morris with fat rashers of bacon and mugs of sweet tea. If they were lucky his father would pass right out on the couch, and he and Virgil would creep in and eat the crisp bacon between two slabs of buttered bread. But there were times when he would not sleep, when he would eat hunched over the table and then rise up like a bull in a box and strike whoever was within reach. He and Virgil would get off the bed and into the wardrobe and pull the door shut, cowering amongst the scratchy hems of woollen duffle coats, shoes and cold rubber wellingtons, seeking out each other’s hands. Virgil would squeeze his fingers, and Frederick would pump them like a heart, and once or twice he felt the warm wet release of urine soak into his pants.

When Jan came back she filled her cup with fresh tea. ‘If only I had known you a little better last week I could have asked you to drive me.’
‘It’s not your fault, Jan,’ he said. He cleared his throat. ‘You weren’t to know the boy was there all alone.’ He was having trouble speaking. ‘So how was he? Morrison—the boy. How is he?’

‘That’s the amazing thing,’ she said, ‘once they got the door open he demanded he see their badges. That’s my boy! The social worker found my number in a letter on the fridge. They had to take him to the children’s hospital. He was such a brave little boy, Fred. I took a cab in that night. He was very pale and thin but so happy to see me. I brought him a new teddy. I’m not sure why I’m telling you all this. I hope you don’t mind.’

Fred shook his head.

‘They kept him in overnight on fluids because he was so dehydrated. He’s in temporary foster-care now out in the boondocks. There was no record of me as the living relative so the police and the services had to take me off to give blood and do a swab. The hearing is today.’

‘The hearing?’

‘To present the DNA and to file for custody.’

‘ Custody?’

‘Of Morrison. I’m taking Morrison.’

Fred stared at her. ‘You’re going to have a child live with you? A five-year-old child?’

Jan sighed. ‘I’ve wrestled with this. I struggle with it. I ask myself, at my age? How can I do this at my age? I have already raised a son. I saw my husband through dementia and then cancer—not that I regret it for a moment. He would have done the same for me. I lost and found my son so many times and then I lost him all together. I am seventy years old, Fred. I thought, maybe Morrison should go to a real family. Maybe he’d be better off. He would be adopted and have brothers and sisters. But they told me that more than likely he won’t be adopted while the mother is still around, even if she is out of the country, so that leaves long-term fostering and temporary care, I can’t have that. I’m his Nanna. He’s my boy.’

‘A five-year-old boy.’ The idea of it.

‘You are right, Fred. At first I didn’t want to do it. I wanted to be selfish. I was so angry with my son. I like my home here, even with the management. I have friends in the Village. I feel safe. I can stay up all night listening to the radio or reading a
book. I can lie in bed just thinking if I want to. It’s such a luxury, to be able to think. I love the way thoughts just breeze across you and you don’t have to do anything with them, just let them come and go. And now I have to leave.’

‘What? Why are you leaving?’ Jan couldn’t go; she had only just arrived. She was direct and to the point and she never stopped talking, but there was something very reassuring about Jan. She was like those loose cross-stitches Martha would sew onto fabric to show where the buttonhole should go.

‘I can’t stay here, Fred. They don’t even allow dogs or cats. My budgerigars are pushing it, so I hardly think a boisterous five year old is on the agenda.’

‘But these are our homes,’ said Fred, indignantly. ‘This is where we live. We own them.’ How dare management dictate how they live the last years of their lives? How dare they?

‘Calm down, Fred, you’ll have a coronary. We don’t own them really—not like you own the family home. You know that. They’re expensive holding pens for us oldies. There are rules that we agreed to when we bought. Now I have to get going if I’m going to get that bus to town. Don’t get up if you can’t.’

With difficulty Fred hoisted himself up out of the chair, refusing Jan’s offer of a hand. When he opened the door a wall of heat pressed into the unit. He stood aside to let Jan pass.

‘I saw a dolphin in the river today,’ he said quickly, half-hoping she would not hear.

She turned to look at him. ‘They’re quite common, I think.’

‘No, I mean it was really close, as close as you are. So close I could have touched it.’

‘You weren’t in the water, were you? Were you swimming in the river?’

Fred shook his head. ‘I think it was trying to talk to me.’ He reddened. ‘No really, Jan, it was extraordinary. I was walking along the path by the river wall and all of a sudden there was a giant dolphin in less than a metre of water. It was huge. It was like it had decided to find me and follow me, or to lead me along the walkway. At one stage it stopped and looked right at me.’

‘Did it wink?’

‘You think I’m silly.’
‘Au contraire, that’s the best story I have ever heard from you. Admittedly, it’s the only one so far, but it’s a good one. Talking dolphins are a sign, Fred.’

‘A sign of what?’

‘You’re the Professor. I’ll leave that to you.’

‘Do you think it’s a metaphor? A real animal can’t be a metaphor, can it?’

Jan laughed. ‘You remind me of my Grade 4s. Where did I put my front door key?’

‘It must be a symbol, then, or a sign. I get confused.’

‘It means something, Fred, because it’s got you thinking. Oh my goodness, it’s hot. Here they are, right where I left them.’ Jan picked up her keys and was gone.

Fred ran an eye down a shelf of old hardbacks that had come straight from his study and never made it into a box, and there it was, the one with the blue-green spine and a painted dolphin on the cover. Frederick went back to the B3, but this time he placed a pillow from his bed between his stiff hips and the leather base. He tried to read, but he couldn’t concentrate.

The kitchen bench was recycled blond pine. The cupboards and shelves were orange laminate. When she was preparing food, Martha would cut straight onto the wood bench top, round up the scraps with her hand and toss them into the guineapig’s bucket on the windowsill. A heavy orange casserole sat on the gas hob. Next to the hob was a tin of olive oil and a yellow saltbox. The shelf to the right of the hob held her cookbooks. Along the top of the shelf was a line of aluminium Italian espresso machines, from two cups to ten. A small black transistor was playing Bach. Ich Haber Genug. It is enough.

But it was not enough. It had never been enough. He ought to have cut the capsicums.

Whether or not a man of his age was capable of leaping out of a Marcel Breuer chair is in dispute, but Frederick was up and out of the house in seconds, clutching his keys, his wallet and his book. He banged on her front door but the curtains were already drawn. Damn. He opened the garage and reversed out, and then
swung the car in the direction of the main road and the bus stop, cursing at the Stop sign and the oncoming traffic. As he turned the corner into the two lanes he strained to see if she was still there, at the bus stop, waiting.

If there was a God in heaven, he would have kissed him and offered up a year of rosaries and a thousand candles, or some Buddhist equivalent. When he pulled up and wound down the window, Jan looked at him in astonishment.

‘Get in,’ he said, ‘Quick, before I hold up the traffic.’

Neither of them said a word as they crossed the Freeway. He stole a sideways look at the river. Would he ever see his dolphin again? As they crossed the bridge into the city, Jan took out a compact road directory.

‘Left at the interchange, Fred, and then you need to go around the block because it’s all one way.’

Frederick found a loading zone near the Central Courts. Jan leant towards him. She was wearing some kind of perfume he associated with meditation and yoga. Martha had taken to essential oils in the late 1970s, and he had wallowed in her heavy, sweet, smell until Caroline developed chronic sinusitis.

‘I’ll catch the bus back, Fred. And I can’t thank you enough.’

‘I’m going to wait for you to finish. I’ve got nothing to do today.’

‘What about your shopping? What about your beans and yoghurt?’

‘Pardon? I’ll park the car in the Multistorey and wait for you over there.’ He gestured towards a small shaded square in front of a park, where office workers were eating lunch.

‘But I have no idea if I’ll be half an hour or three hours.’

‘I have this,’ he said, holding up the book.

‘A Book of Dolphins,’ she read. ‘You have a book of everything, Fred. Are you sure you can wait?’

‘I’ll be fine. Good luck, Jan.’

‘Thank you, Fred. How can I repay you?’

I am well in arrears, he thought. And then, to his horror, he began to cry. ‘I loved Martha the moment I saw her,’ he blurted out. ‘Go, please,’ he said, gripping the wheel of the car. ‘You’ll be late.’
Jan put her hand across his. ‘The trouble is, it’s not enough. I loved my son, and look what happened to us. Love is a feeling, Fred. But it’s also like tennis or yoga. It’s something you have to do over and over again to make perfect. Stay out of the sun. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

Ich habe genug. I have enough. I am enough. I had enough, but it wasn’t enough. God was not enough. My wife was not enough. I was not enough to my wife. My daughter was not enough. My son was not enough. I am not enough. I am not anything close to enough. And I didn’t do enough.

I ought to have cut the capsicums.

It is said that Dionysos, the god of wine and frenzy, engaged a vessel to take him from the island of Ikaria to the island of Naxos: but the sailors were a crew of pirates and, not knowing that he was a god, they formed a plot to abduct him. Sailing past Naxos they made for Asia, where they intended to sell him as a slave. When he realised what they were doing he called on his magical powers. He changed the oars into snakes and filled the ship with vines and ivy and the sound of flutes. The sailors felt madness coming on them and all dived into the sea where they were changed into dolphins and made incapable of doing any harm.

Frederick sat on a bench with his book. Every now and then he sipped his water. Men in suits rushed past on their phones, sweating in the heat. Office girls stopped to light cigarettes and dragged on them hungrily, flicking ash to the ground before heading down the Terrace. A council worker in a lime green vest and a wide-brimmed hat pushed butts and litter into a dustpan. The red arm of a giant crane swept a steel girder across the blue-white sky. He closed his eyes and picked out from the din of cars and buses the deep repetitive beat of a pile being driven into the ground. Once upon a time he had felt connected to the upward thrust of the city. Even for a Professor who had never built a thing there was still a certain pleasure in construction. At its purest level it was mathematical, abstract, even in its concrete form. He opened his eyes. One day all these buildings would fall to the ground. All his thin shell structures would crumble, like hollow bones in a grave, or shells on a beach.
Before that time there had been no dolphins. After it, they stood for kindness and virtue in the sea; and the first to learn of their usefulness was the god of the ocean himself, Poseidon, or Neptune, as the Romans called him.

Behind the square was a fenced park backing onto the Governor’s Residence. Open 12 to 2 daily, except Sunday, said the sign on the gate. Frederick walked towards a shaded grove of old trees. Martha carried little botanical reference books wherever she went, but had never been particularly interested in nature. She was always writing letters to the council, asking them to replace exotics with natives. He recognised the oaks and elms. Despite the traffic and the heat behind him, he could have been in Old Hag Wood, in the old forest, playing hidey with Virgil. There was a theatrical sleight to this park. In the shade of the vast canopy a murderous invader could go on pretending they belonged.

Jan was fanning her face as she came towards him.

‘There you are! I thought you might be here. Look at these trees. Aren’t they wonderful? Does it remind you of jolly old England?’

Jan had been successful; he could see that straight away.

‘He’s mine,’ she said carefully, holding a thick manila file.

‘That’s wonderful,’ said Fred. What else could he say? ‘It was so quick.’

‘I know, it took no time at all. I can’t believe it really.’

‘So what’s next, Jan? Where is he? Where is—Morrison.’

Saying his name was difficult. It made him real.

‘He wasn’t at the hearing—it wouldn’t have been appropriate. I have to wait for more documentation from the Department. He’s with the foster family. I’ll see him this week and tell him what’s happening. He can come out with me for the day on Friday, and then again on Saturday night, but I won’t have him permanently for at least three weeks, until I work out where we are going to live. I’m going to talk to Management this afternoon, and hopefully they’ll have someone on the waiting list ready to buy. It’s all happening so quickly. I’ll have to pack again. And then there are my budgerigars...’
‘He has to go to school!’ said Fred, registering for the first time the practicalities of Jan’s situation. ‘You will have to find him a good school. When is his birthday? Does he start this year coming?’

‘He can enrol in Pre-Primary, thank goodness. I don’t know what I’d do with a five year old all day, every day. But I’m going to have to go further afield if I want to buy. Imagine me at Canteen. I’ll be the oldest Mum by 50 years. Have you ever kept a budgerigar, Fred?’

‘Pardon? I’m sure it will be fine at school,’ he said. But didn’t sound fine. It sounded difficult and exhausting and not at all what a woman of Jan’s age should be doing.

‘Do you think we could go now? I’m exhausted. My ankle is sore from standing for so long.’

Fred led Jan out of the park to a bench in the square. ‘Sit here. I’ll find somewhere to pull up. I’ll beep when I get back. I should be about twenty minutes. Will you be all right?’


Jan read to him for the whole trip back. The traffic was heavy and the air conditioner strained to keep the car cool.

‘Listen to this: “When Poseidon was looking for the dark-eyed Amphitrite, to make her his bride, it was a dolphin that found her for him. She had been hiding from him in a cavern by the sea. For this service, Poseidon conferred the highest of all honours, setting in the sky the constellation of The Dolphin. If you live in the northern hemisphere you can see it in July, over in the southeast sky between Aquila and Pegasus”—do you have any knowledge of astronomy, Fred? “The very word for dolphin, or dolphins as the Greeks wrote it, is itself a beautiful representation of the animal’s twirling motion through the water”—I can’t read the Greek.’

‘δελφίς. I think you say it, Delphis. It means womb. There’s an index in the back.’

‘Womb? How beautiful. So is that a sign, a symbol, a metaphor or just a strange co-incidence? What do you think, Fred?’
Fred kept his eyes on the road. ‘I’m not sure, Jan. Here we are, home at last.’

‘I’m going straight to see Management. Do you have plans?’

‘Plans? For when?’

‘As in, would you like to go out to dinner tonight? My treat, but you’d have to drive. I often go to the beach late afternoon for a dip, so we could do that and shower in the change rooms there, and then go straight to dinner. The salt water is good for my ankle.’

Fred hadn’t been to the beach in years. He was not sure he had any bathers he would dare to be seen in. Did he have the time and energy to go to the department store and get some new trunks? Trunks. Another stupid English word.

‘I’m sure you swim like a dolphin, Fred. What about we go at about a quarter to six, after the traffic? I know a very good Vietnamese restaurant. And don’t buy the wine, that’s on me too. One thing though, if you don’t mind me saying?’

‘What now? He wanted to get out of the heat.

‘Get out the Braun. Have a shave, Fred. I’ll be at your place at about 5.30?’

‘But what about Tom’s sister?’ he called after her. ‘Don’t you have to see her tonight?’

‘I’ll call her now and tell her I’m busy. I’ve got something in the freezer she can have. Isn’t there a lot to do in life, Fred?’ She laughed and shook her head.

Fred went straight to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. How long since he’d been in a rush? Or had a decent shave? Or a haircut? He still had hair, didn’t he? He would go over to the shopping centre right now and buy new bathers, and get one of those long-sleeved Lycra tops to cover up his parchment. He would floss. He would scrub. He would iron and he would polish.

And with that, he flicked his tail and disappeared into the shower.
Book 3

Eggs
[What is proper to allegory]: its capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear.

Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse : Towards a Theory of Postmodernism”.

As you walk the length of the darkened corridor towards the illuminated wooden case you hear sounds that are difficult to place. *A few low croaks,* wrote Newton in 1861. *A rough and hoarse scream,* noted Fabricius in 1842. *The captive bird utters a gurgling noise when expressing anxiety,* wrote Fleming. These sounds collide and amplify as you draw near. You are listening to the guttural choking of a single creature cut off forever from the millions of heavy-bodied birds that once nested side by side on Funk Island. It is a sound that marries an arctic tern sheared off from its flock by a winter storm with the insatiable cry of a foundling. Blind hope: could this be an incubator and the mottled egg inside not some cold booty lifted out from under the smashed and bloodied bones of its mother, not some egg abandoned on a cliff face, but something warm and alive, something that might, with care and attention—with what might even be called love—become a living thing?
People didn’t understand loneliness; they thought it was something you could overcome by moving to a table with more people. But loneliness could not be chased out of the room by a crowd, at least not the kind that Caroline felt. Double loneliness, they would probably call it in China. It had always been there, something scooped out of her and taken away, but since Martha died her loneliness had become sharper and colder, like a star.

It was freezing in London, but at least it wasn’t raining. She had spent the entire night wondering what to do until six in the morning, when she could begin to prepare for her flight. At one point she considered the club down the road. How long since she had had sex? She could still put on tight jeans and boots and a leather jacket and don some war paint and with a bit of luck and a bottle or two of white wine, snare a local Romeo, but why bother? For a woman close to extinction, sex was merely palliative.

Perhaps it was because she was thirty-seven, perhaps it was because she was adopted, but she could not stop thinking about a child of her own. Her mother would have disapproved of the expression, but when she imagined being pregnant and giving birth she felt such a mixture of terror and longing it left her breathless.

When she dreamt about her baby it was always a girl who looked just like her. Such undisguised narcissism. So much braver to dream of a child who looked nothing like you.

She heard a faint mechanical whirring on the street, like a wind-up toy. Through the narrow pane of glass that ran the length of the basement flat she saw the rim of a wheelchair and the torso of a man. The chair came to a sudden halt and rotated 360 degrees and stopped. Was he waiting for friends? No one came trailing after him. He turned to face the wall of her building. He was wearing long Ugg boots. What was he doing? Why was he out there alone?

She returned to her emails. The flight for Aberdeen left at 8.20am. There had been some problem with her booking, but it seemed to be fine now. She printed out her ticket and looked at
the weather—a freezing wind off the North Sea. She spun on her chair. He was still there. Why didn’t he move on?

The screen went black and the room fell into darkness. When she was little she hid in the cupboard in her room, holding the door shut tight while her mother tried to coax her out.

“There’s a lovely piece of chocolate fudge just out here on a plate. I wonder who’s going to eat it?”

‘Not me.’

‘Well I’ll just leave it here for when you get hungry. How would that be?’

‘I’m not coming out. Ever.’

She tapped the keyboard and the pale egg floated back out on the screen, like an uninhabited planet in a distant galaxy. The Aberdeen Auk Egg was not the only specimen left in the world, but it was the one she had to have. Insurance and shipping for all the other exhibits were sorted, but this little University museum was digging in its heels. She ran through her letters to the Vice Chancellor. Small museums were always the worst; they were just not used to lending their collections. Tomorrow she would meet the Curator and take her to lunch—what do you eat in Aberdeen? Some kind of fish? She would show her the draft catalogue and explain the importance of the egg to the whole exhibition.

Against Horace’s advice she would begin ab ovo. ‘It all begins with the egg,’ she would say.

Why had she stayed with Julian for so long? He had lived in a squalid theoretical pile, jumping from one mound to another. She had followed him—or rather, led him—to post-colonial theory, from where he quickly hopped over to queer theory. All by himself he tiptoed gingerly across to trauma theory, where he got very comfortable until one of his young post-grad students shook her post-humanist booty at him and he left forever.

He and the post-humanist had twins now. Identical twins. ‘Don’t tell me you’re still upset about that man?’ her father said when she told him about the twins. ‘Look on the bright side for once, Caroline. He was a complete narcissist.’

‘Takes one to know one. But her father was right about one thing: she had always found it hard to see the bright side of
anything. 'Glass half empty,' he liked to say when she was a teenager, mooning about the house in her slippers and pajamas.

But a feeling is more than just a question of point of view, Dad. It is not so easy to change the place you sit. Her father preferred not to think about that. He preferred not to think about anything difficult; not even his own son. She was furious with him over Callum’s prescription. All he had to do was verbally okay it with the Hostel and they could have gone ahead, but no, he had to put down the phone on them and pull the plug.

When she was young she had a family. She had a little brother and a Mum and a Dad. She loved her family. She had never kept a diary, but if she had it would have been full of lines like, *I refuse to be tragic.*

No one asked where it had come from, this *extinction* thing. Her own father had never even asked her about the exhibition, but then he always avoided questions that might have a complicated answer. And she went along with him, as she always had. If he ever got around to asking, she would say something vague, like, I have my finger on the pulse, Dad. We live in an anxious world, Dad.

But in her darkest moments she feared her project belonged on the Internet or in a circus; it was neither provocative nor representative. It was dummy, a stand-in, a mule.

She resisted the urge to turn on her phone. In the morning she would be gone, and her father would be left waiting. Let him stew in his juices. Let him bitch to himself. She had heard it all a million times—the food, the people, the management, the aspect—actually, the aspect was the best thing about his place. St. Sylvan’s was surprisingly high-set. Her little London flat was a boggy depression in the ground. She was like Mole, down, down, down in her dark and lowly little house.

‘*Hang Spring Cleaning!*’, a yellow wool blanket so scratchy her mother had to turn back the cotton sheet to make a soft cuff for her chin. Her father was reading her one of Aunt Marjorie’s books, *The Wind in the Willows*, Methuen and Co., London 1908, old green cloth, frayed edges, gilt spine, on the cover the Piper at
the Gates of Dawn squatting in the selvedge of the river Thames. The cover of the book was mysterious and creepy and reminded her of the stories her father’s granny used to tell him, about small river creatures and rows of shiny stones arranged in wheels.

‘Hang spring-cleaning! Something up above was calling him imperiously, and he made for the steep little tunnel which answered in his case to the gravelled carriage-drive owned by animals whose residences are nearer to the sun and air. So he scraped and scratched and scabbled and scrooged and then he scrooged again and scabbled and scratched and scraped, working busily with his little paws and muttering to himself, ‘Up we go! Up we go!’ till at last, pop! his snout came out into the sunlight, and he found himself rolling in the warm grass of a great meadow.’

Caroline picked up her coat and keys and ran up the stairs. It was wrong to leave that man out there in the cold. He might need help. She stopped well behind him and cleared her throat, and saw that the chair was one of those new high-tech ones.

‘Excuse me?’ she said, ‘Are you okay? I live downstairs. I saw you through the window. It’s pretty cold out here.’

He was black, in his thirties. His thick hair was pulled back in an elastic band. A few coils twisted in the light coming off the lamp across the road. He wore gloves and pushed a knob to turn himself towards her. Thank goodness, she thought. Around his neck he wore a fine dove-coloured scarf, as if to distinguish the soft part of himself from the metal armor of his chair.

‘I thought you might have fallen asleep—I live downstairs. I saw you through the window.’

He looked up at her. ‘Thank you for coming out on this chilly night.’ His words had a fine slur, like those soft edges of the river Thames. ‘I’m fine, actually. As fine as can be expected.’

‘Was it an accident?’ she asked, knowing she ought not to. He had no right to self-pity, not so soon, not with a stranger.

‘I was on my vintage motor bike,’ he said evenly. ‘Not my fault, which explains the glamorous mode of transportation. Insurance is such a blessing. I was the unwitting target of a 23 year old drunk out for the evening in his Daddy’s BMW.’ He paused. ‘You have to excuse me, I’ve been at the pub and I’ve had
a few too many pints. I don’t usually wallow. But I do tend to dribble. Am I dribbling? Tell me if I’m dribbling.’
‘You’re fine,’ she said. ‘My brother had an accident too.’ The words just came out.
‘So we have something in common,’ he said. ‘Para or quad?’
‘Neither.’
‘Lucky man,’ he said evenly.
‘He has brain damage. Severe brain damage.’
‘Not so lucky then.’ He paused. ‘My brain is fine. I’m a C7. *Full elbow and wrist extension and flexion.*’ He had an accent she could not place. ‘I lack strength, hence the electric chair. But no fine motor to speak of. But you’re not from here.’

‘No’, she said. ‘I’m Australian.’

‘Are you black? You are, aren’t you? Black like me. Are you one of those real Australian Aborigines they are always writing about in *The Guardian*?’ He smiled.

She was glad he smiled, because she wanted to be able to like him. ‘Kind of— but not really.’

‘We’re all kind of but not really.’ He began to hum. ‘*Am I black enough for you, Am I black enough for you*—’

She smiled. She knew the song. Billy Paul, one her mother’s favorites. ‘*We’re gonna move on up, one by one*—’

‘*We ain’t gonna stop until the work is done*—’ He licked his lips once, and then he licked them again. The stillness of this body drew her to his wet mouth, like a lens pulling focus on the sticky pollinated stamen of a flower.

There was the sound of glass breaking outside the *Bull and Boar*, and then silence. Neither of them spoke, as if waiting for something. Caroline listened carefully. It was as if the city had expelled all the cars and people, and had been taken over by slow, burrowing creatures. English creatures from English stories. Mole and badger.

When she exhaled a small white cloud formed near her mouth. The clouds parted and the moon appeared. Had she ever seen stars in London? She searched in vain for Omega and Alpha Centauri and Lupus the wolf. He maneuvered his chair to and fro. Caroline came up and locked the wheels. She went behind him to take hold of the arms, and then braced herself to take the weight and tipped the chair backwards. The chair was heavy, and she could only just manage.

‘I can lift my head, you know.’

‘I know,’ she said.

‘You have different stars in the Southern Hemisphere, don’t you? You can rarely see a star in London. There’s too much pollution in the air.’

She lowered the chair carefully.
‘I’m from Liverpool originally,’ he continued. He was breathing heavily. ‘The air is clearer there. What we need is a telescope. I don’t suppose you have one on you, tucked in your back pocket?

‘Not on me, no. When my brother was little my father made him a telescope. He was an engineer—my dad. They were both so proud of it. Actually, it was my mother’s idea, but my father got naming rights.’ How much would she tell him, she wondered?

‘Well, naturally,’ said the man in the chair. ‘De man must dominate de woman.’

Caroline smiled. It was a habit of a lifetime that her father still could not break—to assume that he thought of everything and her mother merely followed. Both her parents had gone to that conference in California. At a faculty dinner her mother sat next to a woman whose child was on a school trip to the desert. ‘They’re taking their own telescopes,’ she told Martha, ‘which they made in school with cheap materials.’ Martha came home with a sheath of paper ‘All eyes on Mommy! I hold in my hand Xeroxes for the construction of the Dobson Telescope.’ She read from the inventor’s form letter, in her best imitation of Martin Luther King. ‘It is my hope and dream that every child in every house in every block of America will have the means to build their own telescope.’

‘Your parents sound like great people,’ said the man, ‘making a telescope. You are lucky, then. Is your father still making telescopes? Hello? Are you still here?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Your parents, are they in Australia? Does your Dad still make telescopes?

‘My mother died a couple of years ago, but yes, he’s still around. He lives over there. And no; no more telescopes. What about you? Do you have family?’

What about children? That is what she really wanted to know.

‘My mother,’ he replied. ‘And one sister. She lives near my Mum, with her husband and kids. She’s got four of them. They’re a gorgeous, rowdy lot.’

‘Are you the doting uncle?’
He sucked his lip. ‘I can’t see them, not yet. They don’t understand why their Uncle doesn’t want to come and I can’t explain it to them. My therapist—I have my very own therapist—tells me I’m being selfish. It seems I am punishing myself and everyone else I love.’

‘I don’t know about that. But I think I understand.’

‘Which part?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Which part do you think you understand?’

It seemed important to meet his gaze evenly. He looked away.

‘So,’ he said, turning back to her. ‘What about your brother? When did it happen?’

A double-decker bus pulled up across the road. A group of teenagers got off and threw their skateboards onto the footpath and took off, scratching and scraping the underbellies of their boards on the concrete curb.

‘A long time ago now, nearly fifteen years. I had a junior research position at the same university. My brother was in his final year of Architecture.’

His final month. The last week. She pulled her down jacket closer at the neck and stamped her feet. It was very cold, but she wanted to go on. ‘My father had wanted to be an architect, but his own father wouldn’t let him. My father always pretended engineering was like his destiny, but my mother never believed it and neither do I. In the end I think he chose to pretend that it was meant to be. It was his way of dealing with how his life turned out.’ There it is: my bitter edge.

‘Destiny is an easy god,’ he said. ‘It relieves you of the burden of choice, and the tragedy of having no choice at all.’ He smiled at her. ‘How’s that? Profound enough for you?’

She knew then that she was going to tell him. She was going to tell someone she didn’t know and would never see again.

‘It happened on a Sunday. Sunday evening. He was driving my father’s old car. It was a SAAB.’ She paused. ‘Not a BMW.’

He had turned away from her, towards the street, and she was grateful for that. She preferred not to see his face. Up until tonight she thought the words had been excised, like a wet tongue, but they were still there, thick and heavy. Everything
now depended on how the words came out. She would have to be careful: it could only be done with pieces cut to length.

‘It was a grey SAAB with leather seats.’

Thick, red leather seats. She would have to crop; she would have to rely on tight close-ups. If she was to step back and see every part of it at once, then that particular shade of red—dark red, like dried blood, or a scab—would stain all her other memories of the car.
The back of the car with Callum, coming home from Ralph and Veronica’s, late on a Friday night. Callum has dropped his chewing gum on the red leather and they are trying to get it off without their parents seeing, but the more they pick at it the more it heats up and stretches, like toffee, sticking them together.

In the back seat with her mother. Callum and Dad in the fields with the telescope. The stitched red seam presses a line into her cheek, leaving a scar when she wakes up.

Two dollars for cleaning the outside of the SAAB, and another one dollar for the red leather seats.

‘Was he drunk?’ Richard said quietly.
‘What? Yes, he was drunk.’
But not drunk enough not to know.

She was in the lounge with her mother when her father came home from Callum’s Hockey Final. He was furious. ‘He lost his nerve on the front line, I tell you, he missed the crucial pass. He let the whole team down.’ Her father spoke under his breath to Martha, but she heard him. ‘We had words.’ Martha caught Caroline’s eye, and raised an eyebrow. Neither of them understood the fury in his voice, and why it mattered so much.

Later, just before Caroline left to have dinner with Fleur, Callum called from the club. Martha picked up the phone.

‘Callum, are you all right darling? Have you been drinking?’ She cupped the mouthpiece and pointed towards the study. Go get your father. Listen to me, Callum, I don’t want you driving home tonight. Who are you with? Is Aaron with you? Dad will come and pick you up. Just a moment.’ Caroline returned with her father and she watched her mother press the phone into her breast. ‘He sounds very upset, and I’m sure he’s drunk. I don’t know if Aaron is there or not. Maybe you should call the Bessells? What did you say to him after the game? I don’t want you to upset him. It’s just a game, Fred—’

‘Give it to me,’ her father said, and snatched the phone.
She and her mother listened.
‘Don’t you talk to me like that. It was a pathetic pass and then you go off sniveling, like a baby. I was ashamed of you, hear me? Don’t you use that language—’

‘He and my father had a blow-up over my brother’s hockey game.’ She could not go on.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I really have to go. I can’t stay out here in the cold.’

‘It wasn’t about the sport, though. That’s not why Dad was angry with Callum. Not really.’

Callum wasn’t good enough for her father. None of them were.

‘I’m Richard,’ he said.

‘Caroline Lothian.’

She was at Fleur’s when it happened. Fleur was renting near the University, and she would go there from the library. To have dinner and to help with the new baby, but Fleur didn’t need help. She and her girlfriend were perfect parents. Caroline just poured the wine and stacked the dishes and marveled at the way the baby’s mouth formed a perfect letter K around Fleur’s long nipple.

When they heard the crash they all stopped what they were doing, all but the baby. The baby kept on sucking as if nothing had happened.

‘That was close,’ said Fleur. She took the baby off her breast.

‘It sounded bad,’ said Kate. She stood up and looked out the window. ‘It was down the hill at the end of the street.’

‘Should we call someone?’

‘Someone already would have,’ said Fleur, but she picked up the phone.

‘I’m going to walk down,’ said Kate quickly. She disappeared and came back with a stack of folded towels.

‘But why?’ said Caroline. ‘Why would you want to see that?’

‘I don’t want to see it,’ snapped Kate, ‘I’m almost a doctor, remember?’

When Kate left, Caroline wiped the table and cleared the glassed. She listened to the police sirens, and then the ambulance, while Fleur put the baby down.
Kate came home with a policeman.

Richard rolled his chair forward. ‘At least he didn’t hurt anyone else.’

‘What?’
‘Your brother. At least he was alone.’
‘He hurt himself,’ she said. ‘He hurt all of us.’
‘The truth is, Caroline Lothian, it’s fucking cold and I’m not allowed to get cold. My lungs are not great.’ His teeth were chattering.

Caroline reached out and placed her hands on his cheeks. He took her fingers with his mouth. She closed her eyes. He drew her warm, wet hand from his lips and ran it across his face.

‘I hope this isn’t pity,’ he said quietly.
‘What if it’s self-pity? Is that allowed?’
‘I’ll have to go away and think about that. You’re a beautiful woman. Too thin, but beautiful.’
‘I don’t feel beautiful’, she said, and then regretted it.
‘Is that why you would toy with a poor black fellow in a wheel chair? Why you would tell him all your secrets? I suppose you think I’m telling you you’re beautiful because I’m desperate?’
‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Are you desperate?’
‘Sometimes,’ he said, ‘but not in the way people think. It’s not sex I’m desperate for. It’s touch. I crave touch.’
‘I’m sorry,’ she said.
‘You should be ashamed of yourself, not sorry. You’re not responsible for what happened to me. Or your brother. You should be grateful for your perfect beauty and your lovely body. You can run downstairs after I leave and take off your clothes and put your hands between your legs and come all by yourself if you want to.’

She thought, if he wasn’t in a chair I would run away fast from this man. Or I might fuck him.

She didn’t wait for him to leave, but when she got down the stairs she looked through the window and he was gone. She was left with nothing but her little brother, and he refused to leave her alone.
SKELETON OF GREAT AUK.
Callum traipsed into her bedroom and flopped onto the bed to announce every breakthrough, every setback.

‘We got the lens in okay,’ he reported, ‘but then the hinges were too small. Are you listening? Guess where we got the lens? Guess?’

‘The zoo?’

‘Don’t be a retard. We went down the coast to where they build the boats, to a marine salvage yard. I bet you’ve never been to one of them—a marine salvage yard? Have you?’

‘I have, actually. Millions of times.’

‘Liar.’

‘Don’t call me a liar.’

‘It’s from a porthole actually.’

‘What’s from a porthole?’

‘The lens. Dad says its got the right curvachar.’

‘Curvature,’ Caroline mocked.

‘Yep,’ Callum continued, ‘it has to be convex. That’s the opposite of concave. Want a go on my Rubric’s cube?’

Callum was so earnest it was unbearable. He never got the joke because he wasn’t looking for the funny line. He did not need to put anyone down, which made him fragile, in need of protection and open to abuse. She knew that even as a teenager.

‘And Caro? Dad is even bringing home a piece of Sonotube from one of the labs at the Uni.’

He chewed his gum, waited for her to bite.

‘So, Albert Einstein, what’s a Sonotube and why is he bringing it home?’ Callum launched into his explanation, punctuating his words with short chopping movements of his left hand. Unlike her, Callum was left-handed. Used to be left-handed.

‘It’s an empty tube made of thick cardboard. They used in the form work when they’re pouring concrete columns.’ The chopping hand paused in mid-air. ‘Do you want me to tell you what form work is?’

‘I already know that,’ said Caroline airily.

‘You do not.’

‘Dad told me.’

‘He did not.’

‘He did so.’
It ended, as always, in a ritualistic battle over their father. Who owned him most, who loved him most, who he loved most. From the very beginning Callum had made it clear that only he and his father truly understood the telescope. ‘It’s not for looking at things you can already see,’ he said dismissively when she asked if they’d be able to see the moon from the back garden. ‘It’s for deep space. For observing nebula, star clusters, galaxies—that kind of phenomena.’

Callum would watch the lunar cycles and announce that it was a full moon or gibbous or waxing or waning—she never could get a handle on the moon—and then they would have to rush around getting the sleeping bags and the tent and pile into the SAAB and head out into the Wheatbelt to pitch tent at a camping ground in one-pub towns like Goomalling, Dumbleyung, Wandering. When camp was set up they would drive into the cold, silent wheatfields and search for a rise. The land was so flat it was almost impossible to find any kind of incline, so eventually her mother would put a stop to it. ‘This’ll do right here, Fred,’ she would say. ‘Just pull over and get on with it.’

She and her mother would lift the telescope out of the back seat where it had been wedged between them for the two-hour drive. Her father would get underneath the tube and hoist it onto his shoulders, like a small air-to-ground missile, while Callum came up next to him with a backpack stuffed with his sleeping bag and a thermos of hot milk and biscuits, leaving Caroline and her mother to cocoon inside the car. They watched from the car as the boys climbed the fence and walked across the stubble into the freezing wheat field. Caroline wound down the window.

‘CALLUM!’

She could see him now with his striped beanie pulled down over his ears, paused on the flank of the hill with one hand on his hip, swinging his torch too and fro like a beacon.

‘What is it now?’ he yelled.

‘E.T. PHONE HOME!’

She had stayed with him on a trip back from Melbourne. It was the first time she had really spoken to him since he threw out Martha’s clothes. The first night it was impossible to sleep and she worked past midnight, then put on a sweater and went out
into the quadrangle. He caught her by surprise. She turned and saw her father as she had never seem him before: a deranged old man in flannelette pajamas, his thick grey hair standing to attention and his dressing gown half-on, half-off.

‘What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?’ he said. ‘You woke me up. You’ve left the side door wide open. It’s freezing inside the house.’

‘I can’t sleep.’ She returned to her study of the stars. ‘Do you remember the Dobsonian?’ She needed to hurt him that night.

‘The what?’ he asked, but he knew exactly what she was talking about.

‘That telescope you built for Callum. You bought the lens at a marine salvage yard. The tube had something to do with concrete.’

‘Such a simple design,’ he said quietly, ‘I got the plans in the US.’

He took a step backwards.

‘Actually, Mum ordered the plans after she got back from California.’

‘I don’t think so, Caroline. Not that it matters now. It was Sonotube,’ he added, ‘used to form concrete columns. I’m going back to bed now. Shall I close the door behind me?’

She would have liked to take up a knife and plunge it in his back. But instead she came in and locked the door. She made a cup of tea before scrolling aimlessly through her bookmarks to check online collections. She was having trouble with her proposal for her first major exhibition. ‘I am interested in the cultural boundaries of nature,’ she had written. ‘I believe we are hopelessly allegorical.’ But what did that mean? Then she found the egg, right then, in Unit 7, St. Sylvan’s.

It had always troubled her that she had not arrived at the beginning by any of the approved routes, and that it happened because she had been with her father. It had been luck. Serendipity.

But it had been a mistake to stay with him. He’d brought everything from their family home before he put it up for rent—the leather couch and the sideboards and the white dining table
and chairs, and all those boxes and buffets. The chairs were piled top-to-toe on the outside patio—she had to turn sideways just to get to the back door. ‘Sell it all,’ she said, ‘or put it on the verge’, but he took no notice.

That first day with him she listened to a documentary on the radio, about an earthquake in a city. *Old people cannot go out for walks, even now that the debris is cleared and order restored. They cannot remember their way home. They have no markers, no familiar signs to help them move through the places they have grown up with.*

It was as if the waters of the Indian Ocean had heaved themselves at her life and taken away everything that was not nailed to the ground, leaving the remains strewn across her father’s Villa. Familiar paintings were stacked in corners, framed photographs of the family poked out from under beds, books flowed from boxes, her mother’s vases protruded from their newspaper wrapping, rolls of Turkish rugs were doubled up over the tops of wardrobes and chipped brown Arabia plates were stacked on the laundry floor.
The only thing left fully intact was a pair of brass Shabbat candles on top of the fridge. Caroline had never been told where they had come from, and she had never asked. Death robbed you of beginnings as well as ends. ‘We were cultural Jews,’ Caroline heard her mother say to Veronica once. What did that mean? Cultured? Her father’s dictionaries led her to a microscopic organism in a glass Petri dish and to pearls in a viscous shell. She was left to cobble together her own story of the candles, which featured steel-capped boots on stairs, Alsatian dogs, small pale-faced children who miraculously survived by hiding in cupboards, who then snuck away under the cover of night to travel through bombed-out cities in a threadbare red woollen coat, carrying an old leather satchel holding a creased Agfa colour of Mama and Papa, twenty US dollars and a pair of Shabbat candles, heading for America.

Richard Waterford. Could that be his real name? Had Richard made it home okay? If he fell over who would pick him up?

Her egg hovered on the screen. One hundred and seventy years ago a Monsieur Dufresne, Keeper of the King’s Cabinet in
Paris, had taken up a quill and lowered it into a pool of India ink. He had leaned over the Auk egg and written the word *Pingouin* across its curved surface, before placing it in a cabinet with the rare and curious. You would never do that now—mark a specimen like that. You would never sully the mute purity of nature with the indelible mark of the human hand.

A pair of high black stilettos and lace-up Dockers stumbled into the elongated frame of her window. They stopped and got their shoes and legs all tangled up in each other and then they left. How perilous to be a bird, she thought, to arrive on earth half-formed and unfinished inside a thin veneer of shell, to have to wait beneath the feathers of your mother until you were ready to hatch.

How exactly did they remove the living matter from inside the eggs? They used a needle, but there must have been a technique. She put a yellow sticky on her screen to remind her to find out.

The door to the hallway opened. Her father threw on the main light.

‘I thought you were going to sleep, Caroline.’

‘Am I keeping you awake? I’ll turn off the overhead light and put on the reading lamp.’ She could barely look at him.

‘You can stay up as long as you like. It’s your house too,’ he said.

‘No it’s not,’ she replied.

He fussed in the kitchen with the kettle and the Milo tin. She watched him spoon chocolate into a mug and crush it against the edges before adding cold milk.

‘You should put hot water in first to dissolve it.’

‘Why?’

Because that’s the way Mum did it, that’s why.’ She began to gather up her papers.

‘Can I see?’ he asked. He carried his drink to the table where her printer was set up.

‘There’s nothing much to see, just a few things I found on the Internet.’

He put down his cup and picked up the image of the egg.

‘What is it?’ he asked.
‘An egg.’

Her father took a steadying breath.

‘Egg of The Great Auk, circa 1844’, he read, and then placed the paper on the table in front of him, smoothing the paper as if it were creased. ‘Is the creature extinct? That’s what you’re working on, isn’t it—extinction? Another one of your uplifting subjects. The writing on the shell is striking. Just wait a moment.’ He disappeared into his room. She could hear boxes being moved, chaos descending. He returned with a small book.

‘Here it is,’ he said after running through some pages. ‘Nec gemino bellum Trojanum orditur ab ovo.’

‘Meaning?’

He held up the book. Horace, Ars Poetica. He gazed into the distance, head inclined upwards, the incarnation of knowledge. Her father loved to gather up his own clever thoughts and take them off into a corner to examine, like ancient runes inscribed with a secret script.

‘Horace is describing his ideal epic poet, who tells the story of the Trojan War not from the beginning— not ab ovo, from the egg—but in media res, in the middle of the action. Ab ovo is a reference to the twin eggs, one of which Helen of Troy came from. Helen sets off the chain of events that leads to the fall of Troy and the death of Agamemnon.’

‘Remind me how Helen got to be an egg?’

‘There are many versions of the story. Leda, the Queen of Sparta, is pursued by Zeus, the god of thunder and lightening and the ruler of the sky, who disguises himself as a swan and descends upon Leda and impregnates her, and as a consequence of which she gives birth to twin eggs, one of which is Helen.’

‘It was rape. I remember the poem by Yeats. But why does Horace prefer stories that start in the middle?’

‘I don’t know the text well enough. I’ll have a good look it and let you know, if you like. It’s not one that we spent much time on in Latin. Are you going to use this Auk egg?’

‘I don’t know yet. I just found it. I have to get them to loan it.’ Her hand flicked the air dismissively as she spoke.

‘Well, good night, Caroline. Don’t stay up too late.’

In her other life she would have opened up to her father. She would have called him every other day from overseas. ‘Use
An Egg of the Great Auk.-Mr. Symington Grieve of Edinburgh, in a recent letter to Capt. J. W. Collins, announces the discovery of one more egg of the Great Auk, "this time in a museum kept in the tower of an English parish church. The egg was labeled 'Penguin,' and the owner of the museum was under the impression that it was the egg of one of the Penguins of the southern hemisphere, until in reading an article in one of the magazines he observed that the Great Auk also was known as the Penguin in the American localities that were frequented by the bird. He had the egg examined by experts who pronounced it undoubtedly an egg of *Alca Alpennis*. From all that can be discovered of its history it appears in all probability to have come from Newfoundland.

FREDERJC A. LucAs, *Washington, D. C.*
me as a sounding board,’ he told her when she was doing her
degree. ‘Use me to refract and amplify your thoughts. Let me be
your mirror.’

‘Dad?’

‘Yes?’ He turned back towards her, holding his cup. He was
lit from behind by the soft yellow of the light in his bedroom.
‘You should never have thrown out Mum’s things.’

He took a deep breath. ‘There’s plenty of your Mother’s
belongings here, Caroline. They are all in boxes just waiting for
you to take them.’

‘You know I’m not talking about saucepans or cookbooks or
the Danish crockery collection that you started for her and she
never bothered finishing. I mean her clothes - her sweaters, her
suits, her jackets, her shoes, her handbags, even her underwear.
How could you have done that? How?’

‘I can’t believe you’re still going on about this. Why do you
keep on about it? There was nothing valuable there, Caroline.
You got all the jewelry.’

‘This is not about value, Dad, do you get that? I don’t care
about the fucking value. You keep all your fucking furniture as if
it means something and it means nothing at all. Keeping isn’t
just about value.’

She should not have screamed at him. It was a mistake.

His mouth was twitching. ‘I just can’t have you using that
language, Caroline. I can’t have you screaming at me any more.
Do you hear me? We have neighbors now. And stop that crying.
Stop right now.’ His face was bright red.

‘That’s what we do, Dad. That’s what we’re supposed to do.’

‘What are you talking about now? Please, I can’t stand the
hysterics. What is this about? What is it we are supposed to do?’

‘Not we, Dad, not you—me. That’s what daughters are
supposed to do. We sort out our mother’s things when our
mothers die. You knew that Mum asked me to do it. She asked
me when you were busy trying to get her into some fucking
experimental trial when she was just about dead anyway. Do you
remember that, Dad? Do you remember how you were when
Mum was dying? Do you remember how you treated that poor
nurse? Daughters are supposed to go through their mothers’
things and
During their passage the sun was darkened and the moon refused to give her light. The beating of their wings was like the voice of thunder and their steady on-coming like the continuous roar of Niagara. Where they roosted great branches, and even trees two feet in diameter, were broken down beneath their weight, and where they nested a hundred square miles of timber groaned with the weight of their nest or lay buried in ordure.

W.L. Dawson, *The Birds of Ohio*, 1903
decide what to throw out and what to keep. They get time to think about when their mother wore something, or where they bought it, or how much they loved it. That’s a daughter’s job. Did you know that?’

She was crying even now, in London. He had taken away her right to be a daughter.

When her father came out in the morning she was already dressed and at the computer. Her suitcase was at the front door. He stood behind her and put one hand on her shoulder. She closed her eyes and let it be.

‘I’m sorry about what happened with your mother’s things. I should have waited.’ Caroline continued to type her email to the curator of the Museum that held the Auk Egg.

He leant over her shoulder and touched her shoulder. ‘Are you sure that egg is authentic? Could it be an ersatz egg?’

Caroline gritted her teeth and shook her shoulder. ‘Give it a break, Dad.’

‘I’m only using the correct terminology, Caroline.’

Should she take her down jacket to Scotland? She put it into her case on top of the large white envelope. Her father had an obsession with the correct terminology. He preferred the word terminology to language. Because of him she knew all the synonyms for fake, as well all the other terms in dictionaries of vernacular, be they English, American, Australian. She knew the words designed to separate skin from meat. Coconut. Oreo. She herself preferred ‘inauthentic’, a disinterested and formal word that best expressed an internal state without bluntly asking you to imagine yourself skinned alive and hung up on a hook. Where was her sleeveless Gortex vest? Why wasn’t it on the hanger in the cupboard?

To be inauthentic was to exist in the negative. I am nothing. I’m rubbish, she screamed at her mother when she was six or seven. Martha had written these things down and now Caroline had those journals. She took them with her when she traveled, not because she wanted to read them again—she had read them so many times since her mother died she knew the words off by heart—but because she was afraid of losing them. She had a
photocopy in Melbourne, and one in a box in the garage at her father’s house, but the imprint of her mother’s hand on the page could never be copied and she needed it with her. Whenever she was packing to travel she had to debate the relative probability of losing her hand luggage in the departure lounge or in-flight, over losing her suitcase in the hold. Since she had not slept and sleeplessness made her forgetful, it was far more likely, she reasoned, that she would lose her own leather backpack than the airline lose her suitcase. So they were in her suitcase.

She had taken the journals from the attic when Martha was downstairs in bed, heavily sedated. She took the journals before her father had a chance to steal them off her. She should have taken everything else.

When she was a teenager she would wait till her mother went out, then go through her belongings. She knew about the box in the trunk upstairs under the quilts, right at the bottom, but she had never looked inside. It was the quilts she liked. She would finger their intricate patterns through the acid-free tissue. Hand-sewn. Hand-stitched. Two days before her mother died Caroline lifted off the quilts and opened the box.

Fred,

These are for Caroline. Please pass them directly to her. They do not concern you at all. You are not mentioned, nor is our marriage. They were written when she was young. They might help her understand. I hope she can forgive me.

There was no note for her, just three small notebooks with intermittent entries from the time Caroline was adopted, to around the age of 12. Her mother wrote in a small, neat hand in thin black pen. She had thin fingers and the very tip of her right index finger was missing. According to Callum, she lost it when her brother chopped it off with the kindling axe when they were playing in the wood shed, but when she asked her mother if it was true she just laughed.

April, 197—

Caroline was very angry with me from the moment she woke up. She has so much trouble getting to sleep she wakes up moody and tired, but today was a bad one. She started by kicking her bedroom door and when I tried to stop her she scratched my face and made it
bleed. I must remember to cut her nails regularly. I am still struggling to stay calm when she touches me and hurts me. Then she started to pull her own hair. She was covered in sweat and throwing herself on the ground. I'M RUBBISH, she screamed. When I tried to stop her pulling her hair she pinched me very hard on face. She said, I HATE YOU. I WISH YOU WOULD DIE. It was hard to hear those words but I tried to do my breathing and stay calm. Then Callum was woken up by her screams and he started to cry and I got really angry. I picked Caroline up and threw her on the bed. I did not hurt her but I wanted to. I am not a good mother. I know that.

Her only pair of woollen socks was still damp. She put them in the dryer and turned it on low, and then she took off her clothes and turned on the shower. She stepped in and let the water run over her head and down her back. She could not remember her mother or father ever asking her to pretend or to forget or to do any of those damaging things scattered throughout the pages of the adoption memoirs and handbooks that Martha gave her, and which she read in binges and purges throughout adolescence and beyond. But pretend and forget and deny she had. Some things were too big for a child to imagine. By the time she was ten or eleven everyone else knew there had been a catastrophe, and by the time she was twelve or thirteen she knew about it too. Caroline slid down the tiles and sat on the floor of the shower. Water pooled about her. She found a flannel and squeezed liquid soap into it. She began to rub her skin.

At first the catastrophe was personal, so it was not really a catastrophe at all, not at the time. At the time it was just something that happened to one little girl on the 17th January 1969, the date on her birth certificate.

Caroline came home from school crying again. When I asked her what was wrong she said, “I am the only one in the whole school who is not a miniature of their mother and father.” I felt so bad for her. All I could do was hug her and tell her how sorry I was, and I wished I could take that away. Then I produced my famous chocolate cake and all was forgotten. Children are resilient. I have to remember that.

She scrubbed the soles of her feet, the palest part of her body. They were impossibly thin feet, difficult to fit in
shoes. They were nothing like her mother’s feet, which were small and soft with high arches and blunt toes and well-formed nails that she filed and clipped, but never painted. Caroline’s were not like her father’s and brother’s feet, with their narrow heel and broad front and those prominent metatarsals. She turned off the water. She found a towel and began to dry her very own skinny body.

Her father always pretended that she was well adjusted, unlike so many of the other Aboriginal children in the historical tragedy that unfolded in front of their family, but how her mother struggled with the truth.

It was clear now, her parent’s confusion about their role in the catastrophe, the ways in which they were at odds with each other, but at seven or eight she just felt different and she hated it. She was a poor copy, a fake. At primary school it was hard to be surrounded by pale Mums and their miniature offspring, but she thought that the feelings would disappear. But at thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, she realized that they would never pass.

‘Mum, am I a half-caste?’

‘What?’ said her mother sharply, ‘where did you hear that word? There’s no such thing. We don’t use that language in this family, Caroline. Those words are for animals, not people.’

Then what am I, Mum?

She knew she was Aboriginal. She had been adopted right at the tail. Officially, the forced removals were over, and yet they continued in a haphazard way. The odd baby in the system intersected with the kindness of a well-placed doctor helping an infertile young couple. Her parents distinguished themselves from those who pretended that nothing had happened. They tried to meet history’s stony glower with equanimity, or so they believed. They were liberal, educated. They watched movies with Sydney Poitier and Gregory Peck. Martha taught her children all about slavery, and about the Ku Klux Klan and the riots in Chicago. Caroline listened to Eartha Kitt and Nina Simone, just like her mother. Soul and funk. She read the speeches of Martin Luther King and, late at night with a torch under the covers, Malcolm X. She loved Maya Angelou. She idolized Aretha
On the third floor of the Downtown Public Library, there is a room, I think it is called the Cincinnati Room. It is on the bridge over Ninth Street. We rarely make it up to the third floor, but when we do, we are often rewarded with an excellent exhibit of some sort.

On permanent display in that room, there is a very large Audubon book of birds. It is in a glass case, and is opened to this beautiful page of the Carolina Parakeet. This now extinct species was found in very great numbers in the Millcreek valley by early white farmers in Cincinnati. James Audubon describes their slaughter:

..the Parakeets are destroyed in great numbers, for whilst busily engaged in plucking off the fruits or tearing the grain from the stacks, the husbandman approaches them with perfect ease, and commits great slaughter among them. All the survivors rise, shriek, fly round about for a few minutes, and again alight on the very place of most imminent danger. The gun is kept at work; eight or ten, or even twenty, are killed at every discharge. The living birds, as if conscious of the death of their companions, sweep over their bodies, screaming as loud as ever, but still return to the stack to be shot at, until so few remain alive, that the farmer does not consider it worth his while to spend more of his ammunition. I have seen several hundreds destroyed in this manner in the course of a few hours, and have procured a basketful of these birds at a few shots, in order to make choice of good specimens for drawing the figures by which this species is represented in the plate now under your consideration.
Franklin and Etta James. All her mother’s heroes were her heroes too.

‘Two peas in a pod,’ her father liked to say.

Caroline was offered forms of compensation she was not able to accept. Her mother ticked the boxes for Indigenous at school and on the Census, insisting on Caroline’s Aboriginality, even though many refused to see it.

‘She doesn’t really look it, does she?’
‘I think I can see it now.’
‘You’d never know, would you?’
‘She could be from anywhere.’

From anywhere, from nowhere. Martha insisted on ticking the box, claiming the higher ground of unavoidable truth. But what were the odds of her being in Ngala Home For Single Mothers on the very weekend that nice Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Lothian came in for a visit? What if she had been in hospital that weekend, where she was regularly subjected to inquiries into the possible reasons for her continued ‘failure to thrive’? What if the car had had a flat tyre? What if another nice white family had done the rounds that day, coming in early because of the weather, or the rain, or a family birthday?

But her mother was right; it was not chance that children were removed, that her birth mother (the careful terms, the fine discriminations) walked away. Closer to home there was the local tragedy of Martha’s miscarriages and the more oblique drama of her modern, liberal American family married to the Lothian family business of perpetual misery. A baby in the family was meant to be a replacement for all the things that did not happen to Martha and Frederick, and a reparation for the past. An overcoming of history.

When the lens of history began to grind and turn towards the adopting mother in the story—the collaborator—Martha’s response was to lower her eyes, to accept the judgment and embrace its sentence. Her mother followed the Inquiries into Black Deaths in Custody like a penitent on her knees. She
attended hearings and returned in tears and went to bed for days on end. Sometimes she heard her father argue with her mother. ‘Why go, Martha? Why put yourself through this?’ She must have seen how others saw her: a blackbirder, a thief, a nester. Her mother put up her hand and passed out leaflets. She spoke up. Single-handedly she would make up for the things that were done to her daughter’s people, the people her daughter never had. She returned to University and enrolled in child psychology. She would turn a scientific eye towards the damage she had done.

There was her mother’s catastrophe, and there was her own, and for a very long time there was no telling the two apart. She loved Martha and believed she had to protect her from the other story. This was the job of a daughter: to shelf her own story and place it in a file somewhere off-stage, for later.

And there came a time to step away. ‘We are not the same,’ she screamed at her mother, ‘in any way whatsoever.’

That was before she discovered they had hidden things from her, well before her mother got sick. She was still furious at the whole world for what had happened to her. Why did she have to carry this thing? She might have taken back some of the terrible words she said as a teenager and young woman, had her parents told her the truth. Her father believed his daughter’s tragedy happened long ago, in the past; they had dealt with all that and it was time for everyone to move on. Look at you, he would say, such a success.

Caroline put her toothbrush in a zip lock bag, and ran her fingers through her hair. Her dark, straight hair.

She buried herself in school and university. She studied and she smiled. She neither avoided nor looked for Aboriginal friends. She was like Switzerland: neutral and safe. She was careful to avoid the malls of Fremantle or Perth, where her folk hung out and liked to bail her up, asking questions about her country, her people, wanting more than she could give.

Martha went to work in a soup kitchen in Fremantle. She became a prison visitor. She took phone calls in the evening. Caroline ignored her.
It seemed as if Providence had ordained that this splendid animal, perfect in limb, noble in size, should be saved to serve as a monument to the greatness of his race, that once roamed the prairies in myriads. Bullets found in his body showed that he had been chased and hunted before, but fate preserved him for the immortality of a Museum exhibit. His vertical height at the shoulders is 5 feet 8 inches. The thick hair adds enough to his height to make it full 6 feet. The length of his head and body is 9 feet 2 inches, his girth 8 feet 4 inches and his weight is, or was, about 1,600 pounds.

THE EXTERMINATION OF THE AMERICAN BISON.

BY

WILLIAM T. HORNADAY,

Superintendent of the National Zoological Park.
There were two other indigenous kids in her high school, both of them boarders from up north, neither of them adopted. She hung out with the Indian and the Koreans and Chinese—they were conches, like her. Their parents had their own local prejudices, no doubt, but they hadn’t been in Australia long enough to absorb the dominant view of her people. My people. At university she joined a support group for Aboriginal students. She helped girls and boys in from the country to find their classes and borrow books from the library and structure their first-year essays. She gave them her lecture notes. She lent them small amounts of money she did not need. She tried to talk them into staying in Perth when all they wanted to do was go home. But she refused their invitations to parties and she shied away from questions of country and people.

There was an award from the Dean, an invitation onto a Committee. She declined, citing study commitments.
She began to talk about ‘my real mother’, not because she wanted to hurt Martha, although that was part of it, but to set the record straight, to let them know that terminology was no match for the truth. She was at university when she accessed her medical records. She could remember sitting on the verandah of a friend’s house, drinking red wine, smoking a cigarette and thinking: enough. I can’t take any more.

But even the records were not enough, not in London at 4.56am, fully dressed, drying her hair, ready to leave for the airport.

One afternoon, a tsunami appeared on the horizon and engulfed 10,000 years of family, washing away babies and their brothers and sisters and graves and bones and everything marked or carved or written or sung into being. She used to wish she was one of those children adopted from Russia; pale children with straw-coloured hair and dark rings under their eyes, children who could disappear into their families. No doubt they were damaged—all children who were abandoned are damaged—but at least they could hide away. But Caroline could never disappear. Her mark made her different from her family, but it was not even written in a script that could be clearly read.

In public her mother tried to buffer and shield her with an explanation out of earshot, or an early announcement designed to silence any questions.

‘And this is our daughter Caroline. And our son, Caroline’s little brother, Callum.’

‘Oh, she’s nothing like you, is she? Is she ad—?’

‘She looks—’

‘Do you know who her—?’

‘You look just like your mother,’ her father liked to say. When she was little she loved to hear it, but as she got older it drove her crazy. At seven she was thrilled and gratified when, after begging and begging, her mother finally dyed her grey-streaked hair a glossy dark brown, just like her own. Now she matched. ‘You and me are the same, Mummy. Exactly the same.’
‘Promise me something,’ Martha said, crimping the edge of her dark quilt. It was an American mourning quilt, made by women whose men had failed to come home from the Civil War. The tight black and white pattern print was called Shaker Grey. How did it come to be on her mother’s bed? It belonged in a box in the attic, carefully folded over acid-free tubes so the creases did not age and crack. At the time Caroline thought, how like her, how like my mother to clothe herself in someone else’s mourning. And then she thought, soon that quilt will be mine.

‘I want you to promise me something.’

Her mother was only sixty-three. She was a lean, agile woman. When she was not in bed in one her moods, she walked in the early morning, a brisk thirty minutes along the river. Twice a week she went to Hatha Yoga. She was in her second term of Arabic at TAFE. She was teaching English to refugees. The University Degree had never been completed. It was a subject to be avoided in the their family, one among many. After Callum’s accident there was no potential in the future, no profession for Martha. There was devotion, and loathing.

When they finally found a cause for the terrible headaches and the clouded vision, once they had a picture of the thing in her brain, Frederick swung into action. He ignored Martha’s weak protests and Caroline’s strong opposition and moved Martha into the downstairs bedroom. He called her only brother in Jersey City and asked him to come. Uncle Sam declined as always, this time citing high blood pressure. But Martha’s women friends rallied, arriving one by one with the sort of soft, wet food that goes in and out easily—pumpkin soup, tuna mornay, cauliflower cheese. They came with pinched faces and left with swollen eyes, throwing themselves one after another at Caroline, unable, even at this terrible time, to imagine either offering or seeking comfort from Frederick Lothian, who stood to attention by the front door, holding out their handbags and their coats and their empty Tupperware containers, as if he couldn’t wait to get them out of the house.

‘Caroline?’

‘Yes, Mum, I’m here.’
'There’s some things in the gunmetal chest upstairs, some notebooks. They are for you.'

‘Don’t speak, Mum.’ Martha needed morphine for the pain, and it left her struggling for air.

‘I want you to sort my things. Only you, not your father. My clothes, everything. There are some letters under the quilts. I want you to get rid of the letters.’

‘Letters from Dad?’ Caroline began to cry. ‘Love letters?’ She didn’t want to get rid of her parent’s letters. There had been love, and it was not be thrown away.

‘No. No.’ Her eyes were closing as the drugs took over. ‘Not your father.’

Caroline waited to see if her mother would return. It was minutes before she opened her eyes and spoke.

‘Ralph.’

She heard her mother, but waited to hear it again.

‘Ralph.’

She found them that afternoon, a small bundle in her mother’s writing inside a blank yellow envelope.

\[R,\]
\[F. leaves on Friday for Helsinki. Saturday? Sunday? Monday? I'll wait for your call.\]
\[M.\]

Her father’s best friend. The man her mother could hardly stand. The last envelope was blue. It was from Ralph.

\[M.\]
\[Veronica knows everything. I am returning your notes. Please, do not tell F. There is nothing to be gained now. Veronica will say nothing because of Callum. Everything is different now. You and Fred must have each other.\]
\[R.\]

She stared at the date at the top of the thick pale blue paper. October, 1995, a few months after the accident. When her father left she found some newspaper and matches and lit a fire in the brick barbecue next to the swimming pool. Brown leaves carpeted
the bottom of the pool and the filter was clogged with decomposing leaves and insects. As a child she spent her summers on patrol, rescuing lizards, a lifeguard for the unguarded of the world. Her mother’s beautiful yellow grevillia had run woody and wild. It had been years since Martha had gardened with passion: not since the accident. Caroline pushed the letters into the fire and waited until the words were gone.

It was long ago. She was about to take the train to Heathrow and fly to Scotland. She had money in her wallet and thousands of Frequent Flyer Points. She had a career. But it was not the career she had wanted. She had wanted a career where evenings were spent in a book-lined study, pouring over papers and doing battle with the fax machine, while your wife and children hovered below you on the ground floor, like iron filings.

‘Your father is teaching tonight,’ her mother would tell them when they ate dinner without him. Overnight he might disappear to Amsterdam or Helsinki or Buenos Aries, called to wherever a major project had developed theoretical cracks.

‘Your father is giving a paper in Helsinki,’ Martha would announce at breakfast, ‘Callum, eat your porridge.’

‘E.T. doesn’t eat porridge and neither do I,’ replied Callum.

Caroline wandered around the world with a small suitcase and a laptop. Before he had taken early retirement, Frederick had had his own laboratory at the University, and students who came from all over the world seeking supervision. His colleagues wondered why a man of his stature and talent would sink himself out of sight in a minor Australian city at the end of the world.

‘Your father is the J.D Salinger of concrete,’ Ralph told her once. She and Callum had laughed, even though neither knew what he meant.

It was clear to her now that his distance from the old centres lent him an aura of eccentricity, but as development turned from London and Zurich to Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, Mumbai and Shanghai, Frederick Lothian was deemed prescient. Architects and engineering companies flew down to consult on the early stages of their projects for the booming economies of Asia. Her
father, the brilliant Frederick Lothian, would spin the mathematics and help them demonstrate the structural feasibility of their new design for the parliament or law courts, and with his invaluable expertise and innate empathy for design they would achieve the flexibility and cost-effectiveness of concrete, but more crucially, they would by-pass brutalism in favor of a more organic monumentalism. ‘A practical poetry’, one article said of his work with concrete shells.

It was clear to her now that such lives no longer existed. There were too many students, too little prestige, and too little money. Young academics now were harried and exhausted, struggling to move from casual teaching to a short-term contract.

She heard laughter on the street. The clubs had closed. Soon she would fly to Aberdeen, but she would never have a real career. A real career was launched like a missile at a target, and travelled towards it, true and unswerving. A real career was not initiated by a chance encounter with an egg on the Internet. She learnt from watching her mother that in the absence of a real career, a woman had to make things up for herself. Martha had abandoned her first degree when she married Frederick. She threw herself into motherhood, running the tuck shop at Primary School, teaching Quilting at Summer School, working part-time as a teacher’s assistant, at the soup kitchen, caring for little Callum and moody Caroline. Martha had gone in the first convoy to Noonkanbah, to protest mining on Aboriginal land. She wanted Caroline to come too, but she had a piano competition that she could not miss.

At thirty-seven she had been to Broome and the Kimberleys only once, for a conference on Museums and Aboriginal collections. She gave an impassioned paper on the repatriation of cultural materials and then went back to her hotel and considered suicide. The town was awash with tourists and faux-colonial architecture and themed shops with their mock-historic fonts. She hated seeing young Aboriginal girls on the streets and ruined men at the bar. She met locals and leaders who were not like that, who had mothers and fathers and aunties and uncles, and nieces and nephews, but in Broome she kept looking for the sorry folk, because she was sorry too.
It ended. Her father’s career was shot down by a phone call in the evening.

Her mother’s life ended on a Monday.

‘Promise me,’ her mother repeated.

‘I promise,’ Caroline replied, dreading what was coming. She wanted no more deathbed revelations. How could her mother betray her father? How could she tell her this now?

‘Say it to me,’ her mother whispered fiercely, her thin hand tightening around her wrist. ‘Say out loud what it is you promise.’

‘Mum, please.’

‘Say it to me. I implore you.’

Caroline winced. ‘Implore’ was not a word her mother would ever use. It was the drugs, she was sure.

‘Caroline?’

‘I promise I will try—’

Thick damp strands of grey hair stuck to her nose and upper lip.

‘I will contact my real mother’s family.’

The correct word was ‘biological’. That was Martha’s word for the other mother; that was the word they had always used when they had their talks. Martha always kept abreast of current thinking on adoption. Caroline had no doubt that the woman who lay dying under the quilt was her mother. But Martha had known what was in her file at the hospital, and had kept it from her. Both her parents knew from the day of the adoption that her mother had a first name and a last name, that she came from a town on a map, and they both knew exactly when she died.

Mixed race female, born King Edward Memorial Hospital, approximately eight weeks premature, with severe respiratory trauma. 4lbs 1oz.

They put her in a box with a warm light. Her real mother came back when the baby was fat and healthy and took her for two years and one month.

Part-Aboriginal female, two years and four months, removed by Department of Community Welfare after
A child presented at Princess Margaret Hospital with multiple small burns and broken leg after domestic between mother and partner. X-rays show prior fractures of arm, legs and skull, consistent with prior abuse. Evidence of malnutrition.

When she turned on her phone there were at least four or five voicemails, all in a row. She recognized the first number—her father. He had called on Sunday morning, Perth time, which was unusual. It was her turn to call. The other calls were from a number she did not know. Later, she thought, and closed her eyes.

It was around 6am when the phone woke her up.

‘Dad?’ she said groggily.
‘Caroline Lothian?’
‘Speaking. Who is this?’
‘It’s Corinne Palmer, the Manager of the Sir Charles Court Care Facility.’

‘What is it, Corinne? Is something wrong with Callum?’
‘That’s why I’m calling, Caroline. I am sorry to trouble you so early in the morning, but we have left a number of messages on your phone.’
‘I’m sorry?’ she said. ‘Is it Callum. Is he—’
‘The point is, Caroline, Ms. Lothian, Callum is missing. He’s not here.’
‘What do you mean—he’s not there? Where is he?’
‘We believe he’s with your father, but we can’t locate Mr. Lothian. Have you heard from him in the last 12 hours? Do you have any idea where he might have taken Callum? Callum has been gone since yesterday afternoon.’
‘He always pulls his phone out. They must be at home. Have you called him at home?’
‘We called St. Sylvan’s Village and the management have been to his Villa and checked. He is not there. However, they think he might have been burgled, which is a further concern.’
‘Burgled?’
‘Apparently there were things strewn everywhere.’
‘That’s normal,’ she said. ‘But where is Callum?’
‘Your father’s car has gone and he and Callum are missing. Apparently they did not stay at the house last night.’

‘Missing,’ she repeated. ‘Why is Callum with him? How did he get Callum? Why did you let him go? Is this some kind of joke?’

‘Caroline, please, calm down and listen. Your father came in on Friday, after he got out of hospital.’

‘What hospital? Why was he in hospital?’

‘I believe it was a minor issue related to a fall he had at a restaurant. He came in on Friday to see Callum and sign the next-of-kin papers, so we don’t have a repeat of that business with the antibiotics last week—which you will have to authorize, of course.’

‘I have no idea what is going on,’ said Caroline flatly.

‘On Friday Mr. Lothian said that he wanted to take Callum out for the day—that would have been yesterday, Sunday. I told him our policy: until he has proper authorization and has installed safety measures in the home he cannot take Callum. We believe that at around 1.30 in the afternoon your father entered the Hostel with another man, removed your brother from his room using some kind of home-made wheel chair and took him outside to a waiting car.’

‘This is ludicrous. How do you know this? How do you know it was my father in this waiting car? There is a security door. Didn’t you see this man come it? It must be someone else. How could my father manage Callum by himself? He’s an old man. You have to find out who took Callum. He could die.’

‘I’m losing you. Please speak slowly. Mr. Lothian was given a folder with the security pin for the door when he came in on Friday. We have video of the car park and both your father and his car have been identified by the Village.’

‘You’ve called the police?’

‘Of course! Mr Lothian was in the company of an older woman. She is also from St. Sylvan’s and I believe she has now been located. She and another Chinese gentlemen helped transfer Callum to the back seat of the car, next to the booster seat.’

‘Who are all these people?’ Caroline had stopped listening. The situation was beyond her imaginings. There had to be some
mistake. This woman on the phone was clearly mad. ‘What is a booster seat got to do with any of this?’

‘There is a child—a boy of about five or six. He is related to the woman. We have asked Jan Venturi—that is the name of the woman—to come in. Normally we would call the police, but we do understand that Mr. Lothian is Callum’s father. It is now Monday lunchtime. Do you have any reason to believe that your father could hurt Callum, or place him in danger?’

‘No, of course not, other than that he’s not at all qualified to look after him.’

‘Is there somewhere they would go? Where do you think your father might be?

‘It’s Monday. He walks at the river.’

‘We would like to call the police, Caroline, but as next-of-kin you must decide.’

Caroline held the phone in her hand.

‘Caroline? Are you there?’

‘Don’t call the police,’ she said quickly. ‘Not yet. I have to think. I have a flight to Aberdeen in a few hours. I’ll make a few calls and get back to you before I board, and if you hear anything, please contact me. And thank you, Corinne. I’m sure this is all some mistake. I’m sure Callum is fine.’

But she was not sure at all. The sun was coming up. She looked out to the street and saw running shoes, court shoes, flat loafers, and lace-ups. It was a day like any other. It was Monday morning.

She listened to missed calls from the Hospice.

The last message was from her father. She sat on the bed while it played, and then she called the airline.
Book 4

Trench
Tuesday, 19th January

As he walked towards the water Fred dug his bare feet into the sand to hide the thick, yellow toenails on the end of each of his ugly, old feet. Janet might not be a strong swimmer, but there was no doubting her buoyancy. She had been floating on her back for at least twenty minutes before he decided to swim. The beach was crowded after the hot day. Most people had stripped down to their bathers, but just up the beach was a group of women covered head to toe in soft, dark fabric. They swayed left to right, like silent bells, catching the cool air coming off the water. Their children bobbed around the shallows inside transparent inflatable rings, spluttering and jauping the water about them—Granny’s words, dredged up from the dead. Hiding in the cupboard from the Mester Pig, he and Virgil would count in Granny’s tongue to keep them from crying: one, two — yan, tan, tethera, fethera, pethera, let era, se ther a, ho vera, co verera, dik, yanadik, tan adik, tetheradik, fetheradick, bumfits. Bumfits? That old local word for the number fifteen twisted their terror until it torqued into laughter that loosened back up quick enough when they remembered what would happen if Dadda heard. Bumfits?

A group of young Asian tourists were struggling to settle a tripod in the sand and adjusting their cameras, getting ready to catch the sunset, repeating the same mistake he and all first-time visitors to the Indian Ocean had made. A sunset could not be captured. There were boxes and boxes of slides under his bed at the Villa, testament to the failure of photography. He passed a family who had brought their esky. They lay about plunging sticks of celery and carrot into green and pink dip and drinking Coke. A young woman in a bikini ran the icy can down her neck and between her breasts, rolling it around in her deep cleavage. Frederick looked away. Some young lads were tossing a Frisbee, diving after it and landing heavily in the sand. They came up laughing and dusting off their legs. A thin, stringy boy with a head of dark hair and a little nub of fluff under his lip leapt sideways and missed. He met the ground not as you would meet an adversary — hardened and ready hurt — but like a member of
the family who had been gone just a little too long — a quick embrace, an easier release. What would he be — eighteen, nineteen?

Fred let the water cover his ugly, hairy toes. He could count on one hand the number of times he had been in the ocean in the last thirty years. His children laughed at him when he stayed on a towel under his cricket hat while they skidded across the shallows on their foam boards, or rose up on the crest of a dumper and disappeared under its cruel lip. Fred would dash to the edge, casting about anxiously until they staggered up in the churning white-water with a thatch of sandy hair hanging over their faces. You’ll be fine, he’d call out. Just breathe, Callum. Don’t rub your eyes, Caroline. Martha didn’t like him taking the children to the beach without her. What if they get into trouble? What if they need to be rescued? But they were perfectly safe. He always stayed between the flags where the lifeguards were on duty.

‘I can swim quite well,’ he said to Jan in the car on the way to the beach, ‘I really just prefer not to.’ He told her about when had been forced to learn in school, in a fetid indoor public pool in Lincoln.

‘You have no idea how filthy those English pools were. I can still remember the horrible black-green mould in the gaps between the tiles.’

‘Funny how a little detail from childhood has affected you so much,’ she said. ‘Would you turn down the air conditioning?’

But that was only the half of it. The mould brought back Grandpa’s description of the living filth that nested in the skin and under the toes and fingers of men in the trenches. ‘You’d try to pick it off, to get it out. Pick and pick. Get a stick, a piddle of wire. Wouldn’t want to come, would it? Put a bit of meat in front of it and it’d all crawl on out. Least you had your supper, hey Freddie?’

Young Fred learnt to swim in stiff, jagged, desperate grabs, feet paddling wildly, his neck straining to keep his head up above the waterline to avoid the scraps of snot and brown stuff that floated past, and to save his eyes from the fierce antiseptic that they tipped into the pool from grey tin buckets each time a new group arrived. The boys were made to wait on the edge of the pool in their saggy jersey trunks, blue-white and rigid with cold, while
the attendants took up long wooden poles and stirred the water too and fro, like Macbeth’s witches.

Eye of newt, and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog.

Mr. Chandish snuck up behind him and pushed. Frederick went in as stiff as a statue and sunk, then kicked his way up for air. Through stinging eyes and mouthfuls of acid water he saw his hated teacher’s little round glasses and small eyes. The bright patch of red hair above his mouth moved up and down, up and down, like a signal flag:

‘Stroke, Lothian, STROKE!’

The detail was small, yes, but it had an unstoppable tread. It rolled straight over the top of the pool and up the green hill to his father and Pop, staggering home from the pub.

He had always been afraid of grown-up men. Granny always said that Pop was different before the War, when Pop started out as a lad at Foster’s Engineering on Waterloo Street, after they set him down in the foundry to make tractors and harvesters. When War broke out the Company made a tank, which was just a pair of metal boxes stacked one on the other, like tin coffins. It had small eyes, just like Mr. Chandish, and they named it Little Willie, and it scared the pants off the children in town. ‘I’ll lock you in Little Willie and leave you there to rot,’ mothers told their boys when they misbehaved. The next tanks were just converted tractors, but then they made the Mark IV, a categorical leap in engineering terms. By then Pop had laid down his tools and volunteered. He was too old for the War, well over forty, but they took him anyway, and when they brought him back he was missing one arm, half a leg, and all of his sense of humor, or so Granny said before she packed up and went to live with her sister Marjorie in Aberfeldy, Scotland. ‘Don’t you go, Granny,’ he cried. ‘Oh no, no,’ sobbed Virgil. ‘Stop your kebbing,’ said Granny, but she was crying too. Granny was the only warm, sweet, constant thing that he and Virgil had ever had—he didn’t count his mother, because she was too wrapped in fear of his father to be putting out love to her boys. You couldn’t blame Gran for going. When he came back from battle, Pop retired to The Hare and the Fox, where you still only needed one arm to lift a pint. It was too much for Gran, so
she left for good. She never forgot her two boys, though. There were little bits of money on birthdays, and postcards of the Falls of Moness and Edinburgh Castle. Write me, Freddie and tell me, is your Pop still at the pub? When Virgil died she wrote to his Dad. ‘Morris, I’m coming down for Freddie,’ but his father wouldn’t have it. ‘She left Pop of her own free will. She’s laid down on her own bed up there, so don’t go thinking she can sneel back now.’

Yes, Dad.

His father was at the foundry from fourteen. By the War he was almost old enough to join with his Pa, but they dismissed him outright on account of a buckle in the spine. Without the older men to beat him back and with only women on the floor, he climbed up to foreman. Well after the machines were forged and riveted and readied and the Mark IV rolled on off the line and out to Mesopotamia, his father kept rising, like dough on top of a warm oven, going up an imaginary run to be a floor manager of sorts, from where he got the occasional glimpse of Sir William and Lady Isobel in their suits and furs, preparing for true posterity.

Fred looked out to sea. The Indian Ocean was oily and firm, like the rind of a tropical fruit, or the sleek body of his dolphin. He was out there somewhere, he thought nervously. Towards dusk a fin could go either way. The wrong sort of fin could rise up and take you down. Of all the stories of sharks and shark attacks, none scared him more than those about the disappeared. Weeks later a pair of bathers might wash up on a beach—or even worse, a small part of the missing person—a remainder, a reminder, like a leg or a torso. He imagined being called in to identify the missing person.

‘Mr. Lothian, is this the leg?’
A solemn nod. ‘I’d recognise that kneecap anywhere.’
He was being silly now. Jan lifted her head and waved.
‘Are you coming in?’ she called. ‘It’ll be dark soon.’
She was using her hands as rudders and paddles, turning herself around and around in the water, like the arms of a large railway clock. You could never be sure if Dad was coming home as a dolphin or a shark. He balanced work with an equal weight of lager and Scotch, which he took at the bar with Pa and a toast to
the fallen, but when Virgil died those scales tipped right over and he took them all down with him.

Fred stepped in up to his knees and felt his feet sink into the soft, sucking sand. He and Virgil had been prepared for the likelihood of quicksand in Sarawak and the Congo.

‘Always carry a length of good rope,’ Fred advised his little brother, ‘and be tied together around the waist, like they do on the Matterhorn.’

‘What about a plank of wood, Freddie?’ said Virgil. ‘I can throw it across the quicksand and pull you out. Hey Freddie, how quick is that quick-sand?’

He planned it all. They would steal passage on a boat to Port Said, then it was on to Hong Kong and the West Indies, where they would be adopted by a pair of intelligent orangutans (they both loved Kipling) before being discovered by a distant uncle with a private income and huge library of old books. Uncle would give them brass telescopes and make them dugout canoes from fallen tree trunks. After a series of adventures with pirates, they would find buried treasure and settle down in the British Enclosure in Canton, which Frederick had read about in his encyclopaedia. He was going to give up French, which he hated, and learn to speak in Mandarin and Cantonese. He would study the architecture of the Great Wall and travel to the Forbidden City, while Virgil would do whatever Virgil wanted to do, which at four nearly five was eat sugary cakes and dig large holes in the garden with his bare hands. They would be leaving from Liverpool in the spring of 1948. But Virgil wanted to leave from Southampton, because The Mayflower had gone from Southampton (how did Virgil know this? Had he imagined it all?). He tried his best to change his brother’s mind, because Southampton had farewelled the Titanic and Fred was superstitious, but Virgil whined and stamped like a baby.

‘But Freddie’, (was he really only four?) ‘Southampton was where them Flying Boats is from.’ Frederick gave in—Southampton it was. The plan was broad in scope, short on detail. Through careful thievery from the pocket of his father’s jacket when he was passed out on the couch, along with the money earned by fairer means (delivering milk early on Friday
mornings for Mr. Smith’s dairy), he managed to save up three pounds and 10 shillings, which was tied up in a sock and stuffed under his mattress. He never told Virgil about the money. Virgil was bound to get over-excited and go tell Mam. He could hardly be trusted with a stolen sugar cube, let alone the great escape.

Fred stepped in up to his thighs. It was freezing. Why was he digging up what was done when he’d just have to go bury it again? After they got back from France, after they put Virgil in his new woollen pants and jacket and dropped him in his pine box and covered him up with dirt, Fred stole the old metal stirring spoon from his mother’s kitchen drawer and dug out a hole right near the grave and dropped the sock right in. Three pounds ten shillings, and all that was left of that.

He took a deep breath. This would be the time to turn and head for his towel, but he would not be doing that today. Today he was wearing a new black Lyrca rashy and navy trunks that were itching the insides of his thighs. Today he took a breathe of fresh air into his lungs, stepped forward into the cold water and dived right in.

_{Stroke, Lothian, stroke._}

He came up and breast stroked slowly by Jan, who was passing through ten o’clock on her way to twelve. He would not think about the incalculable volume of water below him, or the immeasurable volume of air above him, or of the endless capacity of the ocean to swallow and digest all who entered. He pushed his face forward, letting his chin skim the water, then pulled his arms apart and tucked them in tight, like chicken wings, and raised his head to breathe. His knees said goodbye and his feet said hello as he frogged his legs up, out, and back together in a nice long snap, driving his arms and hands forward in a straight line, just as he had been taught to do more than sixty years before. The waters parted in front of him and closed over behind him. On and on he swam, towards another place altogether, aiming straight for that fierce orange sun ball slipping down behind the world. As he swam a red curtain was dragged right across the sky, and then it too began to drop away, leaving only a grey sky and a single star.

‘Fred! Fred!’
He turned. He was miles away from the shore, out in the middle of the ocean. A figure on the shore zigzagged in diminishing zeds until it came to a full stop. Clouds descended and the water rose up. He paddled furiously in tight circles, like a lost dog, looking for Virgil. He dove down and grabbed at the sea, desperate to feel his brother’s worsted jacket, but instead he met something greasy and entangling. He fought it off and swam upward for air and met neither storm clouds nor driving rain, but a benign Venus in a clear sky. He tugged at the long thread of sea grass that had wrapped itself around his legs. This was not the lake at L’Isle St. Claire. That was not his mother on the shore worrying her heavy grey wool skirt, but Jan, wrapped in a pale-blue towel, calling him in.

His legs shook when he stumbled ashore. He had not swum that far since he was a child. Jan held up his towel, spread wide, as if he was a little boy coming in from the cold. She had been worried. He had given her a fright. He waited for the fountain of concern, the overflow of words, like down from a pillowcase, but he was met instead with silence. Jan’s lips were shut tight and she would not meet his gaze. He dried himself carefully, measuring the widening silence and then as he bent down to dry between his toes, the Frisbee struck him square on the cheek.

‘God!’ he said, standing up and clutching his face.

‘Are you okay?’ It was the skinny young man with curly black hair, all out of breath from running. ‘Are you all right? I missed it. We should have stopped playing, it’s too dark. I’m really sorry.’

‘I’m fine,’ said Fred, ‘it’s nothing.’ He rubbed his cheek. It hurt like hell.

Two more of the boys came running up. One was very fair and blond, like a Swede or a Dane. The other had freckles and unruly brown hair, like the head of a duster. None of them were laughing now. They were all too worried about the poor old man who’d been felled by their Frisbee.

‘He’s not hurt,’ said Jan brusquely. ‘Are you? There’ll be a bit of a bruise, but that’s it.’

They both watched the boys walk back up the beach, trying to trip each other up with their legs. The curly-headed one turned and waved. Jan lifted a hand.
‘Lovely boys,’ she said, almost under her breath. ‘My boy looked a bit like that one with the freckles. He was all teeth and smiles. He had more of the build of the tall one who threw the Frisbee.’

Fred rubbed his cheek. He cleared his throat. He waited and waited, and then he understood.

‘Mine had dark hair,’ he said quickly. ‘Lot’s of it. He got it from his mother. You can see he didn’t get it from me.’

Janet shot him a dismissive look and began to pack her bag.

‘Let me get that,’ said Fred.

‘I can manage,’ she said sharply. ‘I’m going to the showers.’

He tagged along after her, straining to keep up. Jan was a fast walker. She had remarkably strong, well-formed calves. It was almost dark, and the tall lights in the car park had been switched on. Seagulls were circling the white beacons, screaming and cawing. The first time he saw seagulls around street lights he could not get over the idea that they ought to be moths, and that the birds were engaged in some kind of exaggerated animal mimicry. Why would seagulls circle streetlights? But of course it was the bugs. The birds were after the insects that were drawn to the lights. He had missed a whole step in understanding because he could not see the insects.

He went into the Men’s room, where he wrestled with his wet rashy. Why had he bought the smaller size? He could barely get it over his head. Vanity, that’s why. It held in his little paunch, tugged at the loose flesh. He thought of the boys on the beach, of the lean, long muscles of his son at 20.

When he was dressed he sat down on a bench outside to wait for Jan. It was getting late. Where was she? Women always took so much longer than men to change. It wasn’t the make-up, because Martha didn’t wear it. For a long time he thought it was the bras—those tiny hooks behind your back, the finicky shoulder straps — but then Martha stopped wearing bras and instead wore stretchy black singlets, and he was still left waiting. A man was bringing his little boy up from the beach on his shoulders. He rolled him off and held him under the head of the shower, turning him back and forth like a plate being rinsed under a tap. His
mother held out a towel and wrapped the boy up tight like a sausage in a pastry, binding his arms to his body. The boy giggled and squealed and fought, like Tom Kitten in the clutches of fat Samuel Whiskers and skinny Anna Maria.

But Martha had wanted to keep him waiting. She would rather be in the shower than with her husband in the car, driving to the cinema, where she would have to sit next to him for the entire film and pretend not to like salty popcorn. She would do anything to avoid him. It had been like that since the accident. *Tolerance*, their book would be called, if it were ever written. He checked his watch. What the hell was Jan doing in there? He hated waiting for women. He hated waiting, full stop. He could not bear being left with nothing to do. He needed a pencil and paper, or a torch and a *Women’s Weekly*. When he went to the doctor he liked to arrive early so he could read the women’s magazines piled up in the waiting room. They kept his mind off the pending examination. The closer you got to death, the more likely you were to be dying. He liked to begin with the advice columns. The idea of asking anyone — a stranger — for advice on anything other than a mathematical calculation or superannuation was mystifying. ‘My wife of thirty-seven years loathes me. I have trouble sleeping at night. My daughter is adopted. What should I do?’

Jan walked straight passed him towards the car. He hurried after her with the keys.

‘How was the shower, Jan? Mine was a bit cold.’ He fumbled with the remote. ‘Have you got everything? It’s difficult to see in those showers in the dark. The lights are hopeless. I could hardly get my underpants on the right way. Ha! How were yours? Your lights I mean, not your—.’

Something was wrong. There was a vacuum that ought to be filled by words—Jan’s words—and in the absence of those words Fred was floundering. He pushed the remote. The boot popped up and Jan tossed her wet things in. He went round to open the door for Jan, but she pushed past him.

‘I can open my own door, thank you,’ she said.

Fred started the car and switched on the headlights, but left it in neutral. He turned to look at her. She was staring straight ahead.
'Is everything alright, Jan?'
'Why do you ask?'
'You seem quiet, that’s all. I thought I might have done something to upset you.’
'What do you think that might be?’
'Pardon?'
'What do you think you might have done to upset me? I’d be interested to know.’
'I don’t know. You just seem—different.’
'Different?’
Fred turned on the car and put it into Drive. Jan took hold of the gear stick and pushed it back to Park.
'Is that because I’m not providing the light relief you’re accustomed to?’
'What do you mean, Jan, what’s this light relief—?’
'You think I’m one of those chatty, older widows who just can’t wait to get her hands on another man to look after, that all Jan dreams of is spending her last days providing comfort and company for a former Professor who hates swimming, can’t cook, and is not man enough to tell the truth.’
Fred turned off the car. ‘I have no idea what to say, Jan. I have never lied to you.’ He wanted to say, *I've only known you one day*, but thought the better of it.
Jan undid her seatbelt with purpose and shifted in her seat to face him. He had not thought that Jan was capable of anger—sadness, yes of course, women were always sad—but anger was not something he had associated with Jan. He had been wrong.
'Why did you swim out so far? What were you doing? I was terrified. I was about to call the lifeguards—or the police. You tell me on the way to the beach that you don’t like to swim because of some childhood trauma involving mould—which frankly I didn’t buy, but that’s your business—and then you head off into the sunset. How do you think I felt? Do you have any idea what I was thinking?’
Frederick wasn’t used to imagining what others might be feeling or thinking. He wasn’t sure he was even capable of it. But he had an inkling.
'I don’t know what came over me, Jan. I just felt like I could go on forever.’
The car park was filling up with patrons of the new beachside restaurant. A stretch limousine pulled up and released a gaggle of girls in short, tight dresses and sparkly high heels. An eighteenth birthday?

‘I’m so sorry if I upset you,’ he said. ‘It wasn’t intentional.’ Jan’s thick curls were retracting as they dried. He licked his lips. ‘I’m not suicidal, if that’s what you think.’

It is a strange thing to take possession of a word for the first time. *Suicide.* Fred had never before placed the first-person pronoun and that particular noun in the same sentence; he had never before thought, *my suicide,* but once he took possession of the idea it turned on him, as a turret on tank rotates the muzzle to find its target. Suddenly suicide had an inexorable logic.

‘Then tell me what has happened to your son? And where is your daughter? You think talk is a one-way street? Oh don’t worry! Good old Jan will manage all the traffic while you sit at home with all that rubbish in that ridiculous excuse for a chair and watch the world go by? I saw the way you looked at those boys. I know that look, Fred.’ She stopped to gather herself up. ‘Is your son dead too?’

Defeated. ‘My daughter Caroline lives in Melbourne, but right now she’s in London for work. My son was in a car accident. It was almost twelve years ago. He is in a high-care hostel. He has an acquired brain injury.’

He watched Jan’s face carefully, waiting for sympathy to soften her tight mouth and her unflinching gaze. But she did not soften. If anything, she tightened and drew back, like an arrow in a bow.

‘Where?’
‘What?’
‘Where is this hostel? Is it in Perth?’
He nodded. It was easier to nod that speak.
‘So how often do you visit him? When did you last see him?’

The girls were standing under the light, taking long swigs from of a bottle of champagne. They skidded about on silly heels. Every so often their long, thin legs gave way, like baby giraffes learning to stand. Small, shiny evening bags hung down from
their shoulders. He focused on the glittery rectangles, hoping they would do something to save him.

‘Not very often. He doesn’t know who I am.’

Jan laughed, or whatever it is you do when you make a sound like a laugh about something that is the opposite of funny.

‘Is that your definition of a person worth visiting? Someone who knows who you are?’

This was not how he had imagined the evening. He had imagined a nice little out-of-the-way restaurant, with spicy Vietnamese food in white bowls and tiny glasses of green tea, him eating with chopsticks and nodding and chewing as Jan filled the air about him with comforting, feathery words.

Jan slumped back in her seat. She shook her head slowly. He looked past her to the blackening ocean. His dolphin was out there waiting for him, with a smiling face and a winking eye.

‘How long has it been, Fred?’

The answer was getting ready to climb out of his mouth and write itself up in the air, in neon, flashing on and off, on and off.

‘I saw him just over two years ago, when Martha died.’

‘Two years ago.’

A concrete time frame seemed to energize Jan. She turned to him, with one finger raised.

‘You cannot leave this one more day. You must go. I can come in the car if that helps. I can wait outside. I have to see Morrison, and then you can go to see your boy. Does he have a name? What’s your boy’s name?’

‘Callum, his name is Callum. We called him Callum.’ He should have said, this is none of your business, but it was too late for that.

Martha opened her door to release her seatbelt strap.

‘I need to eat. I can’t go to a restaurant now. There’s a burger place just off the highway and that’ll have to do. Drive as if we are heading home, and I’ll tell you when to turn. How do I loosen this belt?’

‘You press that button near your shoulder. See it?’

The car was idling gently. He put it in Drive and kept his foot on the brake to wait for Jan. The girls were climbing back into the limo. One of them tripped as she walking after her friends and went down on both kneecaps, like a camel, and began to
laugh and cry at the same time. Her friends pulled her into the car. The car door closed.

‘Actually, they called yesterday,’ said Fred.

‘Who called? I’m all buckled in, you can go now.’

‘The hostel called last night. I gave them Caroline’s number.’

‘Why? Is that unusual—that they call, I mean?’

‘They don’t have my number. They always call Caroline.’

‘But I thought Caroline lived in Melbourne? Or London?’

‘She comes back regularly to see Callum. She manages things. I pay for the flights.’

This was not completely true. She had only been back two or three times since Martha died, although he knew she spoke to the hostel every week. And she had refused to let him pay for the flights. He looked at Jan. He saw that he should not have mentioned money.

‘So they never call you? Normally, I mean?’

Frederick did not answer. Jan had tipped her face away from him so he could see only the outline of her jaw and the crown of curls. It was like confession, but there was no one left to absolve him of his sins.

*Is it a sin of thought or a sin of action, my son?*

*A sin of thought, Father.*

*And what are your thoughts? Come, come, laddie, the Lord Jesus will understand.*

*I want to kill my father. I want to kill him dead.*

‘What did they want? Why did they call, Fred?’

Fred could taste salt water at the back of his throat.

‘Are you going to make me squeeze every little word out of you?’

Jan had clearly had enough of him. Could you blame her?

‘They just said it was about Callum, and that my daughter had given them my number while she was out of the country. I passed on her contact details in London.’

‘I see,’ said Jan.

But she didn’t see. She didn’t see at all.

‘So have you spoken to Caroline? What is this all about? Is Callum alright?’
‘I put the phone down. Then I pulled out the plug. That’s why you couldn’t contact me about Tom. It’s still unplugged.’

He was pathetic. He was crawling across the floor like a cockroach.

‘What if it’s an emergency?’ Jan exhaled heavily. ‘I’m trying, Fred, I really am. I know you probably think this is none of my business, but anything could have happened, don’t you see? He could be dead. How have you managed to live like this? I think I might go straight home.’

He spoke in desperation, just before the truth swallowed him up completely. His words rose up slowly like a glacier in front of an ocean liner, cold and hard and unavoidable.

‘But Jan, you did it to your son. You said it yourself. You stopped seeing him.’

There was the sound of glass shattering. A girl had thrown an empty bottle out of the window of the limousine.

‘What did I do? What did Sam and I do? Turn our backs on our son? Is that what you are saying? You think it’s the same? Something equal, two wrongs that cancel each other out? Well I don’t think so, Fred. I’ve had enough of this. I want to go home.’

‘I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.’ A headlight from a parking car spun around and struck the back of Fred’s head, casting his face into darkness. Ahead of him was a giant clock with great big metal arms. He was climbing up onto the clock trying to push the minute hand back, but it would not budge. He looked at Jan. My god. She was crying. He had made Jan cry.

‘You have no feelings, Fred. My son was an addict. He robbed us clean. He broke our hearts so many times I could not begin to tell you. We took him back over and over again. We had him in counseling, and rehab, we took him around the world twice to get away from his so-called friends, we bought him a flat, and we put him in new courses and each time he did it again and again. In the end we had no choice. Do you hear me Fred? WE HAD NO CHOICE.’

‘I’m sorry, Jan.’

She ignored him. ‘But you’re right in a way. We always thought it was our fault. And it was. It still is, as far as I’m concerned. Somewhere, sometime, we did something wrong.'
That’s what I believe, deep down. But it’s not the same. You can’t say it’s the same, Fred.’

Fred watched the driver of the limousine get out of the car. He walked over to the door and opened it. He was angry. Two girls got out and began to pick up broken glass and carry it to a bin. Jan was crying softly. He had only known Jan one day and he had made her cry.

‘I know it’s not the same,’ he said. ‘Can you forgive me?’

In books and films, moments like these come closer to the end than the beginning. Fred had only just met Jan. It was far too soon for the fog to lift. It was too soon for dawn to break. But there you have it, unlikely, unprecedented and hard to believe: an epiphany early on in the story, at night, in the car park of Leighton Beach.

‘I am a monster.’ He began to cry.

Jan wiped her eyes and sighed. She reached across and put the car in park. ‘I think you’d better turn it off, Fred. We’ll run out of petrol next. And the headlights too.’

Fred turned off the car. He fumbled in a compartment on the side of the door for a small packet of tissues and blew his nose loudly. He offered Jan a tissue.

‘No thanks. Look Fred, I’m not the angel here—or the priest. I’m not here to save you from yourself, or absolve you of your sins. I guess you were brought up Catholic?’

‘How did you know?’ sniffed Fred.

‘This isn’t some romantic comedy set in a retirement home…And then he met chatty Jan, the widow next door with the budgerigars, dot, dot, dot.’

‘Ellipses,’ muttered Fred. ‘Those three dots are called ellipses.’

Fred blew his nose. Vast amounts of seawater were coming out of his nostrils. He should never go underwater. It was the shape of his ears; they were like funnels. He had run out of tissues, so he doubled them up and blew again. They were sodden. What should he do with the tissues? He had no pocket and he didn’t like to drop them on the floor. His house might be a mess, but he kept his car spotless. He saw a bin near the showers.
'I know what an ellipsis is Fred. I'm a teacher. What are you looking for? Don't tell me you're worried about that tissue, are you? Open your window. Open it!'
Fred pushed the button.
‘Now throw the tissue out.’
‘What? You can’t do that.’
‘Why? Because it’s littering? Because it wouldn’t be the right thing to do? Look, you seem like a good person—or at least, capable of good. You have potential. You don’t like throwing rubbish out of car windows, for a start. So I don’t give much weight to the monster line. You just have to get on with it now. You have to go home and clean it all up. And I don’t just mean your Villa.’

‘I have to change,’ said Fred as passionately as he could. He only half believed his delivery, so he said it again. ‘I have to change.’ He could do it, he could. But he still didn’t know what to do with tissues. He screwed them up tight in his fist, compressing them into a tiny, wet ball. ‘Do you believe that people can change, Jan? The trouble is I’ve have never believed it. How can you change when you don’t believe in change?’

‘Why is it about belief? It isn’t a miracle you need. It’s not like you have to assume another identity, or do anything monumental. You’re not in a thriller where you wake up as what’s his name—Jason Bourne. Change happens slowly. The good thing about your situation is that you have room for improvement. Lucky you. What are you doing with your hand? Was that the tissue you just pushed out the window?’

His face was hot. He opened his door and plucked the damp ball from the bitumen. He refused to look at Jan. ‘I think we should get that burger,’ he said stiffly. He turned the key. Nothing. He turned it again. ‘I think the battery’s flat,’ he said meekly. He tried it once more.

‘Oh for goodness sakes. It’s those F-ing lights. I told you to turn off the lights. Are you a member of the RAC? I’m going to die of hunger here—if I’m not already dead from frustration. We need to find a phone.’

He left Jan in the car and walked around the side of the restaurant to the entrance. Two huge panels of glass parted.
Fred stepped from the cool neon light of the car park into the deep blue depths of an underwater cavern. The air was thick, like honey. Frederick waded towards a long bench, and met the languid gaze of a very tall, very redhead woman in a green and yellow sequined sheath. A length of creamy pearls dangled from her pale neck. A hard, scalloped bodice fortified her breasts.

‘Good evening, Sir, my name is Ariel. Welcome to Le Marin Japonoise. Are you here for the Degustation? Under what name is the booking?’

A light pulsed on the counter. The girl held up her palm to excuse herself and stepped away to take the call.

Frederick looked along the bench for a menu. Polished concrete. He ran his hand down the cool surface. Few people understand the beauty of concrete. He peered at it closely. His glasses were in the car, but it looked like it had been poured with an aggregate of shell grit and some kind of local curly worm shell, and then ground back at least three times with different grades. It was a lovely job. He read the menu. Chef Yuko De Burge, formerly of Le Buffon Japonoise in The Bund, Shanghai welcomes you. Four-course degustation with matching wines, $150 per head.

‘I’m sorry, Sir. What name is your booking under?’

‘I don’t have a booking, Ariel. My car has broken down. Is there any chance you have a table for two?’

Ariel opened and closed her cornflower blue eyes.

‘O my goodness,’ she said, clutching her bosom, ‘this is your lucky night! What have you been doing to deserve this? We are absolutely fully booked and normally we have a three-month wait, but I’ve just this very moment had a telephone cancellation for two. Their car has also broken down, but in the northern suburbs! What a coincidence. I think you’ll enjoy your table. We have slid back the glass doors onto the beach.’

Ariel gestured into the aqueous depths of the restaurant, past a row of clear tanks filled with heads of purple and pink coral, to the outer shoals of Le Marin. There in the distance was a glowing square heavy with silver tableware and sparkling glass, opening right onto the pale sand dunes and the waxy ocean.

‘That is your table, Sir. But you said there were two guests?’

‘Could I possibly use your phone?’
‘Of course,’ said Ariel.
‘Do you still have a phone book?’
‘Naturally, Sir.’
‘And then I’ll bring my guest from the car.’

Jan point-blank refused.
‘I just couldn’t, Fred. Not after everything. And I’m not dressed. It looks very formal in there.’

‘Please Jan, it’s my treat,’ he said. ‘I am so sorry about what I said. And who cares if you look like you’ve just been to the beach? It’s at least a two hour wait for the RAC, so why not enjoy it?’

He could offer to put Jan in a taxi. She would be home in less than twenty minutes. But if he was going to change, then he had to do things that he would never normally do, like spending $300 on a subterranean degustation.

‘Why were you so long? I’m not in a good mood, you know.’

‘I realise that,’ said Fred, ‘and I am very sorry. That was a terrible thing to say.’

Jan crossed her arms. Fred cast his gaze to the ground. He was humbled before Jan. Humble, a state of humility. Humility, from the Latin humus, meaning earth. He was truly contrite. Contrition, from the Latin contritus, ‘ground to pieces’ or crushed by guilt. Could there be link with concrete? He would have to look that up.

‘It was weak,’ said Jan.

Fred cleared his throat. ‘I called the hostel from the restaurant. Callum has had a chest infection. I couldn’t find out much more. They got hold of Caroline in London, and they have him on IV antibiotics but they’re not altogether happy with his progress. I’m going in there tomorrow after lunch, to meet with the doctor.’

Jan did not move. Did she think he was making it up? The weekend staff had tried to call him to authorize the drug and they were not at all happy about having to call Europe. ‘That was an expensive phone call, Mr. Lothian. We won’t be doing that again.’ He had been very formal on the phone, not at all like a father calling about his son. He could not think about the actual visit.
The last time he saw Callum was when Martha died: before that it had been four years. Before that, who knows.

‘I’ll come to dinner,’ said Jan suddenly, ‘but only because I’m starving. I’m not doing all the talking, though. I’m going to be listening to you.’

She pulled the rear vision mirror towards herself and fossicked in her handbag. Frederick found a pen and paper to write a note to the RAC.

‘Moisturizer?’

‘Thank you,’ said Frederick, accepting a squeeze of pink cream in his open palm.

‘Lipstick? I don’t normally like degustation menus.’

‘Me neither,’ said Fred. ‘But it’s a lovely setting. And I’m paying.’

‘If you insist,’ said Jan, snapping her lipstick back into its sheath.

Fred rubbed the cream into his face, and then got out of the car. It was a perfectly still evening. You could snap your fingers in one end of the galaxy and you’d hear it at the other. This was going better than he could have ever expected. Jan was coming to dinner. Was it possible that a man could still live some kind of normal life as a monster? He watched Jan swing out of her seat and close the car door and together they walked through the car park towards the restaurant.

‘What’s that?’ said Jan suddenly. She was pointing towards the small white ball that Fred had tossed behind the wheel of a stationary car when he went to the restaurant to find a phone.

‘Oh, thanks,’ said Fred. ‘My tissue. It must have dropped out of my pocket.’

‘Of course it did,’ said Jan.

Jan gasped as she stepped inside. She nodded towards Ariel.

‘Look at that, our very own little mermaid. Are those seahorses in the tanks? I love seahorses. I’m going to use their bathroom. I don’t suppose you have any blush on you?’

Fred waited to be seated. He was holding onto the concrete bench in case he floated away. He was not feeling himself. The walls of Le Marin were carpeted floor to ceiling in heavy olive green wool shag, like shreds of nori in miso. An aquatic blue-
green light filtered down from the ceiling. Trails of wool dangled idly from the walls, like sea grass buffered in the intertidal zone. The floor was covered in a nubbly carpet with an uneven twist, the colour of sand at Moggs Eye beach. Fred felt himself disperse and soften.

‘Your table is ready, Sir.’

He followed a young man in oyster-grey pants and shirt who was wearing those ridiculous round black-rimmed spectacles, à la Corbusier. Another modern affectation, another one of those short-hand ways of signaling you wanted to belong to some tradition or movement or context or country that you have no right to claim as your own.

Fred sat down and looked out into the dunes, waiting for his eyes to adjust. It would be a full moon in less than a week. Granny always said a full moon was bad luck. For years he had stayed inside with the curtains drawn on full moons. He peered into the restaurant. Where was Jan? He needed Jan right now, because the moon had just returned to him his son.

Callum was standing in amongst the club rush. He was wearing one of Martha’s knitted beanies, and he was holding a brown metal thermos filled with hot chocolate. He was smiling. He had a bent smile because his second teeth were coming out crooked. He would need braces, they knew that already at ten. Frederick stepped out onto the narrow, wooden deck abutting the dunes. The moon and the beanie and flask and the crooked smile put the boy up on a hill past Wandering, where they were camping out in search of the Aurora Borealis. Caroline and Martha were asleep in the back of the SAAB and there was a fox in the lower paddock, on the hunt for meat. They both heard the lambs mewling nervously in the dark, calling for their mothers.

‘Are you coming, Dad? Hurry up! The battery on my torch has just gone.’

‘Sir?’

Frederick turned back to the table.

‘Can I offer you and your guest a complementary champagne cocktail?’ Ariel carefully lowered two flutes.

Fred sat in his chair. Thousands of industrious gold and silver bubbles were headed up the tunnel of his glass. The night
Callum was conceived millions of sperm had tussled and fought to meet Martha’s lovely egg. What were the chances of his boy being made whole and perfect in that single moment? He picked up his glass and drained the contents. When he put down the glass Callum had gone and in his place was a clump of coastal sedge. Or was it a myrtle? After working his way through all of Martha’s things, he had finally come to the plant books. He could now identify many of the plants on the dunes: cotton head, snake bush, dune mosses, and club rush. Martha had several titles devoted to the grevillia. *This plant is easily hybridized through a simple cutting, but is given to woodiness if not kept in check.* Martha was right; it was a remarkably beautiful species, especially in spring, when it unfurled its long, sticky-sweet stamens.

Spring was Martha’s favorite time to walk along the river. In the first months after the accident, when it was still possible that Callum might regain some semblance of intention and order in his thinking, before he had the seizures, when Fred still prayed to his lost God that his perfect boy might be returned to him whole and intact, Martha would take Callum along the river on walks. With the help of Martha’s books, he could now conjure these promenades in detail.

‘That’s hardenbergia, Callum, the creeper with the purple flowers. That beautiful orange plant is a Chapman River Creeper – it’s quite a rare plant from up north, and I have no idea how it found it’s way here. See how it grows in a continual spiral in one direction? Those Carnaby cockatoos probably flew the seed down from Geraldton. And look at that Grevillia with the orange flowers— a Honey Gem.’

He caught the waiter’s eye and pointed at his empty flute. While the waiter was gone he Fred picked up Martha’s glass and drained it in one gulp. Caroline had told him all about their walks. She made a point of talking about everything Martha did with Callum, rubbing it into his face until it hurt. Martha visited Callum every day, and when Caroline was still in town she went with her.

Would he be telling Jan that after the seizures he always made sure he was out of the house when Martha left for the
hostel, and up in his study with the door closed when she got home? That he always gave it a good half an hour before he came down, in case Martha was crying again? Or that when he finally appeared he would carry a sheaf of paper in his arms in case he needed an excuse to get back to work?

Martha would be in the laundry doing a load of Callum’s washing, even though they did it at the hospital, or she would have her wicker basket open for some kind of stitching job, though nothing of Callum’s ever wore out. ‘How are things?’ he would say. Once in a blue moon Martha would surprise him with an answer. ‘I’m worried about his feet. We need to get a new podiatrist—a specialist. The one they have is hopeless.’ Fred would nod slowly, clear his throat. If she asked, he would help her shake out a wet sheet. He would take hold of his corners and bring them towards her, then bend down and pick up the lower edges and bring them in towards his wife, as if they were dancing a courtly pavanne. Then he would step away, leaving her to carry the sheet to the line.

‘Any ideas for dinner, Martha? Would you like to eat out?’ On rare occasions she would let him take her to dinner. They would eat Indian food, or pasta, and drink their wine. He would talk endlessly about Caroline, only ever about Caroline. Why was she still with Julian? Was she really going to move to Melbourne? Would he go too? He’d have to give up his tenure, and he’d never do that.

The truth is, Jan, there were two different worlds in our house. Martha stayed up at night listening to the radio and cooking vegetable broths, while I was in bed sneaking looks at the novels she was reading. In the morning she was up early boiling and mashing the same soft foods Callum ate as a baby—pumpkin, avocado, and banana, as if Callum was just teething. I stayed out in the garage with my collection, or closed the door to my study, pretending to keep up with concrete.

Fred was being lowered into the Mariana Trench, 11,000 metres beneath sea level. His head was exploding from the pressure. He caught the waiter’s eye and watched the oyster scuttle over for his empty flute and then swim off in the direction of the mermaid. When it became too hard to manage Callum on
the walks, even with Caroline’s help, Martha took CDs and books to his room. She would pop on a fugue or a sonata, and then she would open a book. For the first few years Martha read him the books she thought an intelligent young man ought to be reading: *All the Pretty Horses, Midnight’s Children, Atonement.* After Callum was finished with these books, Fred tried to read them. But what use was literature to a monster? Monsters had no need of poetic language. Metaphor was lost on monsters.

Martha then read Callum the books that she liked to read, the ones by *women writers,* thick with female grief and loss and children and death. She left them by her bed with little strips of yellow paper marking where she was up to. Sometimes he opened them up, looking for the fine pencil lines next to particular passages. He was desperate to know what was going on inside her head, but terrified of finding out.

When the first *Harry Potter* came out she read it in one night. The next day she took it straight in to Callum.

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you’d expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn’t hold with such nonsense.

‘I’m sorry I took so long. There was a queue.’

Fred stood up while Jan seated herself. She had done something with her eyes. They were deep green, like sea grass, and rimmed in black, like an elliptical banded fish.

‘Jan, did you read *Harry Potter* when it came out?’

‘Where did that come from? Have you looked at the menu?’

The waiter returned with Fred’s champagne. Jan reached out to take it.

‘Where’s yours, Fred? Aren’t you having a drink?’

Fred nodded at the waiter. ‘Martha read *Harry Potter* to Callum. She read him all of them as they came out.’

Jan looked at him steadily. ‘That’s remarkable,’ she said.

‘Cognitively, how is he?’

‘He can’t follow stories,’ he said. ‘He can’t follow anything. He can’t speak. He makes sounds. He can hear, but we are not sure how much he understands. For the first year we thought he might recover some function, but then there were seizures. He
was never going to be the same, but we thought there could be more.’

Jan nodded. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

For six years Martha and Callum followed Harry and his struggles with Valdemort. Then she began to sweep further back, to *Stuart Little* and the *Velveteen Rabbit*. He never liked that book about the mouse, which she’d bought for Caroline when she was little. ‘What exactly is the message, Martha? Is Caroline supposed to think she is as different from us as a white mouse?’

‘It’s allegorical, Frederick. Look it up.’

Towards the end she went to the attic and brought down all the children’s books. It was during *The Roly-Poly Pudding* that Callum spoke.

‘He said, *Whiskers*, Fred. I heard him.’

She had rushed in from the garage after parking the car. Her eyes were shining and her cheeks were flushed, like St. Theresa of Avila. He thought, Martha has gone mad. Through all the hell of their marriage—because that was what it had become since Callum’s accident—neither could acknowledge the other’s version of reality. Their lives were like a Venn diagram with two circles sharing only a tiny crescent: Caroline.

‘He said, *Whiskers*. I heard him, Fred. I heard Callum speak.’

Her look was beseeching. In return, Fred’s was withering: a look to kill the vine on the trellis.

‘Whiskers?’ he repeated, curling his lip. Martha nodded dumbly. ‘Whiskers?’

She began to cry.

‘For God’s sake, Martha, get a grip’, he shouted, and went up to his study and slammed the door.

The oyster came by with a glass of champagne and a carafe of water.

‘Salut!’ said Jan, lifting up her glass.

‘Cheers,’ said Fred.

‘So. Go on,’ she said, setting down her glass. ‘Please.’

Fred took a swig of bubbles and descended another 1,000 metres into the trench.
‘Martha kept up with all the latest therapies. She was the one who kept pushing for more tests. She was always onto the hostel to increase Callum’s physio and OT, and to get them to play more classical music and whatever. She wanted them to make sure that Callum was engaged.’

Fred paused to leave a space for Jan to let him know that she was on his side, that his wife Martha was living a delusion.

‘I can understand that,’ said Jan carefully. She took a sip of water.

‘What, that he had to be stimulated?’

‘Why would you have a problem with that, Fred? Why?’

All around the restaurant well-dressed couples were holding hands across their tables. Friends were laughing at shared jokes. I have none of that, thought Fred. I have neither love nor friendship.

Martha and Caroline read all the books—and there were many—about damaged people trapped inside their hard shells. They scoured the shelves of the University library. They met with academic staff from the Medical Department. They joined the Neurological Society. They wrote letters to America and England, to the Professors of Neuro-Stem Cell Therapy, to get Callum onto a trial in America, to see if transplanted cells might stimulate brain growth and help reconnect ruptured neurons, thereby offering new hope to the brain-damaged and their loved ones. But Virgil’s death had taught him everything he knew about hope. Life was not hopeful. Life wore an implacable face, and its disposition was brutal, idle, and cruel.

‘I knew it wouldn’t make a difference, of course. In real terms.’

‘Hmm,’ said Janet. She was looking at the pink card.

Fred’s blood vessels were expanding rapidly.

‘Do you disagree? Do you really think that deluding yourself that therapy can make a difference was the right way to live? Do you think I should have lied to my wife so she could keep lying to herself and my daughter?’

He had raised his voice. He hadn’t meant to do that. He took a gulp of champagne. His hand shook.
Jan put down her menu. ‘I don’t know, Fred, but it made a
difference to your wife. And to Caroline too. It helped them deal
with what had happened. To accept that Callum had changed. To
have hope.’

‘CHANGED?’ Fred picked up the menu. He could not read,
but he had to do something other than look at Jan’s face. He
hated her face. He hated her startling green eyes with their black
rims, gazing at him like some kind of sea anemone, its tentacles
opened to the entire world, unafraid and unflinching.

When Martha died he had gone the hostel with Caroline.
Caroline had not asked him to come but he knew he had to do it.
All the way in the car he had been thinking monstrous thoughts,
thoughts he would now desperately like to confess, if he still
believed in confession. But Jan had made it clear that she was
not here to save him. She would not listen to his terrible thoughts,
or absolve him of his mortal sins. *Father, why should it matter to
Callum if Martha is gone? He couldn’t recognize her when she
was here, so why should he care if she’s gone?*

Martha looked up from the menu.

‘I don’t think we have any choice. The courses arrive and we
use this document to interpret the dishes. It’s like foreign travel.
Some of it is in French, which I suppose you speak fluently, what
with being a Professor, but the food is actually very Japanese,
which is my territory.’

The waiter arrived with white wine from somewhere in New
Zealand. He tipped the fluid into their glasses. Jan picked up the
enormous glass bowl and swung her wine around the perimeter.

‘Just checking to see if there’s a goldfish in it,’ she said, and
went back to reading the menu.

She had let him off the hook lightly. He could come up a
little, release the pressure. But Callum was still down at the
bottom of the sea, strapped into his chair like a stone, and to
reach him he had to go deeper.

One of the carers was about to feed him. He watched Callum
opened his mouth to chew. Caroline asked the carer to leave
them alone. She took a cloth and wiped her brother’s face, and
then sat on the bed next to his chair, spooning the soft food into
his mouth. Frederick was standing near the door, so he could
leave quickly if he had to. Caroline looked over at him with
loathing. She put down the plate and took Callum’s soft hands in her own.

‘Callum, Mum’s dead. Our mother has died, Callum. I’m so sorry.’

Callum used to have thin, expressive fingers, like his mother’s, but now he had two limp paws that were liable to jerk away from him unless they were held in place. Frederick was concentrating on the blades of ceiling fan. They were turning so slowly it was hard to see how they could make any difference to the flow of air in the room. Caroline climbed into her brother’s lap and wrapped her arms around him. She began to sob. They were loud, terrible sobs. The blades went round and round, round and round. Callum let out one long sound, like air released under pressure, like a calf lost in a storm. Frederick squeezed his fists against his thighs. Round and round went the fan.

‘Oh God,’ he said involuntarily. What have I done?
Jan started and spilt her water. ‘What’s wrong, Fred?’
‘I have to see Callum. I have to talk to him.’
‘Calm down, Fred. Here, have some water.’ She dabbed the damp spot on the table cloth with her napkin. ‘Your poor wife.’

The waiter arrived with two large oval plates, inflected like bi-valves.

‘Bêche-de-mer gunkan sushi,’ he said, ‘with chocolate-infused nori and a lemon ginger mousse.’ He inspected the damp spot.
‘Would you like me to change the table cloth, Madame?’
‘It’s fine’, said Fred. He looked at the delicate green and black and orange arrangement on his plate. He took a large swig of wine. He hovered over the silver chopsticks resting across the arched spine of a sardine, and then picked up his knife and fork.

‘Sea-cucumber,’ said Jan. ‘Eat!’ said Jan. ‘We both need food. And when you have eaten tell me what happened to Callum, if you are up to it. And then I want to hear about Caroline.’ Jan popped a tiny orange pearl of roe into her mouth.

‘She’s adopted,’ said Fred. He put down his chopsticks and hacked noisily at the nori with his knife and fork, leaving plenty of room for Jan to do some of her imaginative embroidery around his bombshell.
Jan held another tiny orange roe between the tips of her silver sticks.

‘Caroline is adopted,’ he repeated. He put some food in his mouth, waiting for Jan to respond. Jan took a piece of nori and popped it in her mouth. She chewed slowly and then put down her chopsticks.

‘And that explains what, exactly? Is that going to be it for Caroline?’

‘Of course not,’ said Fred tightly. Why was he even having dinner with this woman? ‘Have you heard of the Stolen Generation? Caroline is Aboriginal. She’s Indigenous. Well, her mother was. Of course, she wasn’t really stolen— not that there isn’t a Stolen Generation. We adopted at the end of that period, in the early 1970s, when they stopped taking children away just because they were of mixed heritage. They used to call them half-castes.’

‘Look at that!’ Jan was pointing towards the dunes. ‘I just saw a fox. At the beach!’

‘That wasn’t a fox, it was a rabbit. There’s no foxes here.’

‘I was sure it was a fox. Isn’t this dish wonderful? I’m just going to pretend that there is no contradiction between our dialogue and our food. Go on. I was a teacher, remember? I know all about Australian history. The real Australian history.’

‘Martha’s doctor told her about the Children’s centre and the adoption service. Martha had been trying to get pregnant for years. There were—miscarriages.’ The word was itself a miscarriage of justice. ‘We went together, and we were allowed to choose a baby. It sounds terrible now, looking back, but that was how it was.’

‘And so you chose Caroline. How old was she?’

‘She was about two and half.’

‘Poor little girl,’ said Jan.

‘She’d been brought into the Public hospital and went into care from there.’

‘That’s quite old to relinquish a child. Did her mother actually give her up?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Fred. He didn’t like those kinds of questions. ‘We had all the signed documents.’
Jan played with her chopsticks. ‘Mothers didn’t have much say then. Especially not if they were young or poor. Or Aboriginal.’

‘She was in a bad way. She hadn’t been cared for well.’ Fred pushed back his chair. ‘I need to use the bathroom. Excuse me.’ He could not sit there one more moment.

Someone was in the first cubicle so he went into the second one and flipped down the lid and sat with his head cradled in his hands. He was very deep now. There was very little light filtering down from above, but he could see it all.

They both looked into the cot at the sleeping child, taking in her skinny body and the damp cloth nappy and rubber pants. Then Martha spoke.

‘What are those marks, Fred?’ She leaned right over the sleeping child, knowing full well what they were, but unable, as always, to leave things alone. The child’s skin was a dull colour, dappled with purple bruises and small, round circles of angry skin.

‘These look like burns. Are these some kind of cigarette burns?’

Martha looked across the cot to the woman who was walking them through the nursery. Fred took hold of Martha’s forearm. She should be moving along to the far corner, where he had seen a tiny, plump baby asleep in a crib. That was where the Lothian family was meant to be, with that other child, the one with the orange hair and pink cheeks.

‘What are you doing?’ Martha snapped, pulling away from him. ‘Matron?’ Martha called out, ‘what happened to her? Did someone hurt this little girl?’

‘This little one has been in the Children’s Hospital before she came to us. A case of chicken pox, I think. I haven’t see her file yet.’ Matron fingered the edges of her white veil. ‘The scars will fade with time.’

Fred flushed the toilet and came out of the cubicle. He turned on the cold tap. Was it any wonder people killed themselves? In the mirror he saw his father’s mouth, his mother’s cheeks, and the high forehead and sharp nose of his
Gran. One day he would go to Lincoln and Aberfeldy. He would
visit their graves and pull the weeds and clean the headstones
with a hard wire brush.

Mimesis. That was the word he had been searching for on
Sunday, which seemed a lifetime ago. The insect disguises itself
as a stick. The chameleon dissolves into the world around it—so
much safer that way. By the end of her second year home,
Caroline had disappeared into the family. She no longer woke up
every night with her eyes wide open, screaming in terror but
unable to be roused. She no longer hated her mother. He had
been ordered to stand by while Martha tried to save her face and
arms from the nails and kicks and bites of their screaming,
sweating daughter. ‘I am her mother,’ Martha told him. ‘I have
to be able to hold her fear.’ She had been consulting her
Californian psychology books. ‘America is way ahead on trauma,’
she had said. ‘Our job is to contain her anger, to hold it and make
it safe for her to grieve.’ But who would contain his anger, he
wondered. Who would make it safe for him? Sometimes he would
snatch up the screaming, red-eyed child and wrap his arms
around her like a vice, with so much fury in his hold and so much
wanting to hurt this child who was ruining their lives. And
Martha screaming at him not to hurt the child, to let her go right
now.

‘I can’t stand by and let her hit you,’ he said when the child
was finally asleep and he and Martha were in bed together,
shaken and exhausted.

‘You have to, Fred. That is our job.’

After a year he rarely noticed that her skin was marked. The
nurse was right: the scars had faded. And then Callum arrived.

The toilet flushed and a man came out and looked in the
mirror.

‘Fred? Fred Lothian?’

Fred did not recognize him.

‘It’s Peter Bessell. I thought I saw you walking in tonight. I
said to Lisa, isn’t that Fred Lothian?’

‘Of course,’ said Fred, ‘how are you, Peter? And how’s Lisa?
And Aaron?’ The names had come back to him, like the Creed at
Mass.
‘Lisa and I are all older, as you can see, but apart from that, excellent, excellent. It’s so good to see you, Fred. Lisa will be thrilled. We’re having dinner with Sanjay and Leila. You remember them? He’s the orthodontist? They had Raji in the year above our boys? Why don’t you join us? Please!’

Fred held his tight smile. Aaron was Callum’s best friend at high school and university. They had sleepovers. Aaron came on holidays with them. The boys played Hockey together. They were together the night of the Final.

Peter rinsed his hands, dried them thoroughly with a paper towel and then reached out and clasped Fred’s forearms. ‘I’m so sorry about Martha, Fred. We would have contacted you, but we were overseas. We didn’t know she’d been sick until we got back. I had a contract with the bank in London, and we were out of the country for nearly three years. I’ve retired now, but we were out of touch.’

Eventually everyone was out of touch. He had been bitter about that for a very long time, but could you blame them? He had been out of touch too. He took a long, deep mouthful of air before he went underwater again.

‘And how is Aaron?’

‘Excellent, excellent. He’s based in Tokyo with my bank—he’s North Asia Manager in fact, so Lisa doesn’t get to see enough of him or the grandchildren, which makes her a bit grumpy. He married a Japanese girl. We’ve got four grandchildren now, but only two in Perth. Jono and his wife have had twins.’

‘Twins! Wonderful.’

‘A lot of work for Lisa, though. Not that she’s complaining.’

When he was moving house he came across a paper bag with two tiny cardigans and two pairs of booties wrapped in tissue. He recognized the wool, but he couldn’t recall Martha knitting them. He had examined the booties in detail. So much work for something that would only fit for a few months. It had struck him that knitting for babies was a kind of ephemeral engineering: there was design, and labour and materiality and technique. It was love-work.

Would Peter ask about Caroline? Perhaps he had forgotten that he still had a daughter who could still give him
grandchildren. Only last month he spotted a notice in the Death columns: John leaves two children, Sarah and Brian, an adopted daughter Fiona, and seven great-grandchildren. How could they?

‘Caroline’s in London at the moment,’ he said more loudly than he meant, ‘on an international Museum project. She’s very well-respected in her field.’

‘That’s absolutely marvelous,’ said Peter. ‘Is she married yet?’

‘Any minute,’ he said.

One of staff came in to check the toilets. They stood in silence until he left.

‘So how is Callum, Fred?’

It was difficult for Peter to ask that question. His voice had two threads straining to make one rope; the first was trying to be even-handed and steady, while the other was already fraying.

‘I’m going to see him in the morning, actually. He’s had an infection.’

Peter nodded. ‘So, no real change then?’

Fred clenched his teeth and shook his head.

‘You know, Fred, Lisa and I were heartbroken about Callum. It has been terrible for Aaron. He still feels guilty about letting Callum drive off that night. He still talks about it. We told him how important it is to let go of guilt. You’d know all about this, I’m sure.’

‘It wasn’t Aaron’s fault, Peter.’ It was my fault. ‘I’m at St. Sylvan’s. It’s a retirement place not far from the old house. Ask Aaron to come and see me when he’s next in town.’

Peter’s mouth wobbled. He tightened his grip on Fred’s arm. Fred wanted to shake him off, like you would a big, hairy spider.

‘That’s very good of you, Fred. None of us knew what to do after the accident. Aaron did try to see you. We knew you’d left the university. Lisa spoke to Martha and she said you’d had a breakdown, and didn’t want any visitors. Martha said you couldn’t manage to see Callum at all. I’m so glad you’re all right now, Fred. Is that a lady I saw at the table with you?’

Don’t wink, thought Fred, or I’ll have to hit you. But instead Peter lunged at Fred and held him in a tight hug. As they parted he reached for his wallet and pulled out his card.
'You must come for dinner, Fred. We've sold up and we've bought a great apartment on the river. Top floor. It's so much easier in a smaller place now that the kids are gone. Lock up and leave! In April we're off to Provence for three months, so make sure it's well before then. We've taken a large house in the mountains. The kids are coming with all their children.'

Fred put the card in his shirt pocket and held out his hand.

‘Peter.’

‘Fred’.

And then Peter was gone.

On the way back to his table he saw Peter leaning in towards his wife and friends. You'll never guess who I just saw! They stole a quick look in his direction. Lisa waved furiously and beamed. Sanjay nodded—a kindly, mournful nod.

A breakdown was for engines, not engineers. Is that what people thought? That he had had a breakdown?

Jan was absorbed in the dunes. ‘You were right, it was a rabbit. I saw it again. You look terribly pale, Fred. Did something happen? Or is it all this talking? You're not used to it, are you? Drink some water. It might be the champagne. There is never enough food at these places.’

Fred held up his hand. Stop, please stop. He felt a light hand on his shoulder. He looked down and saw a carefully manicured hand with long pearly nails.

‘Fred? I had to come over in person. I hope you don't mind.’

Lisa Bessell ran her palm across a perfect helmet of blond hair, and adjusted the fine silk wrap at her neck. Please, thought Fred, not another round of sympathy.

‘Oh Fred, Peter and I are so sorry about Martha, we really are. She was such a wonderful woman. The way she devoted herself to Callum. And Caroline. She never lost hope, did she? Hello,’ she said, thrusting out a hand, ‘I'm an old friend of Fred’s—Lisa Bessell.’

‘Jan Venturi.’

The women touched hands.

‘Peter and I want Fred to come to dinner.’ She turned to Fred. ‘You will bring this lovely lady with the fabulous eyes,
‘What a glamorous woman,’ said Jan after she left. ‘Is her husband a colleague from work?’

‘Their son was Callum’s best friend at high school. They went to university together. I haven’t seen them for years. I ran into him in the bathroom. Martha told them I’d had a breakdown. I don’t even know what a breakdown is.’

Jan shrugged her shoulders. ‘You must have been devastated when it happened.’

He said nothing because he had nothing to say. When it happened there was nothing. Nothing.

‘You couldn’t accept what had happened to Callum.’

‘No, I couldn’t. Is that a breakdown?’

‘Perhaps, back then, when it happened, yes. But it’s definitely something else now.’

‘What? What is it now? Go on, Jan.’ Here she goes again, telling him what’s what.

‘Not accepting what’s happened. Continuing to deny it. It’s selfish, Fred. It’s unethical.’

‘I doubt that’s the right word, Jan.’

‘You doubt it, do you? Doctors have to have ethics, and so do teachers and priests, so why not parents? I have no idea about engineers. What you are doing is not right for Caroline, let alone Callum.’

Fred waved at the waiter. He needed more alcohol.

‘Slow down, Fred. Why don’t you have a sparkling water?’

‘We’ll have a Perrier water and another glass of that New Zealand white,’ he told the waiter.

‘Perhaps I should tell you a story now, Fred. And look, just in time, more food.’

Paper-thin ribbons of seared fillet beef rose up from the dish in ever-diminishing circles, like a pink hooped skirt abandoned in the centre of a huge white room. At the edge of the dish was a pair of fierce, round black-spiked sea urchins.

‘Ruban de boeuf à la Pernod, with Wasabi gelati in a liquorice case’. The waiter turned his open palm towards the
small black sputnik. ‘Snap frozen on the outside, warm on the inside.’ He took out a silver spoon and gave each spiked ball a sharp crack. The ball broke apart and released a gooey green froth onto their plates.

Jan took up her chopsticks and shook out a long length of pink fillet, dangled it in the green gelati, and then lowered into her mouth. She groaned. ‘How utterly decadent. So are you listening, Fred?’

Fred nodded.

‘My mother was South African. Her father was Scottish and her mother was what they called a Cape Coloured, a local girl. They both died when my mother was fifteen, in a plane crash. Her father was an administrative officer. He’d taken his wife with him over the Drakensberg Mountains from Johannesburg to Mozambique, in a Junkers Ju. That’s a small plane. Sam researched it all for me. They’d left my mother at boarding school. This was in the late 30s, before the National Party brought in Apartheid, before the ANC and well before Mandela. But my mother still had to endure segregation. She came to Australia with the money left to her by her parents. She had enrolled to train as a nurse. She always wanted to be a midwife and work in South Africa. She met the man who became my father in the hospital. He was a well-known doctor, a heart specialist—I always thought that was so ironic—broken heart specialist, more like it. He was older and very married. My mother was only eighteen—just a baby. She was very beautiful and she thought they were in love. He took her to the Adelphi Hotel, in St. George’s Terrace. It’s long gone now. Do you remember it, Fred, or was it before your time? I know it was the Adelphi because she stole a plate from the restaurant at the hotel. I still have that plate—remind me to show it to you.’

She shook out another ribbon of beef. He liked the way Jan ate. She reveled in her food. Martha was a great cook, but pushed and picked her way around a plate and would end up covering it with plastic and putting it in the fridge. ‘Cooking and eating don’t go together,’ she always said. He pushed Martha aside.

‘Go on, Jan.’
'When she found out she was pregnant he arranged for her to go into a place up in North Fremantle. I used to drive up there to look at it. It was called Hillcrest. It’s all different now that they’ve knocked down the old buildings—I think it’s aged care, but up until the 1970s it was a place for unmarried girls. They arranged adoptions from there too. In the end I went to a couple that did their best, but they had no other children and it was hard. I was such a lonely kid. Back then everyone had to pretend that I wasn’t adopted and didn’t look different to my parents, although I did. There was so much people wouldn’t talk about — or couldn’t. My mother and father were such a pink and white couple it must have been a hard ask for them too, having a little olive-skinned girl with crazy hair. They had a little business in Fremantle selling adding machines and business stationary, but they didn’t have much formal education themselves, and I was a quick, smart girl who loved reading and writing. I gave them hell.’

‘I’m sure they understood,’ he said.

‘No, I don’t think they did, Fred. Nobody did, back then. Adoption was shameful. It was big secret. They were kind people, just very drawn inwards. I think I completely confounded them. I was loud and talkative and I loved to laugh. But I hated my skin and my curly hair. I liked my green eyes though.’

‘Your eyes are very striking,’ he said. So Jan was adopted. What were the chances of such a thing?

Jan took another mouthful. ‘Incredible,’ she muttered.

Fred nibbled at his food. He wanted to hear more.

‘Did you get on with them in the end?’
‘Oh, long before the end. We had to; they were all I had and I was all they had. They’ve been dead a very long time now. I became a Primary teacher, which I loved. I met my husband at a dance and almost straight away he asked me to marry him. We decided never to have children, but just to have fun. And we had so much fun. My parents loved Sam, and Sam loved them, even though they always wanted a grandchild. Sam was an Aussie, but his family was Italian way back, so he knew how to talk and how to cook. I was close to forty when my son was born, and we were thrilled, but shocked, as you are. But there you are, you got me talking again.’

‘So you located your birth mother?’

Jan laughed. ‘All these words you’ve got now, to keep things clear. I didn’t have those words when I was young. My birth mother didn’t have a good life. She never went back to finish her studies after the baby. It just gutted her. I finally tracked her down in Queensland. Sam helped me again. He was really good with research. My poor mother had been through some bad times with the wrong kind of men. She drank.’

Fred nodded.

‘She was stuck in a groove, or a ditch more like it, and she kept getting out and falling right back in.’

Fred didn’t answer. He took a mouthful of green mousse and quickly reached for the water.

Jan laughed. ‘They’ve used fresh wasabi, not the powder. We kept in touch. I sent her money. She always wrote me little thank you notes. I know it was very painful for her to give me up like that, but she really had no choice. All those years she had no idea if I was dead or alive. The first time we met she was so upset I had to leave and come back the next day.’

‘Did you find your father? Did you ever contact him?’

‘I knew his name, she told me that much. He was retired by then, but he was easy to find. He had an old colonial house up on the river overlooking the Yacht Club. I went there in my car and waited. Eventually he drove up in a big grey Mercedes-Benz. One weekend I parked around the corner and stood outside his house, right near the driveway. When he drove in I stared straight at him. I saw him do a double take. I could see his wife looking over at me, wondering why I was there. I like to imagine she knew as
soon as she saw me. He knew, of course. I look just like my mother. He had children too, so I suppose I could have confronted him and forced a connection. But I had no truck with him. I just wanted to make him acknowledge me. He ruined my mother’s life, and I wanted to put a stone in his shoe for the rest of his life. In a different kind of story I might have got a gun and shot him, or demanded money or something, but no, I never actually met him. I sent him a note though, with some pictures of me as a baby and a toddler just to make sure he couldn’t do that thing that men do.’

‘Which is what?’

‘Pretend something didn’t happen when it did.’

‘Right,’ said Fred. ‘I suppose you mean me.’

Jan picked at the fillet and shook out another long thread, like a bird determined to get the worm.

‘It’s a sad story,’ he said.

‘All adoption stories are sad. How can they not be? My parents were good to me. They were just too quiet. Quiet people are hard work.’

‘What happened to your mother? Your birth mother?’

‘I find that a bit hard to talk about. Give me a moment.’

The waiter came for their plates.

‘Thank you,’ said Jan, ‘that was wonderful.’

Jan rolled her wine around her glass.

‘I don’t know how it was for your daughter, but the hardest thing about not knowing your biological mother or father is you feel so alone. It’s like being the first of a brand new species—or the last, one of those sad, old beasts in some horrible zoo with a plaque saying, ‘The Last of the Something or Others’. Jeanette—that was my mother’s name – she had cancer, but she didn’t tell me. I was overseas with Sam for two months. It was very quick, only six weeks from when she was diagnosed. I was contacted when they went through her things and found my name. They wanted someone to collect her body and pay for the funeral. She had no one of her own. It was so terrible, Fred.’

‘Pardon, Jan, what did you just say?’

‘I said there no one with her when she died. Are you even listening?’
‘No, not that; what did you just say, about being the last one?’

‘Being adopted, you’re the last of your kind—you know, the Thylacine, and the Dodo.’

‘It’s something my daughter is working on. What you just said about animals made me think of it.’ Could that be it? Was this exhibition all about adoption?

Jan tossed her napkin on the table and laughed. It was another of those laughs that meant the opposite of funny.

‘You’re incredible, Fred. I don’t think I’ve ever met a man like you. I just shared something with you that was very painful for me. My mother died and I wasn’t there. She was completely alone. I even stopped talking because I didn’t want to cry in front of you. Do you remember a little pause in the conversation? Or were you too busy working out how my story could help you work out your story?

Silence had always been Fred’s best line of defense. When he and Martha disagreed he would argue right up to the point where she worked herself into a frenzy, and then he would stop talking and wait. Eventually she would calm down and apologize and he would forgive her. But it wasn’t working now. Jan called the waiter and ordered steamed rice. She looked out into the dunes. When the rice came, she turned to her meal with purpose. He was going to have to try something different this time.

‘Caroline is working on an exhibition about extinct animals. I never understood why it was so important to her. What you said made me see a connection. I’m sorry I was so caught up when you were speaking about Jennifer.’

‘Jeannette. My mother’s name was Jeannette.’

‘What a co-incidence— your names, I mean.’

‘It’s not a co-incidence at all, Fred. My parents knew my mother’s name. They gave me her name—almost. I loved them for that.’ Jan sighed loudly. ‘Do you want rice? And I stand by what I said about you. This dinner is doing my head in, as my son used to say. How does Caroline feel about her birth mother? Has she had contact?’

‘Actually, for years she never wanted to contact her or find out anything about her birth mother. Unfortunately she died when Caroline was in her last year of school. The woman had a
difficult life. We always encouraged her to contact her mother, but she always said she was quite content with us.’

None of this was true. He would explain it all to Jan later, when she was feeling better.

‘Really, Fred? I find that hard to believe, given all the things in the paper about forced removals and broken families. I know how it feels: if you don’t know your mother you have no one to measure yourself against. When I met my mother I looked at her and saw myself. I grew up hating my hair and my skin and my big mouth. Those things made me stand out from the people who raised me. But if you grow up loving your birth mother you grow up loving yourself. It’s not rocket science, is it? Could you pass the rice? You spend all those baby-years staring into her face, it must make it so much easier to love yourself—most of the work has been done for you. Do you see what I mean?’

‘Yes,’ said Fred. He saw exactly what she meant.

He passed the rice to Jan. ‘I suppose that Caroline has had a difficult time liking herself,’ he said slowly. ‘Not only is she adopted, but she’s Indigenous. Many people don’t see that she is Aboriginal: they think she is some exotic mix, or they don’t want to see it because of her light skin, and they think she doesn’t have the right to call herself Indigenous. She held herself apart because of it. Will you excuse me, Jan, I’m just going to remind Arial to watch out for the RAC van.’

Fred walked quickly in the direction of the polished cement bench. He would never have admitted anything like this to Martha. He had refused to go along with her when she started on about Caroline’s background and about her birth mother, about having contact and finding identity, and now here he was claiming his wife’s position as his own.

He was a monster.

Arial was not at the concrete bench. He would wait.

‘Let’s just wait until she’s got through high school, Martha. She’s not ready to absorb any more than what she already knows.’

‘But she’s nearly thirteen, Fred. She’s a teenager. She has to know more about her mother sometime. She’s a clever girl, and she has such strong emotions, Fred. She knows she’s Aboriginal.'
She knows she’s from out east. She’s always known that. But she keeps asking me these roundabout questions, skirting about the subject as if it’s off-limits. It’s like she thinks we don’t want her to talk about it, and that she’ll upset us if she does. I can’t keep not talking about her mother. Soon she’ll be wanting to contact her.’

‘And what makes you think that? You’re making that up now—projecting I think they call it in your Californian books. Why would she want to contact her? She’s perfectly happy with us. And we’ve never hidden anything from her. She’s always known she is adopted. And yes, her mother is Aboriginal, but how else is Caroline different from us? Is it her skin colour? For god’s sakes Martha, you and I both believe that the colour of your skin should make no difference to anything. What good comes from dividing people up on the basis of colour? Isn’t that what racism is? Look at South Africa, and look where the business of race got your blessed homeland? We treat her just like any child, no better, no worse.’

‘This is about more than colour, Frederick. We’ve gone over and over this and you just refuse to listen. I’m the one who bothers to educate myself so I can help Caroline. Colour, as you call it, means something, Fred. It’s history. It’s what she means in the eyes of other people—other Australians. White Australians. Black Australians.’

Martha was angry. She was spitting out her words.

Fred got up off the couch. ‘You’re getting yourself worked up again, sweetheart. Can’t we have just one discussion without you getting upset? And what you’re talking about is not history, it’s genetics. Frankly, I can’t believe you of all people would say that the fate of a little girl should be determined by her genes. You’re always going on about nature and nurture, and gender roles. What is it you always say—Women are made, not born?’

‘I’m not talking about genes, Frederick, or gender. I’m talking about culture. Black America has its own history and culture and so does Aboriginal Australia.’

‘And Caroline’s mother? What culture does she have, wherever she is, living in some godforsaken country town with no real identity of her own, pissing her life away, then going home to a boyfriend to do god-knows-what to her infant daughter? What
kind of culture is that?’

The veins were standing out around Martha’s neck. ‘We
don’t know that, Fred. We don’t know anything for certain about
who did what. Never repeat that, do you hear me?’

‘You want to tell your daughter the truth? Which bit of the
truth, Martha? We’ve told her the truth. She is adopted. Her
mother was Aboriginal. Her birth mother couldn’t look after her.’

‘What about the sin of omission, Frederick? What about the
sin of silence? All those times we change the subject, distract her
from asking where her mother is, why exactly she might have
given her up, where she lived, if she has any relatives?’

‘But what about her physical state when she was removed,
Martha? What about those things in her file that you never
mention, the things you pretend don’t exist? If a grown woman
can’t face the truth, how can a girl of Caroline’s age? Suppose we
tell her that her mother was a poor young, innocent girl who got
herself in far over her head and committed no wrong other than
trusting the handsome Lothario she met at the local dance?
Suppose we tell her how brave her mother was, giving up her own
baby so she could have a better life? Do we tell her a bit of the
truth, Martha, or all of the truth? Which part should we start
with? The bits we can see? The scars? The burns?’

Martha looked down. When she lifted her head it was not
love or acceptance that he saw, but blunt contempt.

‘All right, Fred, you win again. They’re like fucking stones,
your words. You throw them down in front of me, one on top the
other, and soon I can’t see you and I can’t touch you. But then
you always liked the idea of building things, Frederick, I’ll grant
you that.’

When he came back to the table two clean plates had arrived
and the waiter was arranging a slab of cast iron between them.

‘Careful Sir,’ he said, ‘this is very hot.’ He returned with a
tray. He placed a dozen scallops on the sizzling plate, waited for a
few seconds, and then flipped them over.

‘Scallops in a ginger and cherry jus. Just give them a minute
or so. The sommelier will be here with your wine.’

‘Oh, no more wine for me,’ said Jan.
‘Yes please,’ said Fred.

‘Aren’t the colours amazing?’ Jan bent over at the cherry-pink scallops. ‘Does this all feel a little strange to you, Fred? A little bourgeois, as they say, talking about such sad things in a luxurious, decadent setting? It’s like one of those French movies, where beautiful rich people run around the Champs-Élysées shaving elaborate traumas.

‘It’s the blue lights I’m finding most off-putting. I feel as if I should be in a snorkel and mask. But it’s not like a regular occurrence, is it?’

‘What? The food or the conversation—or the lighting?’

‘All of it.’

‘I’m not sure I can eat much more after this. Are we up to desert yet?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Fred. ‘I don’t know what we’re up to.’

‘Callum. We’re up to Callum. When did you adopt Callum?’

‘Oh, Callum’s not adopted. He’s our—.’ He’s almost said it, the real word. It had been drummed out of him by Martha and finally defeated by his own recognition of the injury. Caroline was as real as any child could be. But still he had slipped. ‘He’s our biological son. It was very unexpected.’

‘How did Caroline feel about that? She was older?’

‘Five years older. She was so excited when he came along. She adored her little brother. Does that look like some kind of candied Blackpool rock at the other table? What about these scallops? Do you think that’s a minute?

‘I think so. No more talking for a while—let’s eat.’

There was no question that Caroline was their first child, and that she was loved, no question at all. When Martha found out she was nearly four months pregnant (and barely a bump to show for it) she had cried for hours. Their Doctor assumed they were tears of happiness—after all those years of trying miracles do happen—but Fred knew better.

‘What will this do to Caroline?’ she said to him in the car on the way home from the doctor. ‘She’s made such progress. This will be a terrible setback. It will make her feel second best, I know it will. The introduction of a sibling is hard enough, let alone this.
He did his best to reassure her, but that night she woke him from his sleep.

‘Fred, I want a termination.’

He was horrified. ‘What do you mean?’ he said. ‘What are you thinking, Martha? A child is a gift. After all you’ve been through. This is our child.’

‘And Caroline isn’t?’ said Martha.

‘You’re overwrought, Martha,’ he said. ‘Come here.’ He knew better than to mention hormones or morning sickness. His wife was not a woman to excuse herself on the basis of her womanhood. He held her in his arms until she slept, and in the morning he let it rest. Time, that was his wife needed.

When Martha gave birth to a healthy seven pound eight ounce boy it was he who brought Caroline to the hospital. They came into the room to find the infant sucking fretfully at his mother’s breast, while Martha grimaced and squirmed with pain.

‘It’s a conspiracy of silence,’ she said. ‘First the horror of child birth, now this. No one tells you how much this hurts. Look at the little gobblegutz.’ She called out to Caroline, who was still standing near the door. ‘Cary, come and give me a hug, sweetheart. Come and meet your baby brother. I’ve missed you so much.’

He took five-year old Caroline’s hand and led her to the bed. Martha unhinged the child from her breast (‘Ow!’) and carefully peeled back the white wrap to reveal his pink, squashed face and his pale mottled flesh.

‘Isn’t he beautiful?’

Caroline looked doubtful. She reached out to touch the small foot protruding from under the wrap. Her face crumpled.

‘Sweetheart?’ said Martha, ‘what’s wrong? Here Frederick, you take him.’

He fumbled to hold his tiny son, and then stood to attention like a tin soldier. Caroline had been more than two years old when she came to them. He had no experience with the helpless dependence of a newborn.

‘Come here, honey, come to Mummy.’

Martha pulled Caroline up onto the bed and wrapped her arms around her. He could see his wife struggling to keep herself in check. She was pale and exhausted from the long labor. He
was still recovering from his role as witness—no wonder his 
father’s generation avoided the whole shocking business. Were 
women meant to feel that much pain? It seemed very wrong, and 
a terrible injustice.

‘You’ve missed Mummy, haven’t you? I’m coming home in a 
day or two and then everything will be back to normal. Mummy 
will be home soon.’

Caroline looked up through her tears. ‘Is he coming home 
too?’ she wailed. Martha looked up at Fred and smiled wryly. 
‘Of course he’s coming home, darling,’ she said, gently 
patting Caroline on the back. ‘He’s your brother.’

He winked at his wife. What else would you expect when a 
pretender to the throne appears on the scene? Their friends had 
warned them to be prepared for this. It was all quite normal. But 
then Caroline pushed herself away from her mother and off the 
bed. She backed herself up against the washbasin with her fists 
clenged.

‘He can’t be my brother,’ she said fiercely. ‘He doesn’t even 
look like me.’

He saw her then as if for the first time; a small girl with 
honey-coloured skin and a high forehead and a wide mouth who 
had been flushed out of hiding by the birth of her brother. She 
was alone and naked, without cover or camouflage.

Then there was the look on Martha’s face.

The scallops were perfect, but he had dropped something on 
his shirt and managed to knock over Jan’s water when he reached 
for her glass of wine. He dipped the corner of his napkin into his 
glass and dapped at the spot.

‘You should try water for that Fred, not wine. We were 
talking about Callum,’ said Jan. ‘How was Caroline when Callum 
arrived?’

‘There were no real issues there. Caroline might have been a 
little jealous at times, but nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing 
that all siblings wouldn’t go through. Am I still spotty?’

‘You’ll have to soak it when you get home.’

‘Mr. Lothian?’
Ariel leant over the table, like a cloud. Shoals of silky white breast rose up above the scalloped bodice. Fred thought he might faint. He imagined sinking down into the rift between those soft mounds and floating away.

‘There is an RAC man outside. Would you like me to tell the kitchen to hold your desert until you’ve sorted out your vehicle?’

‘I’ll come now,’ he said. ‘Jan, you have desert. I can’t eat anything else. And if you don’t mind, I’m going to have to call a taxi. I’m well over where I should be.’

‘I’ll drive,’ Jan announced, putting her napkin on the table. ‘It’s about time I got behind the wheel. And I’ll pass on desert too. Could you let the staff know it was a wonderful meal, Ariel? And Fred, thank you for dinner.’

‘No. Thank you, Jan, thank you so very much for everything. Everything.’

Jan rolled her eyes. ‘I’ll meet you outside, after I visit the Ladies.’

Fred floated through the restaurant, past the oyster who was peering through his Corbusier’s at the label on a bottle of sake, past the sporty seahorses flicking their jaunty tails and jogging up and down their tanks, past Peter, Sanjay and Leila, who tipped their heads towards him, past Lisa Bessell who was coming back from the bathroom and waved madly and bared her teeth, past the purple coral, past the leather armchair that looked like a clam, right up to the shell beach where the mermaid lived. He was having trouble putting one foot in front of the other. Too much alcohol, or an aneurysm?

Ariel slid his credit card through the machine. He punched in some numbers.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, Sir.’ She turned the machine towards him. Declined. ‘Shall we try again?’

‘Please.’ He paused over the pad. The automatic flow of numbers from brain to finger had been stymied. There was a blockage in the pipe.

‘92843627’, he said. But no, that was his old telephone number. And far too many digits.

2407, but that was his wife’s birthday.

0305. Callum’s birth.
1701. Caroline’s birthday.
1901. The year of his father’s birth.
1954. The year his mother died.
2901. The day and month of Martha’s death.

‘It’s 2006, he said loudly.
‘I’d keep that to yourself, Mr. Lothian,’ smiled Ariel, running
the card through the slot.
2006. The year he met Jan. He punched with flourish and
confidence. The machine beeped.
Ariel peered at the electronic screen. ‘Oh I’m so sorry, Mr.
Lothian. Do you have another card?’
‘Do you take Amex?’
‘Of course.’

From the top of the stairs he could see the pulsing yellow
light of the service van, tracking round and round, like a Ferris
wheel. I think I’m going to be sick, he thought suddenly. He
turned and vomited into a giant concrete Triton shell. As he stood
up Frederick tripped and struck the side of his temple on the
corner of the lowest concrete step, in full view of Lisa Bessell, who
against her husband’s advice had gone after Fred armed with her
mobile phone, just to make sure she had his number so that he
and that lovely lady with the fabulous eyes could come to dinner.
Arial insisted they call the ambulance. ‘Just to make sure,
Mr. Lothian,’ she said with her hand on her pale bosom.
‘Of course, Ariel,’ he said. Anything for Ariel. ‘I’m sorry
about the clam,’ he said. ‘I’m so sorry for everything.’

By the time the ambulance arrived, Fred’s car battery had
been restored and he was fully conscious. I just want to go home,
he muttered, I’ve drunk too much, I’ve hit my head, I am a
monster. He lay on his back with his head on Peter Bessells’s
jacket and watched the seagulls circling the lamps.

Jan followed directly behind the ambulance. It had been
nearly ten years since she had driven, but even with Lisa Bessell
sitting next to her it was not difficult. Thank goodness she kept
her license up to date. The ambulance was advancing in a stately fashion—no sirens, no running of red lights. It was so annoying that Fred’s old friends felt they had to come. Lisa tugged distractedly at that aquamarine wrap about her bony shoulders. Now she was checking the little mirror on the back of the sunshade to see what was going on in her husband’s car. Leila was at the helm of Peter’s Porsche, which Jan was sure was a less than an ideal outcome for all concerned. Both Peter and Sanjay had had far too much to drink, said Lisa—they never should have opened that fourth bottle—and since Lisa had never learnt to drive they would put Sanjay in a taxi home and let Leila drive the Carrera to the hospital, even if she had never in her life driven a manual, let alone a six speed Porsche, ‘Or would you prefer to leave your prize possession in the car park at the beach for the night, Peter?’ That seemed to settle it.

‘So Jan, how long have you and Fred known each other?’ asked Lisa.

They were stopped at the lights next to Peter’s car. The engine was roaring and they could see Peter talking in an animated fashion to his driver.

‘Just over twenty-four hours,’ said Jan.

‘Goodness,’ said Lisa, ‘and you’re already going to hospital with him. It must be serious. Look at Peter would you, telling that poor woman what to do. My husband can be such an asshole.’

The lights turned green. Jan glanced at Lisa. ‘Tell me Lisa, what was Martha like? Did you know her well? I hope you don’t mind me asking?’

‘No, of course not. Martha and I saw each other at drop-off and pick up, and when the boys got together. We talked about all the normal things – school, sport, adolescence, you know, but I always found her a bit reserved. She was very clever, like Callum. I mean Fred is clever, obviously, what with being a Professor in Engineering and all that, but Martha had more of an interest in things. She was always reading or studying or volunteering. She had strong views, if you know what I mean. Oh poor Leila, she keeps putting the indicators on by mistake. Peter will be having kittens. I think Martha probably thought we were all superficial.’ She laughed. ‘Has Fred mentioned Ralph
Orr, the architect? His wife Veronica — ex-wife now — was Martha’s best friend for years. She’s the one you want to talk to. She’s been in South Africa, but I just heard she’s about to come back for good. They had a problem with their oldest daughter—well, actually it was drugs. I guess there’s no harm telling you now. It was so long ago. We knew the family of the boy involved. His father was in property. The boy’s all grown up now. He’s on the Terrace with one of the bigger brokers, but the girl just couldn’t straighten out. I think it’s quicker if you take a left here, Jan, rather than following the ambulance.’

Jan eased into the left lane. What a pity. Earlier in the evening Jan had thought she might like Lisa.

‘Sneak in here, to the right and then go straight ahead,’ said Lisa. ‘We have to get to the overnight parking area. She died. The daughter. They were very liberal with their children — Ralph, I mean, not Martha and Fred. I think Ralph was a bit of a ladies’ man. I’ve always wondered if their home life was unstable. Kids just don’t start on drugs for nothing. It was a very artistic home. We had dinner there once or twice. Veronica—Ralph’s wife—had a degree herself in Art or Drawing or something. Three girls, they had—two now, of course. I do remember Veronica saying, Martha is an intellectual without an intellectual sphere—or something like that. Whatever that means.’

‘Sometimes children choose their own paths,’ said Jan quietly. ‘Sometimes nothing you do can stop them. Was Martha very beautiful?’

‘Oh would you look at that—Leila’s gone and stalled it. Martha was gorgeous. We were all quite jealous of her. She was very lean and vivacious, and she had this wonderful thick, dark hair and a way of dressing without looking like she was trying. She was naturally stylish, but I don’t think she spent any money on clothes. She didn’t approve of it. She was like that. A real women’s libber. She wore jeans — Levi’s—which back then was really quite unusual, and old men’s shirts with the sleeve’s rolled up. She used to get Veronica to print patterns on them and then she would embroider them with native flowers. One had grevillias on it, I think. Her garden was full of them. Such a messy plant, I find. And she always had silver bangles stacked up her arms, like that singer. You know, Joan someone?’
‘Joan Baez,’ said Jan.

‘Martha loved all folk music. I think she identified with it. She had that lovely olive skin, and bones to die for. She bought good shoes though, I do remember that. I think they were her weakness. We all thought she looked like that actress in that film with Dustin Hoffman—I can’t recall her name. Red light ahead, Jan. Why is the ambulance on this road? The emergency entrance is at the front. Oh look, is that Fred sitting up and waving?’

Fred’s face was pressed against the small glass window at the back of the ambulance. His hair was on end and he was smiling and waving furiously. He disappeared as quickly as he appeared. What was he doing? Wasn’t he supposed to be lying down with a strap over him? ‘He’s drunk,’ said Jan. ‘It was Ann Bancroft in *The Graduate*. You were saying? Martha?’

‘She was devoted to her children, but she went through a difficult time with Caroline. Has Fred told you about Caroline?’

‘You mean, the adoption?’ Here we go again, thought Jan. ‘Yes, and the rest.’

Jan turned into the car park and pulled into an empty bay. ‘What do you mean, the rest?’

‘Well, she’s Aboriginal.’

Dear me. To think she had thought this might just work: Fred and Jan and Peter and Lisa and Sanjay and Leila, and the Porsche Carrera.

An enormous roar to the left. The Porsche careened past them into the car park, accelerated into the speed hump and was briefly airborne. Jan caught a glimpse of Peter’s open mouth. There was a bang, then a terrible screech, followed by silence.

‘I think I might leave you with that, Lisa. I’m going into emergency.’ Jan opened her door. ‘If you close the driver side it will lock by itself. It’s got some kind of timer. I think you all should take a cab straight home. Thanks so much for seeing me here safely.’

‘Are you sure, Jan? If you need us please call. Fred has our number. I’d better see how Leila is holding up—and the car.’

Leila was still in the driver’s seat, with her head resting on the wheel, but Peter was flat on the ground with his head under the front of the Porsche.
‘I’ll be in touch,’ called Leila.
Jan waived, and went in search of Fred.
Book 5

Hyperbolic Paraboloid
‘Boom! You’re dead.’

Morrison was sitting on the blue nylon carpet in the Medicare office, playing with his Hot Wheels cars. He slammed the green one into the yellow one.

‘Boom,’ he said again, ‘you’re dead too.’

‘Quiet, Morrie,’ said Jan. She had a terrible headache, and that barking didn’t help. Someone had tied a black and grey kelpie to the bollard outside and it wasn’t going to stop its racket until the owner came out.

‘Why is that dog wearing a hanky round its neck, Nanna?’ Morrison asked when they came in. ‘Has it got a cold?’ He wanted to pat it, but Jan held him back. It looked friendly enough, but you couldn’t tell with dogs. Now that she was responsible for a child again all the worries were back: pools, cars, bikes, dogs, strangers, viruses.

She looked along the seats. The kelpie with the jaunty red scarf probably belonged to that barefoot girl with dreadlocks and pierced eyebrows. Why did young people wanted to put holes in themselves? Stop it, Jan, she said to herself. She had never been a judgmental person: she had taught all kinds of children from all walks of life and had lived in countries rich and poor, but lately she found herself thinking badly of others, particularly young people. Was that what happened when you got old? Your opinions froze up, along with your joints? But that dog would drive anyone mad.

All morning she had been in and out of offices, first the plush carpeted office at St. Sylvan’s, where she signed the forms to release her Villa back onto the market, then the local Real Estate Agent, and now the ticketed queue at Medicare to get the boy on her card. She looked at the electronic board. Only three before her turn. The Real Estate agent had confirmed what she already knew: if she wanted to buy a two-bedroom place she was going to have to move much further out. *I’m sorry, Mrs Venturi, but with this budget you’d be lucky to get a one-bedroom flat anywhere in the area.* She nodded dumbly at the woman with the long red nails and the helmet of dyed black hair. What had she been thinking? She was going to have to start looking at Primary Schools in other suburbs, and getting a feel for neighborhoods.
How do you do that? Stand in their playgrounds and see if they hit their kids, or walk around the local Coles and see what’s in their trolleys? And she would have to buy a car.

Morrie jumped up and dropped the yellow car on top of the green one.
‘You’re so dead now. Daddy killed you dead.’
The man sitting next to her laughed, but Jan didn’t find it funny.
‘What are you playing there, Morrie? Why don’t you come up and sit with Nan? I’ve got a banana in here somewhere.’ Jan looked in her bag. No banana, but a packet of Tiny Teddies.
The boy crawled onto her lap. His games set her on edge. They were so intense, and he did the same thing over and over again, as if he was stuck. Morrie grabbed the packet off her and shoved it down the side of the seat, then put his leg over the crack. He lay still for a moment and then began to scratch his legs. He’s been doing that all morning, and now his skin was horribly red and inflamed. She’d have to get him to the doctor to see if he was allergic to something.
‘Leave that alone, Morrie, or you’ll get scars.’
‘I already got some,’ said Morrison.
He pulled up his long-sleeved t-shirt and lifted his arm. On the soft, white underside she saw red lines. Her stomach turned. She thought of her Grade 1’s bent over their desks, ruling up their pads with straight red lines before they began their letters.
‘How did you get those, Morrison?’ She ran her finger over the raised scar.
The boy pulled his arm away and stared up at her with big, round eyes. He put his thumb in his mouth and began to suck.
‘Number 254 to Counter 4.’

Morrie was fast asleep in the booster seat when they got back to the house. It was another very hot day, so she couldn’t leave him for even a few minutes without the air conditioner. She touched his arm to wake him, and then lifted him into her arms. He was dead weight. She thought about those red lines. His mother? Her son? Some druggie stranger. The boy woke up and she put him down. The garden could do with a good weed—it wouldn’t take much. There I go again, she thought. The woman
looking after her boy managed to fit five children and an over-
sized husband into a modest two-bedroom war-service bungalow,
and all she could do was criticize the garden.

‘We've got bunks,’ Margie explained on Jan’s first visit. ‘My
two oldest are in the double bunk on one side, the other three are
in the triple bunk on the other, and any extras get the fold-out in
the corner. That’ll be you, Morrie. Do you like camping?’

She shepherded the boy towards the front door. Thankfully
the other children were at school. When she’d picked up
Morrison the doorway was jammed with bags and sports gear.
Kids were yelling and banging doors. How could anyone cope
with such a hoard?

Margie was waiting inside with the boy's lunch.

‘Here’s your sandwich, Morrie,’ she said, sitting him down at
the kitchen table, ‘and don’t you get off that seat until all the
green, orange and red bits are eaten—and don’t go putting them
in the bin. I'll be checking in there.’

Margie ran a tight ship. ‘He’s tired,’ Jan said, watching
Margie fill the kettle.

‘I’ll put him in front of the TV when he finishes. Milk and
sugar? What about Nemo, Morrie?’

‘I’ve seen it,’ he said. ‘It’s too scary.’ He was lifting up the
edges of his sandwich, picking out the grated carrot.

‘Then it’ll have to be cartoon network,’ said Margie. ‘Come
and sit in the lounge, Jan. I’ll bring the tea. You look like you
need a rest.’

She was exhausted, but she didn’t want to admit it. There
were so many practical things to do before Morrison came to her,
but right now it was the other business that was worrying her
most. She waited until the door between the kitchen and the
lounge was closed.

‘Margie, do you find Morrison very agitated? Or withdrawn?
He’s either jumping around like a jack-in-a-box, itching and
scratching those poor arms and legs, or else he’s a million miles
away. I’m never seen a child get so completely lost in play.’

‘We see it all the time,’ said Margie. ‘They’ve either had no
one to give them any attention, or else what was going on around
them was too hard for them to take in, so they escaped into their
fantasy worlds. These kids get hyper if they get too much stimulation. They’re not used to settling themselves down. My three were all like that, but the oldest was by far the worst. We still see a psychologist. I guess you haven’t got that far yet.’

Jan took a sip of her tea. In fact, she had seen quite a few kids like Morrison in her years of teaching, she just didn’t want to recognize the similarities. They turned up in her class and sat at the back. They spent long periods outside the door on the veranda in time out, or in the Principal’s office. There would be meetings with the family if they could be found, and the school psychologist if the school had such a person. Sometimes there would be a diagnosis, but mostly these children were barely tolerated. They were to be endured, until one day they were no longer in school.

All this time she had been home with her budgerigars, pretending she was finally having her own life, while Morrison was being damaged. She would never forgive herself. She took a deep breath.

‘Have you seen those marks on his arm?’

Margie nodded. ‘I was going to talk to you about that. You need to make sure that’s on his file or else they might think you’ve done it—or me. Don’t look like that—it happens. I’ve seen it all. My oldest boy got a look at that arm at the pool the other day. He told us about it. Someone’s done that, Jan. He’s too young to do it to himself. If it’s any consolation, I’ve seen a whole lot worse than that. I’ve had dozens of kids through here on emergency care. Morrison has been through a tough time but he’s a good kid. Somewhere down the line someone’s tried. He laughs, he cries, he gets angry. He lets it out. You’ll get him talking eventually and he’ll open up, mark my words. He just needs a routine and lots of love, and now he’s going to get it.’

The walls of Margie’s lounge were covered with photographs of children—babies on blankets, teenagers holding trophies, toddlers in plastic cars, and even a set of twins in matching striped t-shirts.

‘That’s some of our kids. Most of them were just for a few months, a year at the most. Not all of them keep in touch, but we have quite a few call up and come over on Christmas and birthdays. Mike and I always wanted a big family, but I had to
have everything out after number two. I was gutted—I mean, really gutted. Sorry, I’ve got an evil sense of humour.’

‘I find it helps,’ said Jan. ‘Did you ever think about adopting, Margie?’

She laughed. ‘You know what they say—rich people adopt, poor people foster. It didn’t used to be like that. Our three extras came as a sibling group because the Department didn’t want to split them up so young. Not many people were prepared for three at once, but it was perfect for us. They ranged from four down to eight months, and now the youngest has just started high school. They call us Mum and Dad. And we are Mum and Dad. More tea?’

Jan shook her head.

‘We’d love to adopt them legally, but their Mum is still in the picture. She’s hung in there, and good on her. She doesn’t want to give them up. She loves them, and they love her, and she is their Mum too. She tries hard but she’s got really bad depression issues and health problems. Basically, she was born poor and she’s always been poor, and that’s really where her problems come from. She was really young when she had her kids and didn’t have any support. She comes over once a month or so, sometimes more often when she’s feeling good, and takes the three of them out. Or we have her for a BBQ and we all sit up and watch *The Biggest Loser*. My kids keep telling me I should go on it.’ Margie laughed. ‘Have you finished in there, Morrie?’ she called out.

Morrie opened the kitchen door and stuck his head in.

‘I’m full,’ he said. ‘Can I watch TV now?’

‘Not till you finish all that carrot on your plate. I’ll warm the TV up for you.’

Margie reached out for the remote and turned on the largest flat-screen television Jan had ever seen.

‘What an enormous television,’ said Jan. ‘It must have cost a fortune.’ She saw Margie’s face.

‘I suppose you think we shouldn’t be spending money on things like televisions.’

‘Of course not,’ said Jan quickly. ‘I don’t have a television, so I’m out of touch.’

Margie found the cartoon channel and lowered the volume.

‘Just to set the record straight, we get paid to foster but it doesn’t
come anywhere close to covering what we put out. These kids need a lot of extra support. You can’t buy love. We’ve had special education programs and psychologists, for a start. The middle one, Jessie, he’s dyslexic. We put most of the money into those things, and anything after the essentials goes into a special account for holidays and sports and for things like this television. The kids have their Playstations and Xbox and they love their movies. They bring their friends over here where I can keep an eye on them all, and it’s a lot less expensive than taking them all out to Hoyts or those Arcades where all sorts hang out.’

Jan nodded. She was ashamed of herself. ‘I’m sorry if I sounded judgmental. I’ve got two dozen budgerigars, so what would I know?’

Margie disappeared into the kitchen. Next to the couch was a basket of washing waiting to be sorted. Folded clothes were stacked in little piles on the carpet. There was some sort of soup simmering in the pressure cooker. On the fridge was a list of chores for each of the children, with a yellow happy face next to completed tasks. Margie was a good person. Fred thought that she was a good person, but she wasn’t. She lectured Fred about his son and his daughter, but she was selfish too. After her son died she had left Morrison with his mother, even though she suspected she was using drugs. She and Sam thought they had made so many sacrifices to save their son, but perhaps they hadn’t really made any of the important ones. They ought to have had more children, for a start. More, or none at all.

She followed Margie into the kitchen, where she was pulling loaves of frozen bread rolls out of the freezer and keeping an eye on Morrie’s vegetable patch.

‘Afternoon tea,’ Margie said, nodding at the bread. ‘It’s a feeding frenzy. Morrison, if you want to watch TV you better get a move on.’ She walked back into the lounge and turned up the volume.

‘How can you live without television, Jan?’ She began twisting socks into pairs. ‘You’ll be needing a TV with that one,’ she nodded towards the kitchen, ‘if you ever want to have a cup of tea again. Do you know how long before you can have him for good? We are supposed to get a call from the Social Worker, but
they are always late. He can’t wait to go. It’s all he ever talks about.

‘You don’t think he’ll miss other children?’ Jan picked out two navy school socks and tucked them in together. ‘There’s only going to be one of me.’

‘That kid needs 100% love, not fighting off my hoard to get in my lap. He’d end up the runt of the litter in a large family.’

She hoped Margie was right. ‘I’ll be here tomorrow morning, to get him for the weekend. I’m hoping that once the Department knows my place is on the market, they’ll let him come to me until the sale goes through.’

Morrison rushed in and threw himself at Jan. ‘I love you Nana. I want to eat you up.’

‘You don’t need to eat me because there’s enough food around your mouth for another meal. Go wash your hands and face and then come and say goodbye. Nana has to go.’ She watched him go. ‘I have to go to the hospital.’

‘Is everything alright?’ asked Margie.

‘A friend has had a fall. He’s fine, but they kept him in for a few days for observation. I’m picking him up.’

‘Does this ‘friend’ have a name?’

‘His name is Fred, like the chocolate frog. He lives in the Estate where I live.’

She handed Margie her folded socks and picked up her bag.

‘Do you think you could wait a minute before you go?’

‘Of course,’ said Jan.

Margie took a packet of cigarettes from a drawer under the TV.

‘I know I shouldn’t,’ she said. ‘I don’t smoke around the kids. I keep quitting and starting again. I’ve promised Mike I’ll give up for good before my fortieth.’

She disappeared out through the laundry door. Morrison came back and climbed into her lap. She kissed the top of his head. He smelt young. Morrison would be fine. His scars would fade. There was no need to be afraid.

‘I’ll be here for you tomorrow morning, okay? You be a good boy for Margie. You’re coming to me for the whole weekend. You can help Nana feed the budgerigars.’
'How do you manage, Margie?' she asked Margie when they were at the front door. 'How do you do it?'
'I don’t know, Jan. You just muddle along.'
'But what about your own life?'
Margie pulled a face. ‘This is my life, Jan. I don’t have another one. Do you mean, like a career? Or hobbies? I’d like to do more exercise, or join a gym— god knows I need to lose weight—but I guess I don’t think its important enough to prioritize. Is that the word? I suppose if I’d had the chance to go to university I might think differently. What was your career, Jan?'
‘I was a Primary school teacher. I loved it.’
‘Well there you go. You helped all those children. I think that’s marvelous.’
Jan jangled the keys in her hand.
‘I didn’t help my son. Morrison’s father.’
Margie glanced back towards the house.
‘I don’t really believe that, Jan. I have to go in to Morrison. I’ll see you in the morning.’

I could live here, thought Jan as she picked her way through the streets of Margie’s suburb. Morrison and I could live here with our budgerigars and our books. We could walk to school and do our spelling on the way. He would learn to read and write, to start the small a just before the curve and to run up the straight line and down again to make the strong, straight backbone of the letter. Two big bellies for the Capital B, and a smidgen of the moon for C. She would show him how to carry those tricky tens across from one column to another, and to borrow from the hundreds to pay back the tens. He would count up in twos, like a little birdie hopping up a path on both legs. Two, four, six, eight, ten. Together they would master time. She would turn the small hand and the big hand and mark out the minutes in the hours and the days of the years, and teach him about day and night and the earth and the moon, and the importance of gravity, how it helps you stay right here on earth, where you belong, so you don’t just up and float away into a terrible, empty, nothingness. She would hold the string, so he didn’t get away.
She was late for Fred, but it didn’t matter now. This was her
life, and she was going to do the best she could. Now, was it left
at this lights, or the next?

‘And how’s that tummy, Mrs. Jenkins? Let’s have a little
look, shall we?’

All morning Fred had been sitting on his bed up on the 7th
Floor Geriatric ward, fully dressed, toothbrush packed, waiting
for his doctor to release him from hell, and now Mrs. Jenkins had
got in before him. The nurse turned down the sheets and rolled
up Mrs Jenkins’ gown. Poor Mrs. Jenkins, all alone with her pale,
soft belly. The doctor leant over her and tapped her stomach, just
like you’d tap a water tank to see if it was full. The nurse looked
up at Fred and whipped the curtains across.

‘And how does it feel when I press here?’ the doctor said.
From the sound of it, not good.
‘And here?’
Even worse.

There were more groans from the bed on the other side. It
looked like the old man was finally waking up after his operation.
He managed to rotate his head in Fred’s direction.

‘What are you doing there?’ he said. His speech was slurred.
‘Where’s the girl?’

The man had remarkably hairy eyebrows, just like his Pop.
Virgil always loved Fred’s jokes about Pop’s brows. *Watch out for
the fireplace, Pop, or you’ll be kindling.*

‘Would you like me to get the nurse for you?’ Fred reached
for his buzzer.
‘Don’t you dare. They’ll kill me if they find out I saw them
at it. It was one after the other, all night, right under my bed.
Shameful what goes on with them doctors and nurses. I got no
sleep at all.’

The anesthetic had made the man delusional. The same
thing happened with Martha: for two or three days she thought
he wasn’t her husband and that she was married to Ralph. ‘I
want Ralph,’ she moaned, ‘where is Ralph?’
Fred made sure the old man wasn’t watching and then pressed the buzzer. Someone needed to know he’d woken up. The curtains around Mrs. Jenkins bed snapped back and the nurse refilled her water bottle.

‘Now Mrs. Jenkins,’ said the doctor, ‘I want you to tell the nurse when you want to have a Number Two. Can you do that for me?’

‘Yes, Doctor,’ said Mrs. Jenkins meekly.

Fred gritted his teeth. Mrs. Jenkins was one of the true believers, a worshiper of the false god of medicine.

‘Excuse me, Doctor?’ said Mrs. Jenkins.

The Doctor looked up from his notes.

‘Yes?’

‘What about the pain, doctor? Can you give me something for the pain?’

‘We’ll write you up some codeine, but that’s what got you into trouble in the first place, Mrs. Jenkins. You’re constipated again. The nurse will give you another suppository and once we get those stools on the move you’ll be almost good as new.’

‘I had the Forte at home all week, and they didn’t touch the pain.’

‘It’s a chicken and egg situation, Mrs. Jenkins. Let’s focus on laying that egg, and then after that we’ll worry about the chicken.’

The blond nurse smiled. The Doctor winked at the nurse.

My god, the man was a comic—or a sadist. Mrs. Jenkins groaned. She didn’t look at all well. His mother had suffered for months, dismissing the pain in her abdomen and refusing to go to the doctor, helped along by his father who hated a woman who winged. ‘Shut your glooming, woman,’ he said. When they finally took her to the hospital she was dead in three days.

A male nurse arrived at his bedside.

‘Did you call for the nurse?’

Fred nodded towards the old man. ‘He’s awake,’ he said in a low voice, ‘but he’s delusional and quite agitated. And while you’re here, can you tell me when Doctor Forster is due? I was told at breakfast that they all did their rounds early and it’s now nearly lunchtime. I’m supposed to go home today. I’m being picked up at 1pm.’

The nurse looked at his watch.
‘If the doctor doesn’t come soon you won’t be going anywhere. Ward 7 is the last stop of their rounds. We don’t get that many going home from here, if you know what I mean, and we do all our releases before the hand-over at two o’clock. It’s Friday of the long weekend. The specialists like to get away early so they can beat the traffic down to Eagle Bay.’

First he had had to endure twenty-four hours downstairs in the Public Emergency Department, where they left him under fluorescent lights in a horrible salmon pink cubicle, not knowing if it was day or night, counting shift changes and staff turnovers and waiting for some indeterminate event. Between these chasms of boredom was a series of what in other places might be called crises, but in the Emergency Department were treated as perfectly normal. Drug addicts were either coming down or going up, enormously fat people were strapped up to cardiac monitors, there were drunks who needed dialysis, open wounds and tattoos and limbs broken in fights outside clubs, and cuts to the face when it got out of hand at the 21st, not to mention the steady stream of anxious mothers with very hot toddlers who would be sent home with Panadol and an assurance that no, it was not meningococcal, but keep an eye on her and come back if her temperature isn’t down by the morning. And then when he finally gets the nod for a bed, he ends up on the Geriatric Ward.

‘But I’m not this old,’ he wanted to scream. ‘I’m not going to die yet.’ Hieronymus Bosch couldn’t have bettered it. The walls were a filthy mint-green and the place stank of antiseptic and underfunding. It wasn’t Jan’s fault; he shouldn’t have snapped at her. She had tried to get him transferred to the private hospital, or at least to his own room but there were no beds anywhere. He and Martha always had top cover, and look where it got you. But he was not going to take it lying down. He was not going to be like Mrs. Jenkins, suffering in silence over there with Oprah Winfrey on mute. He sat up and directed his concentrated bile at the old man’s nurse, who was changing his dressing.

‘Who do I have to talk to here? Where is the Sister-in-Charge? I’ve been in this hospital four days and four nights and I’ve hardly slept.’

The nurse took the chart off the end of the man’s bed and initialed a column. How dare he ignore him like this?
‘I have had an x-ray, a scan, and a suppository. I haven’t had a headache since Wednesday, so I have no idea why I am still here. It’s a waste of taxpayer’s money—not that any taxpayer’s money, let alone a taxpayer—myself excluded—has made it up here in decades.’

Fred could hear his words rattle about him like an old sheet in the wind. It was hopeless. The entire public system was immune to patients’ complaints. He had to get out of here. He had to see his son. He had been told that Callum was doing much better, but they would like him to come in to discuss the situation. ‘The situation?’ he repeated on the phone. Things with Callum never changed, and now there was a situation? What did that mean?

He looked at his watch. It was visiting time, and Jan would be here at any minute. He waited for the doors at the end of the ward to swing open, for the grandchildren carrying helium balloons in the shape of hearts, popping them up and down on their long strings, for the devoted wives returning yesterday’s washing to their husbands, for the middle-aged men carrying bunches of red roses to their sick mothers. He strained his neck to look down the corridor.

No one came. Not a soul. The old grey poor people moaned and hacked and gazed into vacant space. An orderly pushed an empty bed into a gap between two patients. A nurse came past with a trolley draped in white cloth, like the sacraments for benediction.

How long since he’d been to Mass? Father McMahon took the altar boys for catechism on Fridays. He liked to give them what he called room for doubt.

“The Holy Father has room for doubt, lads, but it’s a small room, and it’s not a room you can stay in for longer than five minutes at a time. Now, are there questions?”

Frederick put up his hand. He needed further clarification on the troubling matter of transubstantiation. It just didn’t seem possible that wine and a wafer could be turned into the body and blood of Christ with just a few words in Latin from Father McMahon.
Father listened for a moment to get the gist of the complaint, then cut him off. ‘But Freddie, it’s a miracle!’ said Father.

‘But exactly how long does it take, Father?’

Father McMahon adjusted the rope on his brown cassock and pushed his glasses up his face.

‘It’s instantaneous, Freddie. Like that!’ He snapped his fingers. ‘A clever boy like you has heard of the speed of light, I’m sure?’

‘Yes, Father.’

‘Well, be thinking of something a million times faster.’

‘But it tastes the same, Father, it still tastes like bread dipped in wine.’

‘Of course it does! Of course it does Freddie. You boys don’t think God is going to make his flock taste the very flesh and blood of the Lord Jesus? God is not cruel, Freddie. And he’s not stupid. He knows that lads like you would never come back on the Sabbath to receive the Holy Sacrament if it tasted like a piece of uncooked beef and that scab off your knee you keep pulling at. Leave it alone, Frederick Lothian, and get your mother to tape that up before you get an infection and end up with Dr. Broadbent, who’s got far better things to do than patch up boys who pick. What is it now, Frederick?’

‘I need to go to the toilet, Father.’

‘Well off you go now, and don’t look down. I’ve got no more room for doubt, so you’d all better get on the move. It’s Algebra with Brother Stephen, and don’t forget to scrub those nails before you parade down the aisle on Sunday.’

Was it the shock of seeing Fred Chelmsley topple to the ground, or the knock on the head? Something had shaken out long-forgotten characters. It was Dr. Broadbent who came to the house the morning Mam wouldn’t wake up properly. The day was dry and freezing, like the inside of a skate rink. It was Christmas holidays and he was back from boarding school, hiding in his room and dreading every new dawn and wishing —praying even, though by then he no longer believed in prayer —that he could go back to his dormitory, with his books and his slide rule and his compass.
‘How long has she been like this, Morris?’ the doctor asked his father.

‘I can’t say,’ said his father. ‘It’s been a measure of pain in the belly which I put down to that change women get.’

He stood between his father and the doctor as the ambulance pulled away, chewing his nails and wishing he could sit in the van and hold his mother’s hand without Dad seeing.

The warm arm around his shoulders was the doctor’s, not his Dad’s.

‘Are you coming to the hospital, Freddie? I’ll take him with me if you like, Morris.’

‘No need, Doctor,’ said his father. ‘The lad with ride with me, if he’s not too smart to sit with a man who works for a living, if he’s not too grand with his Scholarship and his Latin vocabulary.’

He held his mother’s hand all day while his father was at work. Dr. Broadbent came in the mornings and again in the evenings, and brought him soup in a can and chocolate squares in silver foil.

‘She ought to have been brought to see me months ago,’ he said sadly. ‘There are treatments for this, there are operations we can do, but it’s too late now, Freddie.’

The doctor must have seen his face because he took up the hand that did not hold his mother.

‘You mustn’t blame yourself, Frederick. That Dad of yours is a hard man to handle, and she is his wife to care for. Remember that when she’s gone.’

All through his fifteenth year, when his mother slipped further and further into the folds of her clothes, right up until Dr. Broadbent took his hand in the hospital, he had never imagined that his mother might die. Her illness was a constant in their house, something to touch lightly on weekends at home, where she sat quietly in the corner, knitting and reading, and once or twice, when he caught her, just watching him read and draw.

‘I like to see you there,’ she said. ‘It’s enough to see you there.’
Mrs Jenkins had fallen asleep. At least his mother had that feeling, he thought suddenly, the feeling that something was enough...your wife, your children, the life you had made.

A specialist came onto the ward, followed by a group of medical students who fussied around him, like ducks after stale bread. They pulled up at the bed of an old woman whose racking, murderous cough had kept him awake all night. She was on oxygen, and her compressor pulsed like underwater sonar. Every half-hour or so she almost choked to death and a nurse would come and roll her on her side and thump her between the blades, and tuck in the sides of her sheet.

The students leant in close to the old woman. They would open up her gown, press their cold steel instruments onto her frail chest. They wouldn’t be using this body to hone their diagnostic skills; he’d made sure of that. ‘NO’, he wrote on the form when he was admitted up onto Ward 7. Yes, I know this is a teaching hospital, but NO, I am not happy to have a group of young doctors hovering around my bed while a millionaire specialist in a bow tie talks about me as if I am either already dead or only recently born. Hospitals were bad enough, but they couldn’t hold a candle to some of these doctors. There was always a chance the young ones might turn out differently, but not the chest man over there with his quacking acolytes and not Mrs. Jenkins’ gastro man, all out and about gouging the public purse, with their vineyards and their German cars and their carbon racing bikes and their Lycra panties and their re-hydration packs and skiing trips to Whistler— not to mention the so-called holiday houses they rented out three times a year to their brothers-in-law to squeeze out a bit of negative gearing.

When he was growing up Dr. Broadbent was the only doctor in the Village, and he was too busy looking after people to worry about gearing. He was a Scotsman who suffered himself from the national scourge of psoriasis—not that he let a bit of flaking skin get in the way of his calling. Nowadays you could hardly find a full-time family doctor in any of these supermarkets they called Medical Centres; they were full of bony blond women who punched in a day or two between private school drop-offs and the pick-ups and the gym and the shops. Why was the taxpayer
subsidizing the education of all these people who didn't want to take care of anyone other than themselves? What had happened to the Hippocratic oath?

Was that his Doctor coming up the corridor? Finally! He fumbled for his glasses. Where were they? He was suddenly desperate to go to the toilet.

'Mr. Lothian?'

Fred looked at the frighteningly young and considerably more competent-than-most, Doctor Jane Forster. Clearly, she was an anomaly. How could she be on her way to neurosurgery at her age? Was she married? There was no a ring. Did she have children? How could she ever have a family while she was carrying the burden of the brain, with its fragile and ever-so complicated network of lobes and hemispheres and neural pathways?

Dr. Forster looked pale and tired. She smiled wanly.

'I apologize for keeping you waiting, Mr. Lothian. I had intended to do my rounds much earlier. I know you want to go home today. We've had an emergency this morning and I had to go into surgery. It's been a very long day and it's still only morning.'

'A stroke?' He forced himself to say it. The new, renovated Fred would face his darkest fears without flinching.

'A bad road accident—a school bus and a station wagon. You'll hear about it on the news, no doubt.'

'Were there any children killed?' asked Fred in as neutral a voice as he could harness.

'Three young people in the station wagon, all under twenty, speeding on the northern interchange. It looks like they ran a red light. Two were killed instantly, the other we lost in the ambulance. She’d only had her license for six months, so she wasn't supposed to have all those people in the car. I'm for raising the age to twenty-one.'

'And the bus? The children?' He had to ask.

'One killed, two critical, and both of those have trauma to the head. It was one of those old buses without belts. Heads and bones. We were all called in.'

Dr. Forster opened her file.

'My son—'
Dr. Forster looked up from her notes.
‘My son was in a car accident. He has brain damage. I’d like
to get out today so I can see him.’

Fred could not endure the physiognomy of sympathy: the
knitted brow, the tilted head, the pinching together of the lips.
Ooh, poor little Freddie. He had left it up to Martha to field
sympathy. He stayed up in the bleachers, from where he could
avoid accepting anything at all—sympathy, condolences, the
accident itself. But Dr. Jane was a professional. Sympathy was
not part of her repertoire.

‘Does your son live at home with you, Mr. Lothian?’

‘Oh no,’ said Fred, ‘he’s in a hostel. I could never have
managed. My wife has died.’ He looked down. The good Doctor
Forster would help him out here. Poor Mr. Lothian, of course you
couldn’t manage.

‘When did the accident happen?’

‘Nearly fifteen years ago,’ said Fred.

‘There’s a lot more support available now than there was
back then,’ said Dr. Forster briskly. She was sorting through her
file. ‘We understand it more now. There’s still nowhere near
enough help, of course. It’s still hard on families. I’m part of a
lobby group to expand funding for families, and to get some kind
of tax concession that recognizes their unpaid labor. You’re lucky
to have a place for your son, and the means to pay for it. But a
surprising number of families are choosing to manage at home, at
least for as long as they can, and with respite now available many
of them do quite well. They have to modify everything, as you can
imagine, depending on the level of disability. People put in
ramps, pulleys, bridges. It’s amazing to see the effort families
make to keep their loved ones close to them.’

Fred ran his tongue around his teeth. He tugged at his
bottom lip. Dr Forster placed her fingers on Fred’s neck. How
extraordinary. She was wearing an old watch with a black face
exactly like the one his grandfather gave him when Virgil died. It
was called a trench watch, with cathedral arms and luminous
numbers. He had passed on the watch to Caroline when he
moved into the Villa.

‘That’s an interesting old watch,’ said Fred.
‘I love it. I shouldn’t really wear it to work. It’s a Trench watch from the First World War. It’s quite rare.’

‘Did you have a relative who fought?’

Dr. Forster opened the large grey envelope at the end of the bed.

‘Pardon? Oh no, I bought it from an antique shop just over a year ago.’

‘In Perth, was this, or overseas?’

‘Right here, in the city, on the eastern end of the mall. I think the business has been there for years.’

‘It certainly has,’ said Fred tightly. ‘My wife used to take my daughter there to window shop.’ While Dr. Foster looked into his eyes he was dying a private death.

‘So, Mr. Lothian.’ She leant in towards him. ‘When we look at your pictures we see this.’ Dr. Forster held up what Fred assumed was a scan of his own brain. It resembled a black and white fruit, cut at the equator. Caroline had sold his watch. She had given away the only thing he had left that his granddad had touched.

‘Can you see this? It’s shaped like a slice of lemon.’

He squinted. ‘What is it? Is there a mass?’ Mass was a terrible word, an inexact word, but he had to get it out of the way. An even more onerous word forced itself upon him. ‘Or a tumor?’

He and Martha had squinted at and peered into sheet after sheet of images that neither of them could understand. ‘What is it?’ he kept saying to Martha’s doctor. ‘Where am I supposed to be looking?’ All his life he had looked at two-dimensional drawings, but these meant nothing to him.

‘Nothing as grave as that,’ Dr. Foster said. ‘Can you see that little crescent there between the grey matter and the white matter? That is a small subdural haematoma—a little bleed in the dural mater. It was probably caused by the blow to the head, but we can’t be sure. It could have been there a very long time.’

‘Tough mother.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Dr. Forster.

‘Dura mater. It’s Latin; it means tough mother.’

The doctor smiled. ‘Is that a fact? So, Mr. Lothian, the question is, what do we do? This little fellow might resolve all by itself. If we choose the path of least intervention, you will come in
here every month for a scan and I will have a look at it and see what that tough mother is up to.’

‘Or?’ Could he live with the idea of something literally hanging over his head? A tiny crescent-shaped gauntlet?

‘Or we get a little drill and we make a tiny hole and we let that little mother out. We can do it right here, with a local anesthetic.’

‘What? Here?’ What about the other patients? What about the noise? He had chills down the spine just thinking about it.

‘What I propose is this: we send you home right now so you can see your son and rest up. And in one month’s time you come in here and we have a look and see what that mother’s up to, and we take it from there? How does that sound to you?’

It sounded like a compromise. It sounded like a deferral.

‘That sounds very good, Dr. Forster,’ he said meekly.

‘Good. I’ll book the scan and you’ll get notification in the mail with a time and date. And I want you to take it easy. No deep sea diving, or parachuting. And no driving. Sorry about that, but just for the month. You might want to call someone to pick you up — I’ll get the charge sister to come down and take the details and get your release forms ready. I’ll see you in a month. Best of luck with your son.’

Dr. Forster stretched out her arm. Fred shook her hand. He looked down at Pop’s watch. Give that back, he wanted to say, it’s mine.

Dr. Jane Forster is racing down the stairs. She is running through the long, white corridors that lead to the operating theatre, the old black-faced watch ticking away like a time bomb, just as it did the day Pop’s other arm was blown clean away to the German side. Dr. Jane Forster covers her hair and mouth. She is scrubbing her arms and her hands, and those neat, short nails. She holds out her arms for the surgical gown and lets the nurse tie the tabs. She backs into the swinging doors that lead to the theatre where his beautiful, clever, serious boy lies on a table. He is covered with sheets, as if he is already dead. There is a tube down his throat, and all manner of people are opening up his body. In the distance he hears Martha call.
*Not Callum*, she said on the way to the hospital, *Not Callum.* By the time they reached Emergency shock had ruptured the two vowels of their son’s name and neither of them could speak.

‘Lothian,’ he said, and followed a doctor through the corridors to Caroline, who was waiting in a room.

Only he had looked inside that theatre, only he had understood from the people in the room and from the costumes that they wore and the machines that throbbed in the wings that Callum would never return as he left. Someone led him away and put him back with his wife. He stood in front of his daughter and wife and placed his car keys on the seat.

‘I’ll be at home,’ he said. ‘I’ll take a taxi.’

If he had not bought the new car he would not have given Callum the old car, and if he had not given his son the old car his son would not have been driving that night. It was all because of the car. But if Martha’s mother hadn’t died and left them money there would have been no new car. And if Martha had just said no, no Fred, you cannot buy a new car with my mother’s money, it would never have happened. It was all Martha’s fault.

‘What?’ said Martha through a haze of grief and fury.

‘You’re leaving?’

‘But you can’t leave us, Dad,’ cried Caroline. ‘We need you here.’

‘Mr. Lothian?’

It was Dr. Jane Forster again. What did she want now?

‘I just wanted to let you know that they have others.’

‘Pardon?’ he said.

‘At the antique store, they have a few more of these watches if you are interested in buying one. The owner bought them as a lot in an auction in England. We had a long conversation about it. I’m pretty sure that they’d still have one or two left. It’s not the sort of thing many people want to buy.’ She stood for a moment.

‘You should be ready to leave within fifteen minutes or so. Best of luck.’

‘Thank you,’ said Fred. ‘Thank you very much.’

‘All part of the job,’ she said.
A love-heart balloon had escaped from a happier ward and was wandering around the ceiling. Something fried and meaty was coming up for lunch. A man in board shorts and thongs led a woman through the ward. She was weeping into his T-shirt, hiding her face from onlookers.

If not Callum, then who, Martha? It was different for him, because it was all his fault. For Fred there was no accident, and because there was no accident there was no filthy dream of substitution.

He would like to speak to Father McMahon now. What is the point of pain? How are we supposed to live on with children and death? But Father McMahon was dead and buried, far from the room for doubt.

And there was Jan, walking towards him on those strong, firm calves of hers. She smiled and lifted a hand. He swung his legs off the bed and picked up his small bag.

‘I’m sorry I’m late. How are you feeling? Are you all ready to go?’

‘I have to see the Sister at the desk, and then I’m free. How was your morning?’

‘Exhausting. Yours?’

‘I just saw the Doctor. I have a subdural haematoma.’

‘What does that mean? Is that serious? Do you have to have an operation?’

‘It should resolve on its own, and if not they are going to bore a little hole in my skull and let the bugger out.’

‘I look forward to that,’ said Jan. ‘Are you okay to drive?’

‘Oh fine,’ said Fred. ‘After today I’m all clear.’

‘Where to now, Fred?’

‘Callum.’

‘Callum.’

The Manager had been on the phone for fifteen minutes, and not even so much as a glance in his direction. He felt quite weak and nauseous. It was partly the smell of mass-produced food, but it was mostly the colour scheme. The hostel was a sea of salmon pink.
Who was responsible for the colour of the walls in public facilities?

Late in his career at the Foundry, before the lay-offs and the downturns, when it looked like his father might rise to the Top Floor, when Morris could still manage to walk home from the pub instead of being carried, his father took to studying the salmon pink pages of The Financial Times, in preparation for what he called his ‘leg-up.’

‘Any minute now, Freddie, I’ll be getting the leg-up.’

The Hospice Manager put down the phone and he stepped through the door. ‘I’m Frederick Lothian, Callum’s father.’

She looked up at him from her desk. ‘Oh yes, I thought it was you,’ she said carefully. ‘We talked on the phone. You were in hospital. You are obviously feeling better.’

Frederick swallowed. ‘It was a minor issue, all resolved now.’ All resolved except for the gauntlet.

‘I’m Corrine Palmer. You would have spoken to Nicola Masterson on the weekend—it was Sunday, I think—when we needed approval for the script.’

She was going to hammer it in all the way, pound him to pieces.

‘Fortunately we were able to contact your daughter. You do realize we can’t be calling Europe just to get a patient onto a common antibiotic.’

‘I apologized yesterday,’ said Fred tightly, ‘but I’m here now, and that’s the main thing. I want to take over from Caroline. You said I need to fill in some forms?’

The woman went to a filing cabinet at the back of the room and retrieved a large envelope.

‘How is Callum?’

‘He’s much better. The antibiotics have cleared up his chest, but we’re worried about his hotspots. We’re keeping an eye on them. If you fill these in and we’ll take it from there.’

‘Is he being moved regularly? Are you getting him out of bed? Or is he being left there all day?’

Corinne Palmer’s gaze was so fixed and steady there was no doubt she was concealing some very uneven feelings.

‘We have a protocol for pressure sores, Mr. Lothian.’
‘Please, call me Fred.’

Corrine Palmer sat back in her chair. She swiveled from side to side, then rocked up and down gently.

‘Mr. Lothian, we’ve been managing Callum for years, and many other patients with similar needs.’ She paused. ‘The staff here were very fond of your wife.’

Frederick bit his tongue. How dare she? So was I. I was very fond of my wife. Actually, I was her fucking husband.

‘Many of the staff knew her for years,’ continued Corinne Palmer.

Frederick did a fair imitation of a smile.

‘We were all very sorry to hear about Mrs. Lothian’s death,’ the woman continued.

She tucked her chin in to see over the top of her frameless glasses. Her eyes were shiny and unblinking. Her brown hair was short and fuzzy. Like some kind of small feral carnivore, decided Fred.

‘A number of my staff planned to go to the funeral but it was a private function, and then there was no wake. Many of them feel they never got to say goodbye. We did see Caroline afterwards, though. She came in and spent time with the staff, which was a great help. We are very fond of our families.’

She rocked back and forward in her chair. Why did he have to listen to this?

‘I understand that the private funeral was your decision, Mr. Lothian, and that you didn’t want a wake for your wife. I think you should know that we all respected Martha’s devotion and advocacy for her son. I’m sure Callum misses her a great deal.’

‘We all miss her,’ he said. ‘Excuse me.’ He stepped back into the corridor, clutching his file. The gauntlet in his brain was swinging to and fro. He would like to push Ms. Palmer right off her swivel chair, kick her in the stomach while she was down, and then finish her off with a brick over the head. He listened to her take a call.

A few minutes later a young black woman in a blue uniform came up the corridor and went into the Manager’s Office. Presently they both came out.
‘Mr. Lothian, this is Anne. She looks after Callum on her shifts. Can you take him across to his room, Anne? Lunch is finished, isn’t it? Have all the trays gone up?’

Anne nodded and turned to him.

‘Come with me, please,’ she said smoothly. Did he detect a second current running under that polite exterior? The whole hostel was against him. They knew about Martha and Caroline. They knew about Callum. He followed Anne down the salmon pink corridor, stepping on salmon pink tiles. The walkways were lined with empty chairs. Did anyone ever sit in them? Soothing muzak oozed out into the empty walkways, along with scraps of afternoon television, canned laughter, and the low hum of the air conditioning.

‘Where is everyone?’ he asked.

‘It’s rest time,’ said Ann ‘From one in the afternoon until two. On Saturdays and Sundays we extend quiet time until three. We close the doors to all visitors and only those with a pin code can come in. You will have that number in your file there.’ She stopped. ‘Mrs. Lothian was a good friend to me. I only knew her for one year before she got sick, but I heard about the many years they spent caring for her son.’

Fred was alarmed. Were those tears? Surely not? Was this kind of talk permitted between staff and clients?

‘I still feel upset that I couldn’t see Martha when she was sick. Why wouldn’t you let me see her?’

‘What do you mean, I wouldn’t let you?’ Frederick said indignantly. ‘I never stopped anyone.’

‘But you did,’ she said firmly. ‘I called and told you I was from the hostel. You said that the family was under a great deal of stress, and Martha didn’t want visitors. I asked to speak to Caroline and you said she wasn’t there. It was you on the phone, I’m sure of it, with that upper-class English voice of yours, all hoity-toity. I wanted to tell her about my brother. She would have wanted to know.’

Who was this woman? Who was her brother? She couldn’t have been more than thirty, but she spoke with righteous conviction. She had no right to talk to him about his wife and family.
‘I’m sorry Miss, I really am, but you have to understand, it was a terrible time for us all. My wife was dying. I was struggling myself.’

Her face was implacable. ‘It is Mrs. I am married. I was so upset when I heard she had passed away and I hadn’t seen her.’

What could he say? Stepping into the hostel was like falling into toffee. Everywhere he walked he found himself more and more attached.

‘Where are you from, Anne?’ he asked. Perhaps he could broaden the conversation and shift the focus.

‘I’m from Ghana. My husband is here studying for his Masters in Agricultural Management. He has a grant from the Government. It was difficult for me here in Australia, and Martha was so kind. She always helped me bathe and feed Callum, and to feed him. She was so devoted, the way she read to him. There are clients here who have no one to care for them. It’s so sad. I pray to God for them all.’ She paused. ‘I am emotional. I was so upset when Dumbledore passed away.’

‘Who?’ said Fred. ‘There’s no need to apologies. Now, perhaps we can—’

‘I am not apologizing, Mr. Lothian,’ she said, ‘I am just telling the truth. I am an emotional person.’

Another African woman walked past in a blue uniform. She slowed down and looked at Anne, then at him. She knew too. They all knew. He had to get out of here, but how could he leave? Jan was not coming back for an hour, and he couldn’t just walk out, not with that dragon at the front door, not with everyone knowing. Not without seeing Callum.

‘Thank you for caring for Callum, Anne. Now I’d like to see my son.’ He spoke in his best colonial English upper-class accent. What choice did he have?

‘He’s no trouble at all.’

She gave no indication of moving on. Where to now? ‘So, Martha knew your brother too?’

‘Not personally, of course not, but I talked to Martha about him and all my family. I come from a family of seven children.’

‘Goodness me, seven.’

‘But only four remain alive.’
There was nothing to say.

‘Four girls. I wanted to tell Martha that my youngest brother, the last son, had died. She would have wanted to know.’

‘Are they here in Australia? Your family? Your brother?’

‘Of course not,’ said Anne, as if he was stupid. ‘My family are all in Ghana. If my brothers lived here they would not be dead. We could not afford the correct treatments. Martha wanted to pay for medical assistance for my brother, but our family could not accept that. What good can money do? We have an epidemic of HIV.’

As an esteemed Professor at a first-rate University he had spoken constantly and with authority to all kind of people from all over the world. Since retirement he talked to his wife, and if he felt like it, to anyone who came within range. But now he was on the other end of someone’s words, and he was speechless.

He followed Anne into a separate wing. She stopped in front of Number 29 and pushed open the door. He scanned the room quickly. This was not Callum’s room: it was too small and too empty. The last time he was in Callum’s room there were a stack of books on a table and folded washing on a chair. There were pictures on the walls. His daughter was crying in a corner. The fan on the ceiling turned around and around, indifferent and implacable.

He looked up. The fan was gone. ‘Where is Callum?’ Why wasn’t he here? If Callum died this would be all that was left, he thought. A few clothes, a pair of slippers, a single vase and a small photo on the table by the bed.

‘He’ll be back from OT very soon, Mr. Lothian.’

‘When did you move him? Did he have to be moved from his other room?’ Things should not change. Nothing should change.

‘We haven’t moved him, Mr. Lothian. This has always been his room. We try not to move residents. It disorientates them.’

‘But it’s all different’, he said, unable to express the difference in any way. ‘There’s no ceiling fan, for a start.’

‘All the fans have been taken out. We have ducted air conditioning now.’

At one end of the room, next to the bathroom, was Callum’s adjustable bed. The remote controls hung off the back panel. The
cotton waffle cover was pulled tight and tucked in on all sides. A series of pulleys hung down from the ceiling above the bed, and there was something on the pillow, something white and fluffy. Next to the bed was a pan in a chair and a small wooden side table he recognized from home. On it was a vase of fresh pink roses. He could hardly bear to look at them.

‘Most of the things you remember were Martha’s personal belongings—books, CDs, photographs. We returned them to Caroline when she passed. You are probably remembering the room when Martha was here. She was always bringing new things to stimulate Callum.’

He picked up the earthenware vase on the table. It was one of Martha’s favorite, fire engine red with geometric incisions at the base. And there was Martha in the photo, smiling her perfect smile, holding a small, fat, bald baby. He picked up the fluffy white bear on the bed. ‘This isn’t his,’ said Frederick. ‘This does not belong to Callum. He isn’t a baby. Take it away.’

Anne crossed her arms. ‘He likes it. We put it in his bed at night. Is there anything wrong with that?’ She turned and unlocked a small wall cabinet.

Misery.

Callum must have been eight or nine. He was propped up on the couch, pouring over National Geographic and clutching that damn little bear, or what was left of him. Bunky the hairless bear. Fred was on his way up to the study when Callum caught him.

‘Hey Dad, look at this! Please, Dad, it won’t take a minute. You’ve got to see this. It’s Pompeii! There was this volcano thousands of years ago. But look at this!’

Fred bent over and looked. It was the dog.

‘It couldn’t have been in a kennel—the Romans wouldn’t have had kennels, would they? And a dog wouldn’t lie like with his legs up—he must have been asleep on his back—maybe he was in the sun?’

His left hand cut the air as he spoke, splitting words into short ends. So exact, his son, so keen to break the story down into pieces and put them all back together. So like his father.
‘So, the dog is fast asleep, and this hot boiling lava comes pouring down the mountain and flows right over the top of him, and he just freezes, like that!’ He snaps his fingers. ‘Right? Right Dad? Is that how the dog got made into a statue?’

Frederick nodded sagely if absently, hoping his boy would move on so he could get back to a troublesome calculation for mechanical resonance, so he wouldn’t have to explain the concept of rigor mortis or suffocation, or that it wasn’t really a dog, but the space left where a dog had once been, a cavity filled with plaster by an intrepid Italian archeologist in the 1860s.

Not even the shell of the thing.

Anne was putting capsules and pills into a plastic box, ticking off a chart stuck to the back of the cabinet as she went.

‘It says he was a guard dog. That’s his collar. He guarded the House of Orpheus. Who’s Orpheus, Dad?’

Orpheus is the God of the Underworld, Callum, the poet and prophet who tried to bring his beloved wife back from the dead, and then disregarded Hades warning: do not look back.

Callum is wedged between them in the bed. They are playing the kissing game—one kiss for Callum, pass it to Mummy, two kisses for Callum, pass them back to Daddy, and when they get to ten they start all over again. Where was Caroline? Why wasn’t she in bed with them? It made him anxious, as if he had lost her in a vast shopping centre.

The terror of a lost child. He put the bear back on the pillow.

Anne had finished with the pills and was straightening towels on a trolley at the door. He took Martha and the children to see a display of skydiving at Toodjay. One of the jumpers began to drift towards the crowd. As he came closer they all scattered, laughing and screaming, unsure if this was some kind of trick or an accident. The man landed awkwardly and rolled on the ground, with a tangle of wires and the red and yellow parachute coming down after him. A gust of wind picked up the chute. The children threw themselves upon it, but every time they
managed to hold down a segment another billowing fold would pop up.

That was what it was like now, trying to contain the past.

‘He’s coming,’ said Anne, looking down the corridor.
‘I have to use the toilet,’ said Fred quickly.

When he came out ten minutes later, Callum was already sitting in a wheel chair facing the full-length window. Annie was wiping down the back of the chair. On the ground just outside the window was the painted gnome that once lived in their front garden. He had always hated that gnome, and was always trying to get Martha to throw it away. ‘Why? Because it’s bad taste?’ Martha said every time he asked her to move it. ‘Does it offend your modernist principles? Callum bought it for me at the Primary school fete and I love it.’ He could not remember when it disappeared from the house, but one day it was gone from under the tree. He thought, at last she’s got rid of it. At last Martha agrees with me.

The sun was beating into the room, and despite the air conditioning, it was very warm.

‘It’s a little hot in here,’ he said. ‘Can we adjust the temperature?’

Anne shook her head. ‘It’s a centralized system. We like it to be a little warmer because many of our clients have poor circulation. If we make it too cold it’s not good for them. I’ll leave you alone now. You’ll be wanting to talk. He’s had his lunch. If you want tea there is a station down the corridor. Please, help yourself.’

She turned to leave, then paused.

‘Is Caroline back from her trip to Europe?’
‘You’ve met my daughter?’

Caroline had been living in Melbourne well before Anne started working at the hostel, so they could only have met once or twice. How would she know she was in London?

Anne looked at him. Another steady gaze. ‘We all know her from her visits. It’s wonderful how she comes all the way from Melbourne every month to see her brother. She always calls me
before she comes. I tell her if he needs something in particular, and we sort it out together.’

Fred turned towards the wall and looked at a fine hairline crack. Caroline had been coming to and from Melbourne and he hadn’t even known. The whole hostel knew everything. They knew about all those years that Martha was here with Callum, while her husband was in his study with Marcel Breuer, or in the garage with Dieter Braun.

‘She loved her brother very much,’ he said through gritted teeth. When would this end? When would this woman leave him alone?

Anne lifted a brow. ‘Oh, she still does, Mr. Lothian, she still loves her brother. Even when they die you still love them. I know this very well.’ She looked at her watch. ‘I will check in on you in an hour.’

When Annie was gone he walked up behind Callum and put his hand on his cheek. It felt soft and warm and bristly. His son needed a shave

‘Callum,’ he said quietly, ‘It’s Dad. I’ve come to say sorry.’

‘But how was he, Fred? I hate people who drive those huge four wheel drives. These car parks weren’t designed for cars like that.’ Jan checked the rear vision mirror again. She wasn’t used to driving forward, let alone reversing. And she was upset with Fred. He had taken much longer than he said he would at the Hostel, which wouldn’t have mattered except there was no shade, so she’d had to leave the car running and she hated doing that, and now he was giving her absolutely nothing.

‘That Manager is a disgrace. I’m going to lodge a complaint.’

Fred was pretending to look out the window; he was obviously trying to stop himself crying. It was excruciating to watch. If only men would learn to weep openly, thought Jan, it would be so much easier for everyone. Sam was a very good crier, but then he was Italian.

Fred wiped his eyes and nose.

‘Callum is the same, only older. He needs a shave. I had a bit of a run in with the Manager, but it’s all sorted now.’
‘What about?’ said Jan. ‘You know, Fred, there’s nothing wrong with showing emotion. In some cultures the men do all the crying. Am I clear on the left?’

‘After I left Callum I went to the office and I told the Palmer woman I wanted to take him out this Sunday. She refused. It’s a matter of protocol, Mr. Lothian—she won’t call me by my first name. She said she had to contact Caroline before these next-of-kin and duty-of-care documents could be processed. *We don’t allow our residents to stay with family unless there’s been a scheduled home visit from the OT.* Can you believe it? A father can’t take his own son for a drive! They wouldn’t let me take a wheelchair either. I have to get my own chair. I told them I lived at St. Sylvan’s—everywhere you go there’s a ramp or a bar or a handle or a buzzer. And then I have to learn to prepare his food. And there’s a First Aid Course in case he chokes while he’s having his food. *And if he is with you for more than a few hours, Mr. Lothian, there’s the matter of medicine. And the bathroom.* I told her he was desperate to get out of there. Jan, it’s sixty kilometres here and you’re not doing more than thirty. You’ve got cars banked up behind you.’

Jan looked in the rear vision mirror, and then pressed her foot on the accelerator. ‘Did he say that?’

‘Who?’

‘Callum, did he tell you he was desperate to get out?’

‘Well no, of course not, but you can tell.’

Jan sighed. He was not an easy man, not an easy man at all. ‘Fred, if you think about it, they are right. You’ve not been around. They don’t know you—don’t look at me like that, it’s the truth. It’s the same with Morrison. It’s their responsibility to make sure Callum is safe.’

‘He’s my son, Jan, of course he’s safe. Anyway, it’s sorted.’

‘These indicators are on the wrong side of the steering wheel. What do you mean, sorted?’

‘In the end the woman rang Caroline and she is emailing the permission. It’s all arranged. But I might need your help on Sunday.’

‘What kind of help?’

‘I’ve got my friend from the University, but I might need another set of hands to help get Callum into the car.’
‘What? Can’t he walk? Surely you should be using a special vehicle? Does the Manager know about this?’

‘Of course she knows.’

‘All right, Fred, but there’s no need to snap at me. Of course I’ll help. I’ll have Morrison with me though. Guess what I just did?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Guess what I just did?’ She paused. ‘I’ll say it once more and after that I’m not talking to you. I just bought a television.’ She cocked her head.

Fred looked around at the giant cardboard box wedged in the gap behind the front seats.

‘It’s the latest flat screen. A man is coming to set it up this afternoon. And I got a new DVD player. I was going to invite you over to watch a movie tonight.’

‘I think I need a quiet night,’ said Fred. ‘But thank you anyway. Turn here. Quickly. Right at the lights.’

Jan pulled into the right hand lane and the car behind her beeped wildly.

‘Don’t do that, Fred. I almost had an accident. Why are we going here? This isn’t the way home.’

But it was Fred’s way home. They drove past the giant ghost gum that Caroline had ridden straight into on her new yellow bike, on the morning of her 11th birthday. How she could have hit it was a mystery, but afterwards there was a split lip and a trip to the children’s hospital and a buckled front wheel to fix. But where was the Maitland’s place? Was that it? The house was still there, but it was all different. Barry and Lou must have gone. Where were they? Wouldn’t they have contacted him? He had been planning to call them; he was going to drop in once he got settled at St. Sylvan’s. Have them over for a drink. They couldn’t have died, could they? He’d only been gone a year and a half. It would have been in the columns if they’d died.

‘Slow down, would you, Jan?’

The new owners had pulled up Barry’s roses. Barry spent all his mornings in the front garden pruning and fertilizing those roses. Martha came back from her visits with roses wrapped in wet newspaper. She would sit at the table and snip off the thorns
before putting them in her vase—her bright red vase. When she got sick Barry walked up every morning and left yellow and red roses at the front door, and then walked home again.

But of course, that was why they hadn’t called him; it was Martha they always loved.

‘I thought you hated roses,’ he teased as she snipped the ends and clipped the thorns.

‘I like these particular roses,’ said Martha. ‘I just don’t like roses.’

‘That makes no sense.’

‘Why? It’s perfectly logical. I don’t like South Africans, but I’ve got nothing against Paula Simenon.’

Paula Simenon was from Durban. She ran the canteen at Caroline’s school and she and Martha adored each other.

‘You drive me crazy,’ he said.

‘Ditto,’ she replied.

‘What are we doing here, Fred? I’d really like to get home. I’ve been out all day.’

‘That house used to have the most wonderful rose garden.’

Jan stopped to look at the careful native garden.

‘Isn’t it awful when someone has spent years on a garden and the new owners come along and put a shovel through it all? Gardens take much longer to grow than houses take to build.’

It is awful, thought Fred, staring at what used to be the Maitland’s house. He wondered if any of Martha’s grevillias had survived. The skeleton of the Maitland’s house remained, but it had been rendered and painted and dragged into another era. Martha might have approved of the careful placement of the grass tree and the black kangaroo paws in the recess of the rendered wall, but she would never have banished the roses. They must have added an extension at the back: there was a new skillion roofline and a huge garage on the side to hold the kind of equipment well-off men now seemed to require to balance out their earnings: the paddle board, the kite surfer, the carbon racing bike.

They drove slowly past the little park where he used to take Caroline, and then Callum. For years Caroline was wide-awake at five o’clock every morning. When she called out from her bed,
he would carry his daughter downstairs to the kitchen, and then, if it wasn’t raining or the dead of winter, they would head out into the twilight dawn while Martha and the baby slept on, curled about each other in the double bed. No matter how many times he pushed that seat of the swing, it was never enough. The swing was no longer rusty grey metal with perilous flaking corners and legs that lifted off the ground if you went too high. The new playground was fire engine red and sunflower yellow and hibiscus pink. Accidents had been scrupulously modeled then designed away. It was all gone, even the bindies and the double-gees had been replaced with a synthetic surface, yet he could still feel the physical weight of his daughter and son coming back to meet him and being swung away, over and again, like breath.

‘That’s where Callum fell off the swing,’ he told Jan. ‘He let go right at the top. I thought he was dead.’ The swing came back empty, while Callum propelled himself upwards and outwards, like a bat, and landed hard on the ground, belly down.

When he saw that Callum could move his head and stagger to his feet, he took his son by the arms and shook him hard.

‘What were you doing? Why did you let go? You could have killed yourself, do you hear me? Don’t you ever do that again.’

‘You’re hurting me, Daddy, you’re hurting my arms, my tummy hurts, LET GO!’ he screamed. But Fred could not let go. He pulled Callum along the grass, ignoring the prickles and the bitumen and the screaming and the kicking. His son had almost died and it was all Fred’s fault.

‘Left or right at the stop sign?’

‘Right. Can you stop at that phone booth? I won’t be a moment.’ He undid his seat belt and shook his pockets. ‘Do you have any 50c pieces, Jan?’

Jan found her purse and gave him two. Fred seemed to be in a terrible hurry. She watched him talking into the phone. He lifted his hand as he spoke, chopping the air into pieces. She even saw him laugh. What was he up to?

‘Right,’ he said when he got back in.

‘Everything alright, Fred?’

‘I have to go into work in the morning.’
'What work? Aren’t you retired?'
'I just called my former student. He’s always wanting me to come in. He runs the workshops at the Engineering section. I had a favor to ask him.'
'Fine,' said Jan, glancing at him. ‘Straight ahead?’
‘One more stop and then back to St. Sylvan’s. What time is it?” He looked at his watch. ‘I have to call London when I get home.’
‘Your daughter?’
He didn’t answer.

The corner deli where Caroline and Callum had bought lollies was now just another huge house with a vast black window at the front. The box trees that Martha hated and tried to have replaced were resolutely in situ, but the palate of the suburb had completely changed. When they first moved here it was summer. It was dry and hot and comfortably suburban—what Fred called ordinary and Martha called deadly boring. ‘It’s so yellow,’ she said. ‘It’s so dead.’ But she came to love it. She loved the cool autumn mornings and the sharp pins of light in the night sky. She loved the furious winter fronts that ravaged the city and left it in shreds. She loved the spring, when her garden began to shiver and hum. She loved the large, generous blocks and the lemon-scented gums and the hot, empty pavements and the relief of the sprinklers at dawn and dusk. She even liked the rusty tinge of bore water that crept up the walls of the blond brick houses. With a fulcrum of money from mining, the horizontal axis of the suburb began to tilt upwards. The back gardens began to disappear. More and more blocks were subdivided or battle-axed and sold off for these expensive buff and cream two storey mock-moderns, with their smoky glass and their feature walls and the fake stone facades.

‘Just here, Jan, slow down.’ he said. ‘Stop here?’
Jan didn’t want to stop anywhere; she wanted to go home, but Fred was on some kind of mission. She looked out at the plain two-storey box. A red gravel semicircle cut across the front of the house, leaving a half-circle of garden that was a mess of weeds and woody native shrubs. The house appeared vacant and unloved, and out of place among the new mansions.
‘What is this, Fred? Why are we here?’

‘This is our house,’ he said. ‘The tenants have quit their lease and I have to have it cleaned. There are bedrooms—five with the study, and a pool. There’s no fence around the pool but that can be fixed. You can’t have a pool without a fence anymore. It’s against the law.’ He was thinking about four-year-old Michael. ‘Did I miss Tom Chelmsley’s funeral?’ he said suddenly.

Jan nodded. ‘I went for both of us. I felt so sorry for his sister. You don’t want to die with wall between you and the dead. I made a donation to a charity in his name, and signed it from you and I. I hope you don’t mind.’

‘Of course not. Let me know what I owe you.’

He rummaged through the glove box until he found a pencil and notebook.

‘You seem so busy all of a sudden, Fred. You should take it easy with that head of yours.’ Jan leant over to see what he was doing. ‘Aren’t you a wonderful drawer! Look at the way you’ve made the house. There are so few lines, but it’s all there. Is that a bridge?’

‘It’s a ramp. Look at the house. See how you have to walk up those steps from the carport to get to the front door? The block is very steep. That’s a real problem for a wheelchair. I think we can run the ramp up the left there and swing it around to the right. There might be just enough frontage for a ninety-degree turn, or else it will have to be a switchback. I’ll have to calculate the gradient. Ideally you want 1:20 for wheelchair access. Then we have to get him upstairs. If we can’t fit an elevator in next to the stair well, I’m going to hang the shaft off the outside of the building, there.’

Jan followed his pointed finger.

‘We’re going to have to knock through the landing, and put the door to the elevator flush to the outer wall. That way we get Callum right from the ground floor into the bedroom next to the larger bathroom. I’ll put a monitor in with Callum so if he needs something in the night I’ll be able to sort it out. I hope you don’t mind if you and Morrison have the two bedrooms at the back? One of them used to be Caroline’s room. There’s another smaller bathroom with a shower at that end of the house. Caroline and I
will have downstairs.’ He stopped drawing and looked at Jan gravely. ‘If Caroline ever comes back. Do you think she will?’

Jan looked at Fred, incredulous. But he was absolutely serious. ‘You want us all to move here? Into this house? All of us, together?’

Frederick nodded. ‘You can pay me rent if you want, but it’s not necessary.’

He was out the door before she had a chance to speak. What was she supposed to do now? Turn off the car? Get out? Fred stepped out the front of the block from boundary to boundary, then scribbled in his book. He went into the carport and began to walk backwards, turned ninety degrees and wrote down something, then disappeared around the side of the house.

Jan put the car into gear and drove down the road to the buildings she had seen as they drove up the road. It was one of those lovely 1930’s primary schools, with high pitched roofs and wide verandas, with silver hooks for bags and hoops for balls, with painted lines for handball and squares with the numbers for hopscotch.

She allowed herself for just a moment to imagine standing at the gate with Morrison, zipping up his school bag, sending him on his way, then she stopped herself. There were no second chances. You could not live in the same house a second time. Yes, people could change, but there was no returning her son to her side, or erasing those lines on her grandson’s arms. How dare Fred impose his mad ideas on her? How dare he get carried away, thinking he could magically solve all their problems with a ramp and an elevator and a fence around the pool? Who did he think he was?

As she reversed into the driveway of the school car park a little girl on rollerblades cut across the road to the empty basketball court. The girl leant to the left and described a perfect arc, then pushed a rubber heel into the ground and came to a sudden stop. She bent down to adjust her shoe, then stood up and took off to the right. It’s so hard to grow old, thought Jan, to see the path narrowing. We don’t know how to manage so we act as if it’s unexpected, like an earthquake or a road accident. The little girl shot straight forward on both blades. She dipped in both knees and then leapt up into the air to land on one leg. Her
supporting ankle tipped and wobbled beneath her weight, and Jan held her breath, certain she would fall, but the girl steadied herself and extended her other leg out behind her. She is pretending to be a figure skater, thought Jan. The girl lifted her head to the cloudless sky and stretched out her arms out, arching backwards.

Jan beeped and waved and the girl waved back.
At that moment anything was possible.
Caroline took a sleeping pill at Dubai, but after three hours she was wide-awake. She lay in the darkness with the mask over her eyes, trying not to think about what her father might be doing out in the wheat-belt, in Wandering, of all places. When she heard his message she cancelled her flight to Aberdeen, and then called Nicole Masterson. Callum is safe, she told the woman. She knew where her father had gone. ‘I’ll be back in 24 hours. Don’t call the police.’

Was that the right thing to do? Was Callum really safe?

In the lounge at the airport she entered Richard’s name into her search engine. He was real. She read reviews of his albums and a short account of the tragic accident. She listened to something he had written for the double bass and cello that was fierce and serious and unsettling, and then she wrote him an email.

Richard, this Caroline Lothian, the woman from Australia. I am flying back to Australia today. Something has happened with my father and my brother. I am listening to your music. Please write to me as soon as you can

Under her name she typed her number, with the international dialing codes. She wanted someone serious to love, someone else who understood the threat of extinction.

And she wanted to have a baby.

The woman in the seat next to her was snoring. Caroline put on her earphones and turned on the console. She found the film, but from the opening credits she was lost. She was lost when the three children were taken, lost when their mother fell to the ground, lost forever when only two came home.

When it was released she told her colleagues she would not watch it. A film like that could ruin the truth, she said to her friends. A film like that could overstate things, or fall short. It could give truth a bad name. It would be too much, or not enough. She told herself she knew the story—which she did, and that she’d read the book, which she had. It was the 1930s; it was not even her story.

But of course it was.

It was a story about trying to go home.
Last time he was in Wandering the whole family nearly froze to death, but tonight there was just enough cool air to lift the spirits. The moon was rising over the crest of the stubble, and it was so quiet that if you listened carefully you could hear the snap of a fox’s jaw on the neck of a rabbit.

Once more Callum was watching the universe, safely strapped into the B3. Roger Ku had done a stellar job welding the axle and the harness to the tubed frame, not to mention the improvised footplate. The handles had come off a racing bike. Marcel Breuer would have been proud of Roger. He had picked up the tyres at a pram shop, and they were perfect. It wasn’t all plain sailing at the workshop—there were some sticky questions from his former student. Why do you want to ruin a vintage chair, Fred? Can’t you just hire a wheelchair? What’s the rush?

How to explain that he had to do something irrevocable; that he had to leave something behind, relinquish something? Relinquish, from the Latin, relinquere, to surrender. It was not a sacrifice to modify his chair, but a gesture in the true spirit of engineering and modernity. Why cling to the past? But at the Hostel, Roger dug in his heels and he had had to work hard to placate him. Can’t the staff bring Callum out, Fred? Isn’t that their job? Why are we rushing through the corridors like criminals? Shouldn’t we be signing him out? Doesn’t he need a special van?

In the end Fred had to agree to everything Roger wanted, just to keep him quiet. Yes, he would give a series of guest lectures. Yes, he would mentor one or two post-graduate students. And yes, Professor Lothian would even lead a group of structural engineers on a tour of China, South America and Turkey, where they would visit urban areas in earthquake-prone regions and talk to Governments and local councils about prestressed concrete solutions. His former student had developed a system of embedding chicken wire into concrete and it was proving to be remarkably strong under stress—and cheap. The Professor’s task was to garner support from the private sector for the University’s not-for profit venture. Yes, yes, yes.

It would not be so easy to appease Jan. He would beg her forgiveness. He would take her back to Le Marin.
At Wandering he was exhausted, but happy. It had been tricky getting Callum out of the car and through the fence by himself. Thank goodness for the wire cutters—he would slip them back into Roger’s workshop next time he was there. When he clipped back the barbed wire he found a compacted channel left by a header, which made it a little easier to push the chair through the wheat stubble, with Callum piled high with sleeping bags and a thermos and him with a pack of essentials listed in the folder from the Hostel.

It was a magnificent evening under the stars. Callum was staring right up at what could be Alpha Centauri. He checked the chair. The back wheels were angled so Callum could see right across the field and out into the southern sky. If only he knew what Callum was feeling. When he first got him up here on to the rise he was sure his son was ready to jump out of his chair, climb into a rocket and leave right then and there. ‘You’re not going anywhere, young man’, he said sternly, as if Callum was nine or ten. Fred smiled. Callum was not young any more, but it was hard not to think of him that way.

The last time Callum was young he was in his final moments of Architecture, and he was perfect. He had been invited into Honours, and he wanted to go to America to do his PhD. Callum was so much smarter than Fred had ever been. He had his eye on a scholarship at MIT and a bruise on his cheekbone from where the hockey ball had struck him during the final two minutes of the First Elevens. He took the equalizing penalty from well inside the box, and he had missed it outright.

Like all perfect children, Callum was unaware of his perfection. Martha liked to say he was born outside of the realms of the ordinary, like a minor god—Which doesn’t excuse him from the responsibilities of mere mortals, like cleaning his room and doing his chores! She loved to say those sorts of things—infantilizing things. She was never comfortable with either of the children growing up, and if she were here today she would say something like, I can’t believe you’re nearly thirty-four.

The other Callum had been thin and muscular. The Callum sitting by his side was soft and putty-coloured, and his skin fell away from him as if it were a distant relation to his bones. But never mind: they were coming together again, these two Callums.
For now, just being here together was enough.

It had never been easy with the first Callum.

It was June 10th, not the day to be left alone with a four year old. And he was nursing a terrible hangover from a party at their new friends house, Ralph and Veronica Orr. Callum whined, slouched, grumbled, and did everything an over-tired four-year old did when he didn’t know what to do with himself. Then his father called from Lincoln. Drunk, Frederick presumed, although he could never really be sure. He listened to Morris sobbing on the other end of the line, then put the phone down, but not before he caught the strangled vowels of his brother’s name. ‘Virgil –.’

His father was calling on Virgil’s birthday.

While Fred was on the phone, Callum had managed to get into the cupboard and tip Rice Bubbles all over the floor. Nothing really, but Frederick took Callum’s thin arm and squeezed it as hard as he could without breaking it and dragged him into his bedroom, then lifted him up and tossed him onto his bed as if he were yesterday’s newspaper. The boy floated down onto the quilt, where he lay perfectly still, looking at his father.

Frederick felt it rising up inside him, like lava, like vomit, generations of loathing for his own powerlessness. He swept the spit from his son’s mouth and then he hit him. He hit his four-year old son on the face with the back of his hand, as his father had hit him and his father’s father had hit him, begetting and begetting.

He had hit Callum once and the small head snapped back and forward like a piece of white elastic, returning to him with a red welt clearly visible on his cheek and a trickle of blood bubbling out of the split lip. At that moment he saw his son not as a person, not as a child, but as a space, as the same dark, motherless space he himself had been interred in as a child, when his own father was master of the void.

He managed to close the bedroom door before his knees gave way. Inside, he slid slowly down the cold wall and dropped his head to his knees. It was a very long time before the door behind him creaked open and one brown eye looked out. Step by step, as if approaching a wild beast, Callum edged forward until he was so
close that Frederick could feel his shallow, warm breath. He tried to say something to his son but his mouth had clamped up. Frederick forced himself to look Callum in the face, to let his son see his tears. His shame. When he could, he reached out for the arm that hung limply by his boy’s side. He led Callum to the bathroom where he bathed his face and lip in the sink, and then held him in his arms while the bathtub filled. He carried him to the kitchen and found a candle, a match, and a chipped Beatrix Potter saucer. Round and round went Peter, chasing an eternal orange carrot in Mr. McGregor’s garden. He undressed his son, then himself, and lowered Callum into the deep, warm bath. He turned off the light in the bathroom, and on that cold, wet August afternoon Frederick lay in the water holding his four year old boy with the yellow light of the old candle catching the white enamel tiles, and tried to wash away the sins of the father.

‘Are you thirsty, Callum?’ Fred helped him drink some water, then held onto his hand. Callum has long, thin fingers, like his mother.

Frederick was holding on as tight as he could to his mother’s hand. In the distance a man was coming towards them, pulling his little speck of a brother along with him. He could hear Virgil crying—snivelling, his father called it. His mother’s hand tightened on Fred’s, not to reassure him, no; she was terrified of the man approaching like a turbine and she was hoping that if she tossed the boy in front of the man, then the teeth of the machine might catch on him and grind to a temporary halt, giving her just enough time to get out of the way. But the machine was inexorable and it simply picked up Frederick and incorporated him right into its pounding core and continued out of the garden, down the steps and towards the lake.

The small town of L’Isle St. Claire, in a comfortable house by the lake. It was his mother’s idea. The war is over, Morris, so why not a holiday in France, like other families do? Grand people, like the owners of the Foundry who held his father’s fate in their hands. They boarded the train at Victoria Station, and took the night ferry from Dover, as if they were a normal family
in normal times, as if there were not long sections of the train ride where Mam tried to turn their little heads away from the view, so they would not have to see for themselves the bleeding landscape of France.

Their father laughed. ‘Your mother wanted a holiday? Well, here it is, lads.’

But the town was empty, the shops were shuttered and no one was on holidays.

After three days spent inside reading Hotspur and hiding from hail stones and their father's palm, the boys were dragged outside, their dad dismissing the high winds and the storm water pouring down from the mountains, insisting that he, Frederick, get some bloody exercise, and that he, Frederick, row his little brother out to the centre of the turbulent lake.

‘But Morris, he can’t swim,’ protested Mam, and then turned away, giving in for the last time.

No matter. Morris rolled up his trousers and went to work on the boat, dragging it to the edge, while his mother stood on the bank, worrying her heavy grey wool skirt. His father's strong, pale calves were marbled with cold, half-submerged in the lake’s muddy rim, like broken columns.

It was his father who launched them out into the grey waters, yelling at him to be a man, and at Virgil to cease his damn sniveling—from an old English word, snyflun, meaning mucus of the nose. Virgil was crouched on the hard seat at the front of the boat, his small mouth wobbling, his face white with cold and dripping with snot, gripping hard the rails of the wooden boat, while Frederick tried to rotate the oars as he had been shown at school, struggling to keep the tips symmetrical in the rough waters. Sport was not his strength, which is why it was always so important that Callum excel. Trigonometry, algebra, geometry—this was where Frederick shone. He saw all things in three dimensions, in volumes and cubes, carving deep holes in the graph paper he pinned next to the maps of Europe on the drawing board in his cubicle at school. On his first visit to the British Museum he was allowed to peer into a stereoscopic viewer. He saw a bombed-out cathedral in acute black and white, the edges sharply etched. Rouen? Coventry? As he leaned in to focus, he understood that this was the nature of his gift: to fold up the
ends of flat black lines and equations and drag them off the page and toss them out into the tunneling depths of three-dimensional space. He would imagine things into being. ‘Architecture?’ his father responded, incredulous, disgusted, ‘no son of mine will be a damned architect.’

And so it was to engineering he went, a gift pressed into more practical service.

On the shore his mother's body zigzagged in diminishing zeds until she came to a full stop. When the boat faltered they were far away from her, far from love, unsettled by the high wind and a wave of water that ripped across the bow as he leaned into one oar to turn the boat back. Virgil will stand up when he has been instructed to stay seated. He swung around with his arms outstretched, screamed ‘Mummy!’ and then tipped like a little teapot over the side and under the stern, never to be seen alive. Since Frederick thought of a lake as a contained space with a top and a bottom and a volume that could be fathomed, he followed willfully, purposefully, diving in head-first after Virgil, until he was thrown to the surface with a mouth full of salty bile and later, vomit. Lost.

Fred spun himself around and around in his swiveling Tulip chair, doing just what he always told his children not to do. He was no longer lost. Callum was here. Caroline was on her way. They were all going home together.

‘Did you hear that, Callum? A night bird! A tawny frogmouth? A mopoke? Your mother would have known. She would have brought her book about birds of the Wheatbelt. All the way to Wandering we would have had to listen to descriptions of their habitat and breeding rituals, and how their nests at Muckinbudin or Buracoppin are under threat from clearing. Caroline would have complained. She has never been interested in any animal unless it is dead and gone. Why is that? How long is it since we saw your sister? A year, fifteen months?

Callum, don’t you go to sleep on me, not yet. I have something in the car for you. Do you know what it is? It’s your old telescope, the Dobson. You’re slipping in the chair, let me help you. I’m worried about those straps. Are they too loose? I know I

255
should have come sooner, Callum, please, don’t look at me like that. I just couldn’t see you for a while. Are you angry with me? Are you cross with Daddy? Please don’t be angry. Forgive me, Callum. *Mea culpa.* You remember some Latin? When you’re settled in I’m going to get the telescope, and you can help us find the constellations. You remember the names, don’t you? You always knew the names of things in the sky.

We’re going to have some soup from Jan’s flask. She wanted to come with us, because of my head. I’m not supposed to drive, but it’s nothing really. It wouldn’t have been right for her to come. She’s got her grandson to consider—Morrison. You’ll like Morrison. He’s quite a character. Jan’s father used to take her to Kokerbin Rock when she was a girl. Kokerbin Rock is where we went on our last trip together. Did you see Jan in the car? Does it bother you that I have met someone? She’s just a friend, Callum. I hope Caroline likes her.’

Fred adjusted the pillow behind Callum’s head. ‘What do you think of your chair? The last time you saw that chair it was upstairs in my study. It’s clever isn’t it.’

It was Jan who gave him the idea. Fred helped her carry the new TV into her lounge, and afterwards she helped him with his bags from the hospital.

‘I’m not staying,’ she said, ‘I’m exhausted. And I’m not going to discuss your offer of the house and your ridiculous ideas until I have a really good think, so don’t ask me.’ She was standing in front of the B3.

‘It’s like a wheel chair, isn’t it?’ she said.

The more he looked at the chair, the more he saw that Jan had identified a relationship he had never considered. Perhaps the invention of steel tubing had inspired more than bicycles and the B3? After she left, he plugged in the modem and dialed up the internet. Bingo!


They were both mechanical engineers, and one of them had broken his back in an accident. The new tubed chair was light and mobile and revolutionized wheelchair access all over the world,
and with the invention of their cross-member—still in use today—you could fold it and take it with you.

‘So I called Roger Wu. You met him this morning at the Hostel. He wasn’t in the best of moods, but he’ll come good. The thing is, Callum, from the first cut I had not a single moment of regret. Roger showed me how to weld a seam. You need great heat for high-grade steel, and I had to wear a mask like Ned Kelly and a suit like Neil Armstrong. You know, before that chair I had never made anything in my entire life. Except a boiled egg. And I have something else to confess. I had a maintenance fellow from the University come over one evening and put your telescope together when you were asleep. Remember you woke up that morning and it was all ready in the garage? You were so upset. ‘Daddy,’ you said, ‘Why didn’t you wait for me? You should have woken me up, I wanted to do it with you. We were making it together. It was our project, you and me. You’ve ruined it, Daddy.’ You worked yourself up into a state. You must have been tired from the night before—I think we were at Ralph and Veronica’s until late. But you have to see it from my point of view, Callum, there I was, pouring over those damn photocopies from America, and driving around with you looking for the right components, but in the end I just could not manage to put the thing together. So I called someone. I was furious at myself.’

Frederick stopped. He tucked the blanket around Callum’s legs.

‘That’s why I hit you. It wasn’t hard, but it was enough to make you run from me. I was meant to be an architect, Callum. Architects don’t have to know how to make things. My grandfather started it, and my father made things his whole miserable life, but I had no capacity, Callum. That is why I taught at the university; my strength was in the theory of the thing. A theoretical bridge is perfect, but a real bridge is a different matter. What if a calculation of load is flawed? I became an expert on disasters. I am sure I showed you and Caroline that Super 8 film of the collapse of the bridge at Tacoma Narrows?
A minor oscillation meets a stiff wind, and you have two waves moving closer and closer until they join forces in harmonic motion—or, if you are a stickler, aeroplastic fluttering—with devastating results. A tragic convergence. Even with fine weather and an absence of wind, the best design in the world can fail. The 1992 SAAB, Car of the Year, for example.

Do you hear that? I think there’s a fox amongst the sheep in the next paddock. You went straight through that stop sign into the limestone wall. It was a well-lit intersection, there was no rain, no other traffic and it was clear that you had to stop at the bottom of the hill, but you went through it at nearly eighty kilometres an hour. They checked the brakes, the tyres, what was left of the engine, but they could find no mechanical faults. Nothing. People said they heard a car going very fast as it reached the bottom of the hill. What if someone had been coming, Callum? What if Jan and her Morrison had been driving home from Scouts that night? What if you had murdered a child? I’m
sorry, Callum. This isn’t easy for me. We knew you had been drinking, and that you were over the limit, but not enough for that. All your friends said you were upset about the hockey match, and hadn’t talked to anyone at the party. Your mother died not knowing what you were doing, or why it happened. She had no idea.

Do you know why we are out here under the black sky, and not back at my unit? There are no phones here. I am not going to talk about the accident after tonight. This is first time I have spoken to you about it, Callum, and once will be enough.

It was Caroline who called that night. She had gone to Fleur’s house. You remember Fleur? She has those children with ridiculous names. Caroline said you would have had no idea she was at Fleur’s. She hadn’t seen you for two weeks or more. It was sheer chance.

I answered the phone. I’ve always been glad about that. It would have finished Martha. It was quite late, after 10pm, and no one ever called at that hour. I picked up the phone and I listened. I could hear sounds, all fighting for attention. The loudest was a kind of choking, or catching in the throat, as if someone was drowning. Underneath that there was a repetitive thump—maybe someone patting the back of the person on the phone, trying to calm them down? I could hear a baby crying, and I thought I heard a dog bark. ‘Who is it? Is there a dog hurt?’ I said. And then I heard some other sound, which I later realized was the ambulance siren. That was when Kate —Fleur’s girlfriend— must have taken the phone from Caroline.

‘Mr. Lothian, it’s Fleur Easton. There’s been an accident.’

There was a long pause, although it wasn’t really a pause. Pauses can be conscious or unconscious—a lapse in memory, an interruption. I have read books about this. Pauses work best on the stage when used for dramatic effect. A script might say: Long Pause. Between the two parts of a joke they might write: Short Pause. Sometimes they use the word, Beat. It’s years since I learnt French, but a word came to me that night: un trou. It translates as a snag, a hole, a dent, a crack, a gap, a tear. How can you have a word for something that is no longer there?

A bridge can fail, and so can speech. Just like buildings in an earthquake, there are some things that the tongue and the mouth
and the vocal chords are not designed to withstand.

And then I noticed Martha. She had dropped her knitting on the floor and was standing right behind me. When I picked it up the next day the needles were still in place, neatly folded one over the other, like two hands in a lap. It was a difficult cable pattern Martha was knitting for you, for the long American winters ahead. She loved to go on about ‘the American Winter’, do you remember? She was standing very close to me, near the phone, but we were strangers. Have you seen those photos taken after the war in Europe, everyone starving to death but standing patiently in line, waiting their turns? She was pressed right up against me, but her body was pulling away, trying to keep some distance between herself and the stranger in front of her in the queue.

‘Caroline?’ she said after I put down the phone.

Later the police came and knocked on the front door, just like on television. I wouldn’t open it. I said, ‘I know why you’re here. I already know what you are going to tell me. You can go away now. My daughter has called.’

‘Mr. Lothian, we would like to speak to you in person. We understand this is a very difficult time.’

In the end I let them in. They wanted to drive us to the hospital. I refused. I shook my head at Martha, and I shook it again at the police. ‘No thank you,’ I said. I was polite, but firm. I drove us both, in our own car. I can’t remember parking, but I do remember leaving Martha with Caroline in some kind of room and walking down a long corridor to find you.

And I did find you, Callum. I found you but I did nothing to preserve you. Martha did it all, with Caroline, the scans, the tests, the prognosis, the daily visits, the physiotherapy, and pneumonia. Days and nights and weeks and months and years.

You remember that Mummy died, Callum? Caroline came and told you.

I thought that everything I had ever wanted ended with that phone call. For Martha it was different. Her daughter was still alive. But my son was dead. That was what I thought for years, Callum, that you were dead, and that it was someone else was lying there in the hostel, being washed and fed and toileted. Not
someone, but something. An empty egg on a bed of cotton wool.

I’m so sorry, Callum. I can see now that I was wrong. You are different now, but I can’t hold that against you. I am different too.

I have one regret. I should have told Martha that I knew why you did it. I should have told her it was not her fault, or your fault, but mine. It was all my fault. Can a young man of twenty-one be so angry with his father that he can drive a car that once belonged to his father—a car that was a gift to his son—into a wall at a great speed? Yes, yes, of course. That’s why fathers are such a great danger to their sons. There is no one a boy can hate like his father. I understood the dangers of the relationship, so I held myself apart from you. Martha didn’t understand. She said, ‘Frederick, you have to speak to Callum on his level. He is always has to try so hard to come up to you, and he can’t manage it. He feels as if whatever he does it’s never enough. Stop lecturing him and come out of your office and take him out. He is desperate to see E.T.’

I took you. Do you remember? It was a wonderful film. I’m going to the car now, to get the telescope. I won’t be long. It’s in the boot. You know, I’ve kept it under my bed since we moved, wrapped up in a carpet. It’s smaller than I remember, but it hasn’t got any lighter. I’m getting old, eh!”

All the way down the hill Frederick Lothian thought about his house. He would have to find a builder, but he would manage the project himself. He had shown Roger the sketch, because Roger was a real engineer. Roger could make things. He had looked at Fred’s sketches, and taken out a calculator. ‘It’s all certainly feasible,’ he said, ‘both the ramp and the elevator, as long as local council doesn’t block you, and I don’t think you’ll have any problems there.’

It would be the first thing he had ever built something for his children, and he couldn’t wait to begin.
Caroline drove northeast from Kalgoorlie to Menzies in a hired car. All the way there she thought about her mother flying down this long road in the back of a ute, with Maureen sitting next to her. In the report of the trial there was mention of a sister, so it wasn’t hard to find her in the phone book.

Maureen was standing outside the house when she arrived, and she beat her on the back with her hands when she held her. She made a phone call, and three young men turned up. They were Maureen’s sons, her cousins, and they must have been close by, waiting for the call. They all sat in the kitchen at a table, with a howling easterly rocking the walls, holding their mugs of tea, while the boys shifted in their seats and played with their cigarette packets. They didn’t look much like her, but then, Caroline looked just like mother Carol, said Maureen, and Carol hadn’t looked like anyone else. She was the good-looking one, Maureen said, and the boys laughed. Come on, Mum, they said. A thinker, your mother, and she had such feelings. Carol had two moods, laughing and crying. Does that sound right to you?

‘That sounds right,’ Caroline said.
‘Good at school too, when she went.’

Maureen’s words were broken by long silences when only the wind spoke.

‘She ran off young with a crazy fella’ and never really came back. You make sure you come back,’ said Maureen. ‘We’ll take you out to past Laverton, to Cosmo Newberry. Did you say you got a man at home?’

‘Kind of,’ she said. ‘Almost.’ She held her cup to her lips, and then put it down. She tried not to look at the boys. ‘Maureen, do you know if I have any brothers or sisters?’

This was the question she held onto when she first spoke to Maureen on the phone, and kept with her all the way from Perth to Kalgoorlie, through the long night in the motel, and on the road to Menzies. Martha had said there were none, but she had to make sure.

Maureen shook her head slowly. ‘You came too early. They took you both to Perth, to King Edwards. Your mum lost a lot of blood and had a big operation and they put you in one of those
humicribs. She had to wait weeks to hold you, and then the milk was gone. And there were no more kids after that. She brought you back once, when you were about five months old, and then she went off again. We lost her in Perth, and next we heard you were in foster. We didn’t know until later about the adoption.’

Caroline thought, how could I be talking like this to a stranger? But her grown-up cousins had dropped their heads, caring enough to feel bad for her.

‘We heard later that you got hurt when you were little, and that’s why they put you back in hospital and took you away from her. That was our fault. We should have come down and got you.’ Maureen wiped her face. The boys sat still in their seats.

‘It wasn’t right, what happened to you. Your Nan and Pop, they were broken up when they knew you were gone. They were well known around here. You ask anyone. They were big on Church and education. I work as a Teacher’s Aide in the local school, with the little ones. Your Gran and Pop went for the Exemption when they brought that in. You know about those laws—we’re talking after the war now, late 1940s?’

Caroline nodded.

‘Ten years it took them of writing and getting nowhere, until they got those papers. Dog Tags, they call them now. Some folks looked down on them for doing it, but a lot of people just wanted to put their kids in school, or have tea or go to a movie on a Friday night. We were segregated then. Your Pop had to fill in all these forms, and send photos, and references, and they had to have a medical certificate to say they had no diseases – things like leprosy, even VD. They had to say they wouldn’t mix with Aboriginal people. Your Gran and Pop didn’t want to do that, but they wanted the best for their kids. Who knows if they were right or wrong, it’s easy to judge now. Right, boys?’

Maureen got up from the table. There was some history here, something unresolved. Maureen was talking as much to her boys as to her. She brought water to the table and filled her glass.

‘Your Nan lost her first one. He got taken. She was living out on the Depot then, a real young girl who came in from the desert. She put that little boy on Mount Margaret Mission, and they came and took him in the truck. Real fair, he was. She was
out working and she felt it. She knew something had happened to that boy. We've got a word for it. Your cousin Paul here works at the TAFE. He’s teaching language.’ Maureen nodded at Paul, and then jerked her head at the two other men. They got up and went out the back door onto the veranda. ‘It’s not a word for men to hear,’ she said. ‘But Paul’s a teacher, so that’s different. Tell her, Paul.’

‘Mimipathapathalkiri,’ said Paul.

‘Mimipathapathalkiri,’ repeated Maureen quietly, putting one hand on her breast. ‘It means ‘breast biting’, it means the mother feels something’s wrong with her baby. That’s what your Gran felt when her first was taken.’

Caroline tried the word.

‘Mimipatha—’

‘Mimi-patha-patha-lkiri,’ said Paul. ‘It’s a Wangkatha word—well, really it’s more complicated than that. There’s lots of languages round here.’

Caroline wrote it in her notebook with Paul looking over her shoulder.

‘You look after that word,’ he said, tapping the front of her book with his finger.

Caroline nodded. She looked at the clock above the fridge. It was a long drive back to Kalgoorlie, and then a late flight to Perth. She had to go.

Maureen stood up first. ‘Your Gran would have loved to see you, with your degrees and your Museum job. Don’t you go crying on us. You’re back now. Go get the boys in off the veranda, Paul, and tell them not to throw their butts on the ground. There’s an ashtray for that.’

When Paul left, Maureen put her hand on Caroline’s arm. ‘I put some photos out for you. You can take them if you want. There’s not many.’

‘Photos?’ said Caroline. She had never thought of photos. Her mother was dead. Why would there be photos?

They were in the kitchen when Martha told her. Caroline was living in a flat with a friend, and she was home for Sunday dinner. She had just met Julian, and she had finished her
undergraduate degree and was waiting to see if she had a scholarship. She felt strong.

‘I’m going to try to contact her, Mum. I need to know if she wants to see me.’

Her mother put the colander down on the board and wiped her hands on a tea towel.

‘You can’t, Caroline. You can’t see her. She died four years ago, when you were in your last year of High School. It was a domestic dispute. It was in the paper.’

Martha did not cry. If she had cried Caroline would have slapped her face.

‘Where?’

‘Down south, near Albany. You were in Year 12. You were about to have your final exams. Dad thought—we thought.’

What did they think? ‘You said you only knew her first name. That’s what you said. You said that her name was Carole.’

‘Her name was Carole. They were still taking the mother’s name off birth certificates when you were born, but we found out who she was from the Matron and from the Department of Native Welfare—it was still called that back then. It was because of the hospital. For some reason the records from the hospital went to the Matron, and they had the full name on them. I was reading the paper one day, and I saw her name. I always read the smaller columns, the misdemeanors and convictions.’

‘Just in case you saw my mother there?’

‘I know how it sounds. But yes, in case I saw your mother. There was a trial and he was convicted. It wasn’t your father—your birth father—who did it. It was a man she hardly knew. He already had a record. They met at the pub. I’m so sorry, Caroline.’

Her mother must have known that sorry did not come anywhere near close to it. All of her final year she had stayed after school and studied with the Boarders. She sat at a lovely white desk with her books stacked neatly in one corner, her pens in the other, in front of a large window opening out onto a grassy quadrangle. She was going to get top marks. She was going to prove something to all the other girls, but if she’d been asked she would not have known what that something was.
She smashed a plate, then a glass. Her father came down from the study. ‘I told you I wanted to find her. In Year 9 and 10 and 11, I kept telling you and Dad, and you kept saying, wait till you’re older, wait till you’re older. And all that time you knew her name; you knew she was living some terrible life while I was wondering what to wear to the fucking school ball? How could you have done that? And then she dies, and you don’t even tell me.’

_We didn’t know the right time to tell you. We didn’t want you to go through all that. We wanted to protect you._ Martha said all manner of things thing like that, but none of it made any difference. Her father said nothing.

A few months later she made a start. She requested her medical records from the Maternity Hospital. What she found terrified her. She confided in a woman in one of her classes that she was adopted, and that she had requested her files from the hospital where she was admitted. They were at the Tavern, and after a few beers she imagined this woman could be her friend. ‘I was premature,’ she said, ‘and later I was admitted with burns and a broken leg.’

‘How much later?’ asked the woman.

‘Two and a bit.’

‘Lucky you were so young,’ she said, ‘so you can’t remember any of it. Do you want another beer?’

Caroline excused herself and left. Was that the measure of all that mattered—the things a child remembered?

While Maureen hugged her, Paul stood to one side, holding something in his hand. When she turned to him to say goodbye he handed her a small black Bible. The last thing she wanted was a Bible, but it felt wrong to refuse.

‘Thank you, Paul,’ she said.
‘Jesus will protect you,’ he said gravely.
‘I hope so,’ said Caroline.

‘Katung-kat-janya—the one who is in the above. That was one of the first words we had for Jesus in Wangkatha. You better write that down too.’

He spelt it out as she wrote it in the front of her new Bible. On impulse she held it out to Paul. ‘Would you?’
He took the book and pen and sat at the table. ‘Here you go,’ he said, handing it back.

‘Are you a Christian?’ Paul asked.

‘No,’ said Caroline.

‘Plenty of time left,’ said Paul with a smile.

‘And watch for ‘roos,’ said Maureen as she closed the car door, ‘you shouldn’t be driving now, should she, boys? It getting close to dusk.’

The boys shook their heads and kicked their feet, and stood around the car with their arms crossed.

‘You can always stay, you know Caroline. I like having another woman to talk to. But you got a plane to catch. You’re coming back, though. I’ve got that spare room for you, and I want you back. You hear?’

Paul walked around the car and kicked every tyre. ‘Back one’s lying a bit low,’ he said, leaning in the window. ‘Did they check the pressure when you got it?’

‘This isn’t a country car,’ said the youngest cousin, ‘it isn’t even a 4WD. At least you got a bar.’

‘It’ll be fine,’ said Caroline, smiling. This was what it would be like to have brothers, she thought.

It was hard to avoid Slim Dusty on the drive back to Kalgoorlie. Slim Dusty and kangaroos. She drove slowly, flicking her high beam on and off. The missions had deep roots in her mother’s country. Paul was some kind of preacher, she decided, in some kind of evangelical church. Or perhaps he was just poetic.

*For Carol.*

*Getting lost is the easy part,*

*it’s getting found that’s hard.*

*Come back soon.*

*Your cousin,*

*Paul.*

Just how did you go about getting found? As she came into Kalgoorlie her phone beeped and she pulled off the road into a truck stop. The text was from Fleur. *How did it go? Are you okay?* XX.
There was a missed call from her father. No message. Lost for words, as usual.

She parked the car in front of her motel room and picked up her bag, her bible and the small fold of photos from Maureen. She couldn’t really look at the photos with Aunty Maureen standing next to her, pointing and talking. *I am about six there, your mother must be eight. See the hair? Your Nan was always at it with a comb. There’s me and your mother and our lot outside the Methodist Church. Would you look at those dresses? That’s your Pop and Nan, all dressed up. They were big in the Church. See how you look like your Nan? That’s Nan’s sister, May. She’s gone now. There’s your mother at a dance. She’s about sixteen. She got that dress especially. Isn’t she beautiful?*

There were five small black and white images. Maureen had written on the back in pencil. *At Laverton. At Church. Nan and Pop. Aunty May. At the dance.*

At the dance her mother was standing next to a young man in a suit. When she saw him her heart jumped.

‘Is that him?’

‘Who?’ asked Maureen. ‘Oh no, that handsome man is Wally, my husband. We all went to school together. He died about ten years ago.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Caroline.

‘Yes,’ said Maureen.

*It was getting dark, and there was traffic on the road. She should get to the airport. Some kind of sign on the street was flashing on and off, filling her room with pink light then throwing it back into darkness. She caught herself in the long mirror on the dresser, a thin woman sitting on the edge of a bed, holding an envelope to her chest. She watched the mirror. One moment she was lost, and the next she was found.*

Caroline closed her bag and left.
Many things have influenced the writing of this novel. Amongst them:

The writings of W. G. Sebald.
The writings of Melanie Klein.
The writing of Winnicott.

*Bringing them Home*, The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Australia); Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 2007


Jerng, M.C., *Claiming Others: transracial adoption and national belonging*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010


Extinctions:

Exegesis
'It is a joy to be hidden but a disaster not to be found.’ Winnicott.

‘Can an idea ever be really fully present in a thing?’ Bill Brown, _Things._

‘Only in extinction is the collection comprehended.’ Walter Benjamin, _Unpacking my Library_

‘In reading, one enters the spare visual space immediately, through the door of a thing, a small, vivid detail.’ Cynthia Wall.

‘For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference is not an organic part of the whole.’ Aristotle.

‘History...[is] possibly the most cluttered area of our memory.’ Caroline Steadman, _Dust_

‘The spatula cannot be forced into the patient’s mouth.’ Winnicott.
1. Found Things

*Finding* is an old word for all manner of illicit and ambiguous routes by which people and things arrive in our possession. *Finding* appears to open us up to the drama of discovery, and hence to narrative itself. There is more than a trace of magic in finding things, but magic or not, where objects and children are concerned the question of origins is paramount. ‘Where did that come from? Where did you find it?’ asks a parent when something unfamiliar appears in our child’s hands. ‘Where did I come from?’ asks the five year old, collapsing together the question of how a baby is made (biology) and the social quest for identity and location.

Fairy tales and Victorian novels love a foundling, and nowhere is finding more miraculous than in the story of a child discovered in a reed basket on the edge of a river, or in a jungle. We no longer think of real babies being found on the sides of roads (though it does happen), but we continue to teach our children that there are right ways and wrong ways for things to come our way. It is wrong to pretend to have found something that you did not. We call this *theft*, and if children have indeed taken something that is not theirs then we tell them they must return it. In the small but anxious dramas of moral probity that blight children’s lives, the lessons of finding are paramount:

Daughter arrives home from a play at a friend’s house clutching something in her hand.

Mummy (horrified): ‘What is that? Where did you get it?’

Daughter (holding tight onto dolly): ‘I found it!’ I did! ¹

Adults understand all too well that objects demand we attend to where they came from and how they got here. The appearance of the unfamiliar object in the hands of the child perturbs the parent. The parent is ruffled. Action is required. Investigations commence. Were this to develop into a habit (god forbid!) it would constitute what child psychologists call a ‘red flag.’

¹At which point the parent waits to see if guilt (a social category) has nested in her
Whether we are speaking of dolls or babies, of representation or the real, there is something about finding that inaugurates suspense. Finding is incomplete. Finding makes us curious, and curiosity remains a valued term in both pedagogic and creative practices. It is curiosity that the parent is urged to foster in the infant, to stimulate throughout childhood, to assiduously feed and water in adolescence and beyond. One may well ask: is it possible to be creative without curiosity? For British psychologist Winnicott the transitional object is a prototype of the child’s creative relationship with the world. The transitional object is the infant’s first ‘not-me’ possession. . . but it is also a discovery; it is something the infant has found . . . the infant has created the object by transforming an old scrap of blanket into something that is much more than an ordinary blanket.

Paradoxically, finding can figure as loss in both fiction and theories of creativity. Both lost and found things require explanation and thus generate narrative — how many stories begin with some object lost or found? Finding is closely linked to finding out, and to the idea of an enigma. Losing, seeking and finding are fundamental to narrative structure. In Vladimir Propp’s seminal analysis of Russian folktales, plot is reduced to thirty-one basic functions, carried out by one or more of the dramatis personae, to whom Propp allocates seven basic roles. French narratologist Gremais replaces Propp’s characters with actants or actantial roles, further emphasizing their functionality and unhinging them from warm-blooded characters. These functions are played out across the story: the ‘subject’ searches for the illusive ‘object’; the ‘sender’ is on a quest initiated by a ‘subject’ for that lost ‘object’ etc.

Structural analysis is a cold-blooded business. It is unconcerned with the history and reception of these stories because it privileges synchrony over diachrony. Structural

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2 ‘[If the mother can supply the right conditions], every detail of the baby’s life is an example of creative living. Every object is a ‘found’ object [in the way that the breast was a found object in the feeding situation.] Given the chance, the baby begins to live creatively, and to use actual objects to be creative into and with.’ See D.W. Winnicott, ‘The location of cultural experience’, in Playing and Reality London, Tavistock, 1971, p. 101.
analysis (for who talks of these things now?) could never tell us why children and grown-ups love stories about the lost and the found, or why they take pleasure and comfort in the repetition of enigmatic tales that begin with a ruffling-up and end with the flattening out of folds.

We can think of *exegesis* as the actual process of interpretation, and *hermeneutics* as the theory of that interpretation.⁵ Roland Barthes, in *S/Z*, names the system associated with enigmas the ‘Hermeneutic Code’.⁶ The Hermeneutic code is concerned with entities or elements that articulate a question, as well as events that prepare the question or retard its answer.⁷ It is one of two codes that are irreversible and amplify across the narrative; once a secret is revealed and the reader finds the truth it cannot be undone or reversed. *Finding* and *losing* place the reader in a temporal sequence that carries them through the text.

In the classic plot, the story unfolds from order to a state of disequilibrium to the return of order. Magic lamps and beans find their way into the wrong hands and wreak temporary havoc, until they are returned to their rightful place; children are lost until they are found. In the end, the genie gets back in the bottle and the little girl finds her bear—or her mother. Things are smoothed over, folded up and put away. *Lights out now children, we have closure!*

But this is not a fictional story; it is an exegesis and is part of a larger body of work that constitutes the PhD. Its tenor must be critical, interpretative, and theoretical. Yet, I would argue that the generative capabilities of finding (and losing) are as pertinent to theory as to fiction. Further, the interdependency of finding and losing can be seen as analogous to the relationship of the critical essay to the creative work that lies adjacent to it. Perhaps there is something lost and something found in both of these written forms; the requirement that the candidate complete both elements suggests that neither is conclusive, that neither can tell the whole story on their own and were these two parts to

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⁷ Ibid.
collude, so to speak, to get together and tell each other what they are on about, they would still be unable to account for all that remains. The process of interpretation that we call ‘exegetical’ can produce ‘more than itself’ because it is the nature of interpretation to produce an excess of meaning, ‘a remainder’. Not all things lost and found can be unfolded and resolved across the smooth surface of a page. Walter Benjamin writes: The word unfolding has a double meaning. A bud unfolds into a blossom; while the boat unfolds into a flat sheet of paper, just like the paper children use to make their floating object. This second kind of unfolding is really appropriate to the parable; it is the reader’s pleasure to smooth it out so that he has the meaning in the palm of his hand. Kafka’s parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom.

Benjamin’s flat piece of paper promises the finality of restoration. An exegesis can certainly be restorative; it can make up for what is lacking in the text, and return it to full health, but I am arrested by the use of the contrasting images to symbolize different hermeneutics. To open and extend the potential for meaning allows the text to blossom; to close it off is to return to paper and words. To reduce the boat to a single piece of paper is to terminate interpretation; the parable unfolds only once and completes it. It functions like an origin, ‘freezing the ‘never-ending series of reflections’ which the true work (and play) puts

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8 ‘In the terms Bataille proposes in “The Notion of Expenditure” (Visions 116–29) and elaborates in The Accursed Share, any “restricted economy” —any putatively closed, reciprocal system, such as an identity, a concept or structure, marketplace, or ecosystem— produces more than it can account for. Any restricted economy is fractured by its own unacknowledged excess and in seeking to maintain itself will, against its own logic, crave expenditure and loss (hence Bataille’s interest in sacrifice and automutilation). This is to say that any restricted economy is suitable in a “general economy” irreducible to proper conceptualization.’ M. Redfield, Georges Bataille, edited, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. Available from: Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism, litguide.press.jhu.edu, (accessed 30 May 2011).


10 The figure of the fold is a central category in Benjamin’s post-Romantic writings on the Baroque, where he turns to allegory as the means of rejecting the Romantic philosophy of the work of art that unfolds itself organically, as if a flower, and is resolved in criticism’s absolute self-knowledge. See: W. Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Theatre, London, Verso, 1987.
Inverting the logic of the flower, the boat’s multiple folds are reduced to zero...the artist who produces the ‘paper boat’ work has simply concealed a unitary sense within the folds, which envelop it like so much ornamentation.12

If we try to relate Benjamin’s metaphors to the exegesis and its attendant fictional sister, we see that an exegesis can function as a paper boat: once unfolded and flattened it produces the origin of the novel. As the ‘theory of the novel’ the exegesis would reveal the true meaning of the literary work; it would be its key. In this way the fictive copy (as I will call the creative work) is diminished and cast in the role of ‘acting out’ the primary and dominant theoretical model, a model which secures and valorizes the creative work. But at the same time, the paper boat limits the novel and arrests the ‘futurity’ of the work and the possibility of further interpretation arising from ‘the remains’.

Benjamin used two images/symbols (flower and paper boat) with which to explore a critical hermeneutic difference. These two figures part company around beginnings and ends: the flower unfolds without ending—it is an endlessly beginning structure—while the paper boat is resolved in a flat plane. This figure enables Benjamin to conceptualize creativity and interpretation within a modernist framework.13

Like Benjamin, I too found some thing to help me think. It is a real object, yet it is a curiously ambiguous and complicated thing—oxymoronic even. It has at least a double meaning; it is both container and void.

I found an egg.

But that is not enough. In the field of academic writing, as in the life of a child, there is no place for the excuse ‘I just found

it'. Like the good mother, the University asks that we account for the provenance of things. We must know why we found it, where we found it, why it mattered that we found what we found and who might have found it before us. The University has a point: the age of innocence is ended. Freud would never uphold a claim to innocence in the field of finding; his work is replete with compulsive returns and fortuitous losses.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud observes his grandson Ernst throwing and retrieving a wooden spool tied to yarn. The loss of the object is accompanied by a mournful *Fort* (gone), while its return is greeted with a happy *Da* (here)! Freud interprets the ‘staging’ of the game as the child’s way of symbolically containing and managing his anxiety at his mother’s absence (noting as well the aggression in the act of throwing her away). For Lacan, after Freud, all language is loss and absence, because you only need words when things have gone. This game demonstrates the accession to the subject into the symbolic order (language), at which stage the child replaces the object with a semiotic of elementary binary signifiers. Peter Brooks’ bases his Freudian model of plot on the phallic death-drive and the compulsion to repeat. Following Freud, Brooks vision of the reader’s relationship to narrative is erotic; the pleasure of finding is grounded in the masochism of losing. In the game of expulsion and incorporation the child makes a willful passage through the un-pleasurable to the pleasurable. By losing and finding his mother over and over again he manages his anxiety and forestalls her (and his own) death, just as Scheherazade defers her own death at the hands of the sultan by a temporal withholding of narrative.

But we are post-Enlightenment beings. Metaphors and tropes of discover and curiosity are no longer innocent. They give rise to questions of guilt and repression, to ethics and responsibility. All great theoretical movements rise up and challenge the surety of surfaces and the claim to innocence. Be it

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feminism, psychoanalysis, post-colonialism, or queer theory, we are charged with interrogating those things that appear to be private, innocent and innocuous. We must at least try to account not only for what we find, but the uses to which we put these things. At the beginning of the 21st century there is a very real possibility that our find is someone else’s loss.

In the academic field, there are those locations which once appeared to be excised from politics, to be neutral territory for seeking and finding things. The archive and the library are the historically privileged sites of academic inquiry, yet modern accounts of research still borrow heavily from the tropes of finding to lend to their practices the primary force of an encounter. As Caroline Steadman writes, ‘The practice of history in its modern mode is just one long exercise of the deep satisfaction of finding things.’ Steadman’s comments suggest that while the boundaries of historical research have been challenged and the people and things deemed worthy of inquiry have changed, the impulse to find remains a constant.

While historians may sometimes still go looking for things in prescribed places, their search not always a cool-headed one. The historian is in a kind of ‘archive fever’, writes Caroline Steadman, directed towards the dramatic recovery of origins that will finally yield history as text. Steadman is borrowing here from Derrida’s Mal D’Archives, which is concerned not with the historical archive at all, but with history and the desire to recover moments of inception, beginnings and origins—what Derrida calls arkhe, ‘a place where things begin, where power originates, its working inextricably bound up with the authority of beginnings.’ The desire to find an origin is also a desire for truth, but not all origins are true, and not all beginnings are origins, as we will see.

If the Archive is the place where historians go to find things, then the place where the successful historian puts what they have found is History. Success is not for everyone. The archive is a privileged site of exclusion and a focus of public power. Janneke Adema writes:

What is kept and preserved is connected to power structures, the power of those who decide what to collect (and on what grounds) and the power to interpret the archive and its content when called upon for legitimatory claims later on. The question of authority does not so much lie with the archive, but with who has access to the archive and with it, who gets to constitute it. At the same time, although it has no real legitimatory power of its own, the archive is used as an objectified extension of the power structures that control it.17

The archive is a place to put ‘stuff’ that ‘just sits there until it is read, and used and narrativised.’18 But an archive carries far less certitude than suggested by the quote above: Steadman argues that the gaps and omissions, and the disinterested form that it takes can also be expressive and meaningful:

[We] cannot be shocked at [its] exclusions, its emptiness, at what is not catalogued. . . Its condition of being deflects outrage: in its quiet folders and bundles is the neatest demonstration of how state power has operated, through ledgers and lists and indictments, and through what is missing from them.19

The historian who turns towards the archive does so with a kind of stubborn faith that something will turn up, but the writer has no such faith. She is faithless. She belongs to no institution. In terms of belonging, she has failed. Her own subjectivity is fragile and risks dereliction. If as Steadman argues, the archive is an extension and an expression of the systems and structures that constitute it, then what of those persons and things that are not located there? Who will care about them?

Dereliction translates as ‘negligence’, and also as ‘undutiful’ and ‘abandoned’. In Luce Irigaray’ reading of Heidegger, to be derelict is to be outside the masculine symbolic order.20 Irigaray reads Heidegger literally; philosophical homelessness is strategically mapped across the domestic field,

which historically has been outside the Archive. By locating woman within the home (along with her domestic things) men express their nostalgia for the plenitude and wholeness of the original mother, argues Irigaray. For Irigaray, man’s extension in the world is predicated on the immanence of the woman as support: man can build and dwell in the world only on the basis of the materiality and nurturance of women:

To fix and keep hold of his identity, man makes a house, puts things in it, and confines there his woman, who reflects his identity to him. The price she pays for supporting his subjectivity, however, is dereliction, having no self of her own...\(^{21}\)

The slippage between the literal and figural, between philosophy and the everyday is unavoidable. But surely to invoke Irigaray at this point is untimely? Who wants to drag women or ‘women’ back into such predictable spheres? Women and theory have moved on: Irigaray’s vision universalizes both masculinity and patriarchy; it colonizes the literal and the figural, leaving no space for inflection and no way for our homes to figure as nurturing spaces or spaces where one can extend oneself and be creative.\(^ {22}\) Women are retreating from identification with corporate values and are busy reclaiming domestic space through ‘radical homemaking’. We (well, they) are busy knitting and canning seasonal fruits. This is home as refuge and as space of creativity; home is now ‘home-made’.\(^ {23}\)

But we are mixing eggs and chickens.\(^ {24}\) For a moment, let us shore up the wall between literal and metaphorical and return Irigaray to philosophy. Her work is written within the discourse of the Western philosophical system and its inherited metaphors and binaries. For Hegel and for Freud, as for the Greeks, the feminine is the debased inverse of reason and plenitude; she is un-reason and lack. For Heidegger, woman is a vessel. She is


\(^{22}\) Ibid., pp.9-10.


reduced to an architectural function as support and material envelope or container. Iris Young comments:

he contains or envelopes her with walls while enveloping himself and his things in her flesh... She is...to be place without occupying place. Through her, place would be set up for man's use but not hers.  

Philosophically speaking, she is an empty egg.

While post-colonial theorists made homelessness a metaphor for philosophical thought, and figured exile as a kind of 'willed homelessness', for Irigaray it was catastrophic for the category of woman to be cast outside the symbolic order.

I know I am showing both my age and my jealousy of young women who can knit, but I am invoking bodies of thought that shaped me. This is my story too. Can it be otherwise? Whether my identification with 'the derelict' no doubt has its roots in Western philosophy, my personal encounter with feminism as a young woman, or my interest in Museums, I cannot say, but these remain emotional issues—affective. Despite my desire (and declaration) to make my daughter a wardrobe of miniature attire for her favorite dolls, I would very much like my creative efforts to extend beyond the home and matter in other ways. Yet a series of sobering facts must be registered. Creative writing programs occupy an unstable position on the boundary of University departments. There may be times when creative writing has 'border glamour', but my own position is less prestigious than perilous. At this point in my (non)career I can hardly avoid a series of pressing questions: what is the meaning and value of this 'research'? What exactly is it that I have found if I did not find it in a place that is authorized by History? And, by problematising (and refusing) an authoritative beginning (in text, library, State archive) am I sacrificing my future? Finally, and most  

26 Young, p. 52.
importantly, where will I put what I find?29 We all need somewhere to put what we find.

When I worked in a large history museum I was unpopular in my belief that objects should be freed from their historical obligations. The improper use artefacts was considered irreverent and downright disrespectful: a kind of sacrilege.

I have always felt an obligation to force new relationships upon objects. When my mother died I came into a number of inert objects replete with associations: a ‘special’ dinner set called Covent Garden, a pair of silver Danish salt and pepper shakers, a Norwegian Daisy milk jug; I forced myself to use them because I did not want to become enslaved by the sentimental or the sacred. (Daisy was the name of the design on the milk jug; it fell out of the cupboard one evening and is now broken beyond repair. To keep the pieces would be stupid, but is there any point in replacing it with another Daisy? Of course not: it would not be the same.)

Objects place constraints upon us, and while the artist or the fiction-maker may be able to ignore the veridical demands that the writing of history places upon historians, she cannot ignore the ethical questions that arise from ‘the will to find’.30

Losing, finding, beginning, ending, belonging, longing— these are some of the concerns of this thesis.

How we think about things.

How things help us think.

29 ‘We have to tackle the question of what life itself is about. Our psychotic patients force us to give attention to this sort of basic problem. . . I have used the term cultural experience as an extension of the idea of transitional phenomena and of play without being certain that I can define the word ‘culture’. The accent indeed is on experience. In using the word culture I am thinking of the inherited tradition. I am thinking of something that is in the common pool of humanity, into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw if we have somewhere to put what we find.’ D.W. Winnicott, 'The location of cultural experience', The International Journal of psycho-analysis, vol. 48, no. 3, 1967. Perhaps that is where depression begins: in finding one has nowhere to put what you find.

30 See New York-based visual artist Barbara Bloom: ‘I don’t make stuff, I alter it. I don’t have the handmade element. I’ll never forget you asked me one time, ‘What do you do with your hands when you’re watching TV?’ I don’t have hobbies (I have time for a lot of bad thoughts). What I do as an artist is talk on the phone...’ K. Smith, 'Barbara Bloom', Bomb, vol. 54, 1996. The museum (both Natural History and Art) has been a rich source of critical inquiry into the history of colonial practices for indigenous artists and communities. See for example the 2013 exhibition TABOO at the MCA, in Sydney. Curated by Brook Andrew, the exhibition was marked by the foregrounding of installation and assemblage of existing art and archival material in new arrays. See also, J.A. Gonzalez, Subject to display: reframing race in contemporary installation art, Cambridge Mass., MIT Press, 2008.
How things help us begin.

How things help us end.

In the next chapter I turn to the complicated place of my find in the history of objects. I then address the poetic and writerly uses of found things. But these divisions remain unstable. We cannot help but slip; it is into language that my real egg is ‘tipped’, just as books were once printed with large gaps into which the images were subsequently ‘tipped in.’

Having been tipped into language, my egg can no longer be the real egg it once was, but an object encountered in the field of writing. It is an image of an egg, what I call ‘a creative copy’.

But first, to the Egg.
2. In Which I Find an Egg.

The Aberdeen University Museum calls it one of their ‘great treasures’. It is the egg of the extinct Giant Auk, *Penguinus impennis*. One of few in existence, the egg is accorded the rights of the rare and the precious: a limit is placed on its visibility. In 2005 it was displayed for six weeks as part of an exhibition with the thematic title *Extinction*.

The circumstances of the eggs arrival in the Museum collection are in the public record. The egg of the Great Auk was once held in the French Royal Palace, under the watchful eye of the Keeper of the Collection, a Monsieur Dufresne. It was he who probably inscribed the surface of the egg in his own hand: *Pingouin*. The Auk is not a penguin, despite a superficial resemblance. The Great Auk was one of the 4400 animal species originally described by Carolus Linnaeus in his 18th-century work, *Systema Naturae*, in which it was named *Alca impennis*. The species was not placed in its own genus, *Pinguinus*, until 1791. Both penguins and Auks stand tall: the Auk was around 75 centimeters tall, and like the penguin, was black and white.

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However, the Auk’s enormous beak clearly distinguished it from the penguin, which is an altogether different species. But Monsieur Dufresne was not confused: he would have been familiar with the common term ‘penguin/pingouin’ that first appeared in the 16th century and was synonymous with the Auk.\textsuperscript{33} This was the name given to the bird by mariners who travelled in the northern Atlantic seas where the bird was ubiquitous, before it was systematically slaughtered for its flesh, eggs, oil and down. When Europeans began to venture south, they encountered the penguin, and then named it after the creatures of the north.\textsuperscript{34}

Jeremy Gaskell argues that the disappearance of the once-common Auk fueled the 19th century misreading of the new theories of evolutionary Darwinism. The following opinion of a Revd. Moses Harvey of Newfoundland is taken from an 1874 New York journal devoted to sports and natural history:

> It is evident that in the ‘battle of life’, such a bird as the Great Auk had but a poor chance. In a word, where competition for available provisions is so keen, where the ‘struggle for existence’ is so terrible, where only the ‘fittest’ survive, such a simpleton as the Great Auk must ere long be gobbled up. When the fat ‘innocent at home’ actually walked into the mouths of its foes—great gawk that it was—its doom must be annihilation soon or later. Such proved to be the case.\textsuperscript{35}

Survival of the fittest became survival of the most powerful, in terms that are recognizable as the basis of racist evolutionary primitivism, and were used to justify the colonial project in Australia and elsewhere.

Modernity, globalization and extinction are old companions. Gaskell demonstrated that narrative of the extinction of the Great Auk is inextricably bound up with the expansion of trade across the northern European waters. Sailors, merchants and coastal dwellers all contributed to the ultimate disappearance of the species. It was made vulnerable firstly because of the limited breeding locations of the bird, in remote

\textsuperscript{33} Within etymological circles there is debate regarding the origin and meaning of the word: some say it is Dutch, others that is Welsh, still others that it is French.


\textsuperscript{35} Gaskell, p. 6.
rocky islets on the edges of the Atlantic where it came to lay only one egg, but also because of its cumbersome gait on land.36

The extinction of the Auk caused something of a sensation in 19th century Europe. It captured the imagination of the public, and along with the disappearance of the New Zealand Mo and the Dodo, is credited in part with spurring the movement for the protection of birds and other species.37 Much as the Dodo, the Auk became a common figure in popular culture, and an oft-quoted symbol of man’s cruelty and short-sightedness.38 The skins and eggs of the Auk began to fetch enormous prices in the auction houses of London and Paris; it is to one such auction house that our Egg was destined. T.A. Coward wrote in 1920:

From time to time...popular interest is aroused in the Great Auk: an egg changes hands and brings a high price in a London saleroom, and a more or less incorrect account of the Garefowl appears in the Press. It is the money value of the egg...and not the bird that creates interest.39

With the dispersal of the Royal collections after the French Revolution the Auk egg departed company with royalty and entered into private bourgeois collections. From 1847 to 1863 it was the property of a wealthy ship-owner and ornithologist, a Monsieur J. Hardey, of Dieppe. His son Michael then placed it on loan to the Museum of Dieppe, until in 1909 a Madame Ussel of Eu put the egg up for sale at the famous Stevens Auction house in London, where interested benefactors donated the sum of one hundred and ninety-nine pounds, and presented it to the University.40

Provenance has secured the egg a place in the Museum, and protects the institution against the threat of unauthorized

36 Ibid., pp.12-14.
37 Ibid., p.16.
38 Fuller, pp. 10-11. Amongst others, there were Great Auk cigarettes, and ginger wine with the emblem of the Great Auk.
40 The town of Eu has suffered in the Internet era. Potential visitor and businesses are unable to defeat the inexorable logic of the Google search engine and escape their subjugation to the greater EU—the European Union. The town is considering changing its name to Ville d’Eu.
41 The Zoology Museum
copies. But what kind of Museum collection can be constituted by the egg of an extinct species?

The history of collecting is marked by both the desire for totality and the impossibility of completion. While the egg could expect to be secure in its elite affinity (with other Auk eggs) it is an affinity in spirit only; most eggs held in natural history collections have a prescribed role within science and biology. The scientific study and collection of eggs is a specialist field with its own suitably eggy name: Oology. Modern museums collect and compare series of specimens across time and space, but the Great Auk eggs remain alone in their finite singularity, dispersed across the globe and unlikely to meet up in a clutch or cabinet in any foreseeable future. These eggs can never attain the status of specimen in a Natural History Museum: specimens are those eggs of species that have survived and prospered and are collected on the basis of their membership in a class.

The eighteenth century generated its botanical nomenclatures by a procedure based upon the same epistemology that would later be applied to archaeological artefacts. The botanical and zoological taxonomies assumed that a single specimen could stand for a species, that part of a specimen could stand for a specimen, that the parts could be related and named, and finally that they could be seen to stand to each other in a contiguous ordered fashion. The possibility of a perfect representation of nature rests then on a complex series of metonymies and metaphors bridging the gap between the natural object and its representation... It is in this [Enlightenment] idea of an ordered spectacle of Nature, supplemented by an ordered language that would describe the spectacle, that the idea of the Museum was born.

The remains of extinct species— of which the Auk Egg is one— have been robbed of the capacity to slip into the serial anonymity of scientific discourse and to stand-in for an entire species. The egg has no representative power, even to metonymically illustrate the reproductive

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43 Ibid. p. 227
In the case of the Aberdeen Egg, there is a solid provenance to give weight to its specificity. Provenance authorizes and legitimizes the artefact by (teleologically) narrating its relatively unbroken journey towards the museum collection. Despite the original extraction of the Auk egg from the ebb and flow of historical time and its eternal decontextualisation in the Aberdeen Museum, it (paradoxically) still requires a historical narrative to situate it. This history/provenance is unavoidably discursive: history proceeds via the documents and receipts of tender and exchange held in the University archives. That objects excised from the natural world and placed in museums attract such documenting energy and attention to traffic is testament to the continued import of the fence between the natural and the cultural. But in this case it is writing that is required to hold the whole thing up. Ungrounded and unclaimed—outside of writing—a lonely egg could find itself in the category of foundling and risk abandonment and repulsion from the collection. But while the field of museum studies offers practical solutions to the problem of the ‘orphan object’, more discursive realms consider all objects in museums to be ‘at risk’.45

In her wonderful study of the relationship between transparency and modernity in the Victorian era, Isobel Armstrong examines the new relationship amongst things in the new ‘glass culture’ that was set in motion by industrialization and mechanization.46 George Cruikshank’s engraving The Dispersion of the Worlds of all Nations from the Great Exhibition of 1851 depicts an anxious, miscegenated cacophony of manufactured objects, cast out around the periphery of the Exhibition space.47 Armstrong writes:

But what Cruikshank’s satiric exuberance marks above all is one of the most important aspects of modern

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45 Museums call these ‘orphan objects’: for the legal, ethical and practical issues raised by such unhinged objects see R. Leventhal and B.I. Daniels, ‘Orphaned Objects, Ethical Standards, and the Acquisition of Antiquities’, *Journal of Art, Technology & Intellectual Property Law*, vol. 23, no. 2, March 2013.
exhibition display under glass...Once released from the Exhibition taxonomies, these objects have nowhere to go; they become redundant objects reduced to a kind of diaspora of the artefact. This dispersal discloses a further necessity of exhibition space—the modern exhibition always means things out of place.48

The Dispersion of the Works of All Nations from the Great Exhibition of 1851

The Auk Egg tells another story which is about the ways we have organized and encountered the valuable, desirable, unique or strange. Within the Museum, writes Armstrong, ‘things are always meant to be somewhere else.’49 As an artefact, the Egg has inhabited many ‘elsewheres’ and been ‘found’ over and over again. It straddles the historical paradigms of collecting. It has made the vicarious passage from object of wonder in the hands of the King of France, to personal possession, to artefact of public significance in a pedagogic institution. Its meaning as an object is a function of the regimes of display into which the egg has been ‘tipped’.

48 Armstrong, p. 221.
49 Ibid. p. 221. Armstrong continues: ‘...Thus the modern exhibition’s project is the making strange of the thing, and in 1851, as Cruikshank saw, this meant reimagining relations with things.’
A baroque polymathy dominated the organization of space within the cabinets of 16th and 17th Century European aristocracy.50 Objects might find themselves wedged up together because of a superficial resemblance (*pansophia*) or because of their common rarity. They could be placed side-by-side as entertaining oddities, or in picturesque medleys. Objects were valued for being unique, not for their representativeness. They were extraordinary because they were unknown relics from the unknown places brought to Europe by travelers from distant parts of the globe.51 Their singularity was considered wondrous and was in line with the pre-Darwinian idea of a Universe created by God.

*Wonder* was considered by Aristotle to be an impetus to inquiry: ‘It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize.’52 The philosopher Descartes counted *wonder* as the primary passion, aroused in an almost pre-rational encounter.

When our first encounter with some object surprises us and we find it novel, or very different from what we formerly knew or from what we supposed it ought to be, this causes us to wonder and to be astonished at it. Since all this may happen before we know whether or not the object is beneficial to us, I regard wonder as the first of all the passions.53

In the middle ages, wonder was a category that disturbed the dominant social and cultural hierarchies. There was great debate within Christianity as to the seemliness and acceptability of curiosity and wonder as a means of holding the attention of the viewer/reader. In order to incite reverence in the devoted, early Christian monks and copyists placed a visual image of the new religion ahead of the message of the Scripture in the illuminated manuscript. Wonder (aligned with vision) threatened the place of

God as creator, and risked elevating the human over the sacred. The Protestant uprising in the 16th century railed against the visual excesses of the Roman Church, which were thought to distract from true Christian worship. Ornamentation was bedazzling; it lead to temptation and idolatry. Thus, rather than inspiring wonder, the hybrid fantasies of the Cabinet of Curiosity (or Wunderkammer) were considered dangerous illusions and distractions that could impede ‘man’s’ relationship to God.

Stafford argues that this system of relations engaged and then subordinated sight to a world whose governing logic was conversational, in which the roles of viewing, speaking, and listening mingled with one another. She paints a picture of life in the Wunderkammer a lot like Toy Story—‘the cacophony of objects’ with their ‘capricious jumps in logic and their disconcerting omissions’ all chattering sociably amongst themselves, only to freeze momentarily when the viewer walks in. Despite the beholder’s pivotal role, you sense that chaos is never far; bereft of labels and detached from any fixing context, curiosities sometimes resembled rumors or garbled messages, like snatches of muttered speech overheard late at night.

Tony Bennett writes rather more dryly that ‘the manifest incompleteness and deliberately perplexing organization of cabinets of curiosities precluded their being incorporated into a seamless narrative and controlling taxonomy.’ Such collections ‘awaited resolution in the delectating vision of the beholder.’

But in ‘the sideward glance’ and the ‘cacophony of objects’, in amongst the rumour and garble, there is also a very (post)modern model of interpretation which places the viewer/reader at the centre, and privileges interdisciplinary dialogism over taxonomic purity. Like assemblages (and perhaps like this exegesis) the objects in a Wunderkammer are a ‘fragile totality held in conversation, sustained by a temporary order’

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55 Ibid., p.20.
56 Ibid., p.12.
57 Stafford, p. 238.
rather than, as in the museum’s Enlightenment conception, a totality resting on an authoritative knowledge that was ‘invisible to the untrained beholder.’

Barbara Maria Stafford employs the metaphors of conversation to argue that the early Cabinets were largely responsible for constituting what she calls ‘the wandering eye,’ the mode of being in the world that exemplified modernity, and is typified by Baudelaire’s flaneur (and shopping on the internet?). To ‘wander aimlessly’ through the dizzying display of objects was at first a privileged pastime, associated not with inquiry or learning, but with spectacle and entertainment. Such ‘horizontal skimming’ distinguished the polite aristocratic viewer from the ‘vertical probing of the toiling professional.’ The eye is here characterized as ‘vagrant and errant’ and functions not in a purely scopic realm, isolated from the other senses and distanced from the collection, but is caught in a system of distracted sideways glances between objects. Into this furtive schema the undisciplined individual subject is inserted and given the privileged task of ‘rag picking’ from a compendium of objects encountered ‘as if’ for the first time:

Collections permitted the viewer to relive the perceptual moment of discovery by constantly forcing the eye to isolate and single out rarities from a controlled welter of competing phenomena.

It is tempting to write an account of the finding of the Egg as the story of a chance encounter with something rare and wonderful, and to leave it at that. Mummy, I just found it! So much easier than having to account for where things came from, to determine if anyone or anything was hurt in their passage into our hands, and if they ought to be returned, repatriated, and if so,
to whom and by what means. But if ‘finding’ is indeed relational and temporal and relies upon a system of discrimination which imbricates the subject as much as any discrete object, then finding cannot be reduced to a primary encounter, excised from time and space, seen ‘as if’ for the first time.64 I prefer instead to think of an encounter as opening up a self-consciousness of our own stupidity: I did not know/think that I did not know/think that! Barbara Johnson writes:

If I perceive my ignorance as a gap in knowledge instead of an imperative that changes the very nature of what I think I know, then I do not truly experience my ignorance. The surprise of otherness is that moment when a new form of ignorance is suddenly activated by an imperative.65

In the act of being ‘taken’ by a wondrous object am I repeating some Eurocentric script written centuries ago, with the egg functioning to confirm a self-congratulatory ‘moment of discovery’, which I can then mark as a beginning? Perhaps.

64 Sarah Ahmed proposes feminism overcome its reliance upon and association with negative critique (put simply, with always being seen to be ‘against things’) through the (re)discovery of wonder. The subject’s experience of wonder is a departure from ordinary experience: the ordinary thing is that which is unnoticed and comfortable: it is ‘a feeling one does not feel oneself feel’, and is akin to what Barthes called naturalization—the process by which the ideological is experienced as if it were a given. For Ahmed, the experience of first-ness is a wobbly one that can be rendered as ontology or mimesis, as literally true or metaphorical, as non-fiction or fiction. It is unclear that Ahmed is talking about objects at all: ‘wonder’ for her is above all a structure of feeling; she mentions her first encounter with feminism as an epiphany, and borrows from the fictive ‘as if’ to stage a quick escape from the charge of idealism— ‘as if’ I was seeing the world for the first time, and that all I took for granted as given…was contingent’. Ahmed does write that wonder is produced intersubjectively and is not an attribute of an object per se, nor it is based on a fantasy of ‘first-ness’. Ahmed claims to have rescued wonder ‘from its tomb where it lay victim to Marx’s theory of reification—in whose account objects appear as if by magic and not as a result of human blood, sweat and historical tears—and is flipped instead into a mode of reasserting historicity and materiality—the ‘world as made.’ Ahmed, p. 181. For literary theorists Wayne Booth, Frank Kermode and Geoffrey Hartman it is not wonder but the willful embrace of the fictive ‘as if’ that enables the reader to encounter difference. In Booth’s example of reading, we forgo that every day person ‘who goes about paying bills, repairing leaky faucets, and is failing in generosity and wisdom’ (138) and from this, we are able to draw an ethics of expansive encounter. ‘By assenting to construct oneself in the image of the reader that is solicited through the text, the reader has made an ethical decision: she has opened herself up to alterity that is not only itself an ethical action but that creates the possibility for ethics.’ Rather than a suspension of disbelief, or a re-creation of first-times, the ‘as if’ posture of the reader is a positive condition of imagination that makes one ethically vulnerable to beliefs that are not one’s own. For Hillis Miller and Booth it is both the fictive frame and the process of reading that renders the ordinary extraordinary. Perhaps it is the rise of affect that accounts for the return of the category of wonder.

65 Barbara Johnson, World of Difference. p.98
An amateur such as myself, wandering on the internet late at night is offered the opportunity of expanded subjectivity, of discovering something wonderful, something that has significance for them alone.\footnote{D. Maleuvre, \textit{Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art, Cultural Memory in the Present}, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 104.} As in the Cabinet, so it is online: the object finds it’s true meaning (if only for a moment) in the personal space of the subject. For the writer or researcher who is working online there is a kind of busy solitude.\footnote{Before the penetration of the mobile phone and wireless technology this would have been an oxymoron: not any more.} There is the potential for limitless searching, and for the chaotic advance of an idea that progresses through adjacency, according to the logic of the hypertextual link and the search engine. There is also the freezing up of what seemed like a fine idea, which finds its analogue in the frozen screen. There are the false leads, abandoned pathways, and the promise of tomorrows—just Bookmark it!

Can we speak of the internet as a kind of ersatz archive? It is through the figuration of real archives that historian Caroline Steadman finds the origin of the seductive image of the historian, alone with their documents, searching for something or somewhere to start. Steadman traces this romantic figure via Edmund White to Roland Barthes’ favorite 19\textsuperscript{th} century French historian, Michelet, getting down amongst the dust and velum in a lone act of resurrection or animation.

The Archive allowed the imagining of a particular and modern form of loneliness, perhaps ... analogous to the simultaneous conception of the Historian’s relationship to the past as one of irremovable disposssession.\footnote{Steedman, \textit{Dust: The Archive and Cultural History} p. 56.}

The figure of the writer borrows from the historian a subjectivity marked by solitude and frustration. I too was alone when I found my egg, but I was not in a State Library or Battye Library Archive. I was at home. It was late at night. I had been searching online Museums collections for material traces of extinct species. I had already located the gold-plated horns of an auroch in Denmark, and the taxidermy remains of a quagga in Poland. I had a good specimen of the Auk in my sights at the...
Tring Museum in Hertfordshire, but until I came upon the egg I hadn’t even known that I was looking for it.

When searching for extinct species, I had limited myself to artefacts available as jpegs. I wanted to be visually arrested by my ignorance, to be stopped in my tracks, to be forced to ask, what is that? When I first saw the egg I was anxious about the legitimacy of my find. It was, after all, just a dematerialised image, and images are far more wilful, controlling and magical than words.\footnote{M.T. Taussig, Mimesis and alterity: a particular history of the senses, New York, Routledge, 1993. See also, W.J.T. Mitchell, who starts from the other side of the mirror, if you like: while the literary field privileges writing and thus relies on terms like personification and anthropomorphism to ‘unmask’ pictures and things, Mitchell is addressing ‘the pictorial turn’, the ways in which pictures (like things) have been marked with the ‘stigmata of personhood’. He is playing with the idea of returning desire to images. W.J.T. Mitchell, What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2005.}

But wouldn’t you know it? Things are more than just things.\footnote{For a seminal discussion of ‘things’, see B. Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, Critical Inquiry, vol. 28 (1), 2001. B. Brown, (ed.) Things, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004.} I found out that the egg was located in a collection in Scotland. It had to be real (located) for it to do the work it had to do. Initially, the egg took the place of thinking. I did not mourn the loss of words; I did not think of the egg as a (poor) substitute for what I was unable to do on my own i.e begin. Rather like Winnicott’s transitional object,\footnote{And rather unlike. See D.W. Winnicott, ‘Transitional objects and transitional phenomena, a study of the first not-me possessional’, International Journal of Psychoanalysis, vol. 34, 1953. A transitional object is neither real nor unreal, and the child does not have to choose which side to sit on: the thing is allowed to inhabit both sides without having to eliminate one. The object cannot be imposed upon the child. ‘Its fate is to be gradually allowed to be de-cathcted, so that in the course of years it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo...It is not forgotten and it is not mourned. It loses meaning.’, p.94. See Phillips.2007, and C. Mavor, Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J.M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust and D.W. Winnicott., Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2007.} the egg offered a bridge between inside and outside, between different ways of beginning, without existing wholly in either place. The egg was neither the incarnation nor the distillation of a concept that had previously existed in some kind inchoate form; rather than embodying anything, ‘it anticipated embodiment.’ It was ‘suspensive’.\footnote{‘Ranciere argues for the suspensive existence of literary worlds. Literature works precisely to separate language from the mirage of incarnation. Yet if it never embodies anything, it always anticipates embodiment. No world is ever realized in a literary work, yet literary works forever await realization. Literature becomes the ethical paradigm of ideas that have yet to find fulfillment...In its call to the future, literature remains exemplary, and its suspensive existence profoundly ethical.’ A. Gibson, Ethics, in Johns}
Thought needs a limit. I needed the egg to be located somewhere specific, and that somewhere happened to be close to where my father’s family came from in Scotland. My father was dying at the time I found the egg. My mother was in decline. My recently adopted daughter was very traumatised by her early years in an institution. These autobiographical elements can only be indicated with a series of resonant verbs: to die, to be in decline, to be traumatised. It is enough for now to allow words to do their loose embroidery.

I had visited Scotland only once, when I drove around in a small rented Citroen 2CV (which is more like a lawnmower than a car). These co-incidences (the extinct egg, my father’s family origins, my father’s recent death, his hatred of mowing the lawn) are like magic. I think of these nodes as binding me to the egg, as a button binds fabric to an upholstered chair in which I had no choice but to sit.

It was also significant to me that the egg was in a minor University Museum collection. My first real job after graduation was at the West Australian Museum. I spent weeks visiting local museums in the South-West. These spaces were staffed by enthusiastic volunteers, all vigilant guardians of their historical artefacts.

The objects that serve as local history are often partial, and veer perilously towards reliquary. These objects often matter in ways that are different to the artefacts within the formal institutions of the Western World. The objects are wonderfully anti-methodological. Why are they here? Why this, and not that? The collections are neither representative nor pedagogic, but partial and idiosyncratic. These things are descendents of both the Wunderkammer in the private European collection and my English grandmother’s window box, with its collection of unrelated objects—the Cuban cigar (her father’s), rosary beads (her father’s sisters), and sets of small blue and white ceramic cats and dogs she had redeemed from Tetley Tea coupons.


74 There is something steadfast and heroic about both these minor collections dotted throughout rural Australia and the women and men who care for them. Museums Studies Graduates (or me) would turn up with acid-free tissue and new classification systems to
An isolated fragment would appear to be potentially enabling and generative, both because of its relative ambiguity and its freedom to ‘go anywhere’, but in the Museum the narrative instability of the domestic and partial object is disavowed. Objects must be scrupulously labelled and located, and all playful contiguities banished. Orphaned objects out! Steadman captures the wistfulness of the historian’s metonymic fantasies and inflationary desires. It is these fantasies that I share, and which inspire this essay:

A whole world or a social order may be imagined by the recurrence of a name in a register, through a scrap of paper, or some other little piece of flotsam…conjuring a social system from a nutmeg grater.75

So, if history can be imagined with a nutmeg grater, then perhaps this exegesis can be imagined through an egg.

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75 Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* p. 53.
3. Ab Ovo, Or Putting the Egg Back Together.

We make a sharp, jagged break with the past so that we can create. And all our creations, we decree, will be worlds—or at least patents, corporations, architectures, arts, intellectual movements, and now, above all, information—seeming *ab ovo*, sufficient unto themselves, knowing no historical other. Such is the beginning of a new millenarianism—a loosening of beginnings from all that gave beginnings their beginning.\(^{76}\)

In my relationship to the Egg I am heir to both Romanticism and the modernist fascination with objects.\(^{77}\) The very image of *browsing* the Internet borrows from the topoi of Romanticism, as if ‘finding’ something online is akin to kicking through an open field, only to come upon daffodils. The subject’s chance encounter with an object offers the opportunity for creative transportation through the sublimation—in the sense of elevation—of that object.\(^{78}\) Information parades as freely available and *searchable* on the Internet, reintroducing a frisson of randomness and chance into the creative process.

The immateriality of the electronic world gives rise to the strong suspicion that the writer is no longer at the center of things. Sven Birkets made this point in *The Gutenberg Elegies*,

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\(^{78}\) ‘Varda occupies the passenger’s seat and is now filming her left hand by means of the right one. It is a close-up and, in the daylight, we can see all the creases, the protruding veins, and those brown spots that signal the inexorable aging of the human body. As Naomi Schor reminds us, these are the very dermal details that portraiture has been traditionally asked to erase or disguise, being connoted as feminine and transient: “[T]he portrait painter,” writes Hegel in his Lectures on Aesthetics (1835), “will omit folds of skin and, still more, freckles, pimples, pock-marks, warts etc.” The prosaic requires sublimation.’ Torlasco is writing of Agnes Varda’s video work, which is shaped by the practice of ‘gleaning’: ‘gleaners glean for necessity, ethical stance, pleasure, picking unharvested wheat, odd-shaped fruit and vegetables, expired food, discarded appliances, and abandoned toys.’ D. Torlasco, ‘Digital Impression: Writing Memory after Agnes Varda’, *Discourse*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2011, pp. 397-8. Torlasco quotes N. Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, New York, Routledge, 2007, p. 23.
written in 1994, on the cusp of the ‘information revolution’. In the reader’s perception, some measure of power belonging to them is handed over to the machine; words and images seem to appear on the screen with only the slightest of conjuring, as if the screen had a life of its own:

The page is flat, opaque. The screen is of indeterminate depth; the word floats on the surface like a leaf on a river. Phenomenologically, that word is less absolute. The leaf on the river is not the leaf plucked out and held in the hand.

Others have chosen to foreground continuity and commonality over rupture and opposition when characterizing the Internet. An optimistic Didier Maleuvre argues that in its more playful modalities, the Internet behaves like a cabinet of curiosities, setting up a pleasurable cycle of searching and finding. Perhaps the internet could be characterized as nostalgic, reminding us of the days when paintings in the Revolutionary Louvre Museum were crammed in cheek-by-jowl without regard for subject or author, separated only by baroque frames—at which point in history the works of art were asked to leave each other alone and were banished into lonely corridors of ascendant self-referentiality?

Following the bourgeois revolutions, objects of wonder were freed from their aristocratic confinement and placed in public

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81 Birkerts, p. 34. Regarding the idea of the screen having *a life of its own*; in the history of new technologies the radio, the TV, the cinema and the virtual world have all been seen ominously, as taking things in their own hands. I worked in State archives for a research project looking at the history of mental illness, to see what kinds of paranoia constituted different periods. The form followed the dominant technology of the time. Fear of being controlled and inhabited by external forces was a constant, but when radio was first introduced, people believed they had radios implanted in their heads, or radios were sending out directions subliminally, telling them what to do. When TV was introduced it took over.


83 Maleuvre, p. 88.
institutions, whose functions were both civic and pedagogic.\textsuperscript{84} Judith Pascoe argues that the romantic period stands at a unique moment in the history of collecting, ‘the half-way point between the princely private enthusiasm of the Renaissance wonder cabinet and the public institution of the Victorian museum.’\textsuperscript{85} The affective power of the past, the desire for permanence and authenticity fueled a passion for private collecting that was influenced by and continuous with the philosophy of romantic poetics; literary and object-based collecting were entangled.\textsuperscript{86} She challenges the image of the Romantic poet as retreating from reality and from materiality; romanticism contributed to a ‘democratization of curiosity’\textsuperscript{87}, which turned upon the object. Pascoe argues that while many of the Romantics, like Wordsworth, railed against those who wanted to totalize and control, to ‘class(ed) the cabinet’; to create distinctions and then decided that these ‘puny boundaries are things/Which we perceive and not which we have made,’\textsuperscript{88} the values that Romantics positioned themselves in opposition to were those very same values that were shared by the middle classes:

...At the very moment when Wordsworth was writing these lines, romantic era collectors were amassing cabinets of books, birds, relics antiquities, and fossils in greater numbers than ever before. If these collecting projects were motivated by the kind of calculating scientific impulse that Wordsworth condemns (the desire for mastery by way of totalizing classificatory systems), they were driven also by Wordsworthian modes of longing (for permanence, immortality, pleasure, recognition) which suffuse romantic poetry more generally.\textsuperscript{89}

The poetry of Romanticism registered the shock of industrialization, and the passage of time, and the human and material loss that that passage entailed. Romanticism contributed to and reflected a culture’s new understanding of the
past as an idealized lost world, partly salvageable through the recovery and preservation of old objects and documents. In this approach towards natural and historical objects, Romanticism bequeathed modernity a legacy which connects the literary to the political, and the enigmatic work of Walter Benjamin to New Historicism.

Like the discriminating viewer whose subjectivity is constituted by an encounter with the cacophonous Wunderkammer, Romanticism’s object is always secondary to the subjectivity brought to bear upon it. As mnemonic or an aide-de-memoire, the object incites and enables, but then is sublimated to the (creative) needs of the subject. Poetic imagination enables a synthesis of subject and object, returning the self to the self as amplification, just as an echo is returned from a wall. Coleridge wrote:

The imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will; yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.90

Coleridge sought to resolve the Kantian problem of the gap between the subject and the thing-in-itself (noumenon) through the category of the poetic. In his classic study of Romanticism, the American critic M.H. Abrams uses the images of mirror and the lamp to communicate this shift from a mimetic or imitative conception of literature as a reflection of the reality of the world, to an expressive model where the creative act is an impulse of the creator and illuminates the found object in new ways.91 For Paul de Man, Romantic poetics are defined by the turn towards ‘an abundant imagery coinciding with an equally abundant quantity

of natural objects [with] the time of imagination linked closely to the theme of nature.92

At this point it hard to escape the suspicion that Romanticism hangs here in the air just a little too long, like fog on Lake Windermere93—the fog of theory? Romanticism casts a particular light upon the idea of the ‘found object’ and the ways in which the object enables the creative act and engendering a theatrics that unfolds seemingly organically, as if from the egg itself.

In the writer’s first encounter with the egg it appeared miraculously, as if conjured out of thin air, sui generis. But backstage, well before you came along, I had to excise that egg and lift it from its nest of words on the computer screen. I downloaded it. The peripatetic act of finding is rendered invisible and the egg is tipped into print, far from the pixilated noise of the interface.

As an over-determined symbol with a long cultural history, the egg would seem to risk the fate of all great symbols: obviousness. The particularity of the Auk Egg risks being subsumed by the generalized idea of egg. Eggs are pagan, pregnant, and plenary: they have mythic architectural and structural qualities.94 We all know what eggs are getting at.

Jean-Baptiste Greuze’s salon painting of 1756 employs a title that is so literal it just has to be figural. We can guess what has transpired when broken eggs lie at the feet of a young girl, while behind her the old woman tries to assail the gentleman.95

93 The popular conception of Romanticism as hopelessly idealist and subjective masks the revolutionary force of the movement. Alan Lui writes, ‘we have lost a sense of the murderous force at the root.’ Lui’s list of the fate of prominent members of the Romantic movement is sobering—many were put to death, imprisoned, or transported. Liu, p. 88.
Eggs turn up in all kinds of places. Roland Barthes draws upon the image of the egg in his essay ‘The World As Object’. Against the earlier associations of the egg with voids and containers, he characterizes a canal boat as ‘sturdy, securely decked, concave—it is full as an egg and produces the egg’s felicity: an absence of the void.’ While my object’s shape and sheen lends it a touch of ‘Dutch-ness’, my particular egg is worlds away from the generalized egg in the empire of merchandise in Amsterdam, where canvasses groan under the weight of ordinary objects voided of any essence other than their instrumentality:

Consider the Dutch still life: the object is never alone, and never privileged: it is merely there, among other things, painted between one function and another, participating in the disorder of the movements which have picked it up, put it down—in a word, utilized.

Eggs can with relative ease be put to work to signal closure, teleology (in my beginning is my end) and organicism. What could be more typically organic and whole than an egg, with its healthy plenitude and closed surface? The metaphor of

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97 Barthes refers to, ‘matters most superficial quality: sheen.’ ibid., p.63.
98 Ibid., p.64.
organicism is derived from 18th and 19th century biology, which in turn utilized the Aristotelian concept of the poetic as internally coherent:

The structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole.99

All that is external to the organism is taken into it only to be absorbed, reshaped, and reconstructed within its internally defined needs.100 The aesthetic object is thus constituted by its integral unity and its self-identity. Murray Krieger writes:

From the biological model that shaped the poetics of Aristotle to the typological model borrowed from Christian interpretative practice by Coleridge and projected onto mythic interpretation...there is a desire to have language overcome its differential character in order to partake of the identity of oneness.101

The doctrine of organic unity naturalizes the analogy between language and the living organism. Within the ‘organic’ work of art all elements are subjugated to the principle of coherence and inner form. From Aristotle we inherited the familiar reading habit, enforced since the 18th century, of looking for a principle of structure that can serve as a totalizing function and enable closure.102

Coleridge refuted the mechanistic model that made the imagination simply a receiver of sense-impressions: ‘Objects as objects are essentially fixed and dead, but the products of the imagination are essentially vital’.103 In Abrams’ later nomenclature, the imagination was a lamp, not a mirror. By placing the creative imagination at the origin of the aesthetic experience, Romanticism borrowed from biology to give to the aesthetic object an internal organic vitalism: a ‘life of its own’. Nineteenth century Romanticism leant to the work of art the

101Ibid., p.51.
102 For organicism the particulars are at the mercy of the general.
103Coleridge, pp. 139, Ch.XIII.
symbol of the flower unfolding within itself, organically self-sufficient.

But how does the Egg fit into this? The baroque Wunderkammer resists totalisation. It exhibits a non-teleological unfolding in which adjacency stands in for interpretation. The work of Walter Benjamin has come to exemplify modernist object-based literary montage, through which the reader or viewer completes the text or scene using what is at hand, and the thing-in-itself is richly valued for its potential as it enters into relationships with other things.

Benjamin referred to his own Archive as ‘scraps’—Versetteln.104 The German word has two meanings: ‘failure, fragmentary, unachieved’ and ‘a particular method of making information manageable.’ Versetteln in library sciences and lexicography means to excerpt, to disperse things that belonged together into individual slips or into the form of a card index.105 Scrap is both a noun and a verb, as Esther Leslie writes:

...to scrap or verzetteln is to fritter away, to dissipate—this Benjamin knew about as there were many projects of his that remained unfinished, not least because of displacement and exile. His work, his possessions, his thoughts were, as he said, “scrapped,” “hacked up,” “lost,” or “dispersed,” as the German word verzetteln suggests.106

Benjamin wrote copiously within an economy of scarcity; he wrote on theatre and bus tickets, on the backs of prescriptions from the doctor and the edges of envelopes. His scraps exist in a tension between finding and keeping, losing and throwing away, between scarcity and hoarding, expressed in the impulse to salvage implicit in the noun ‘scraps’, and in the verb ‘to scrap’—‘writing off’ or cutting loose. Benjamin’s scraps are not arranged hierarchically, and can therefore be easily retrieved, cross-referenced and placed within new orders of things.107 But for any anarchic creatives hoping for an ally in Benjamin, his Arcades

105 The Larousse online also tells me that verzetteln as a transitive verb means ‘to get bogged down’: a cautionary detail!
Project will disappoint: he was anything but chaotic.\textsuperscript{108} His thoughts, observations and quotations were dispersed in an ordered way and composed in a tiny, neat hand in a (then) modern system of indexed cards. For Benjamin, the object was occult and dialectical: its significance would emerge through a relationship of adjacency, where the scraps are treated as if they were objects freed from their contexts and allowed a new inner life (hence the interconnectedness of collection and allegory):

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse ——these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.\textsuperscript{109}

An avid collector of wooden toys, books, word games and the drawings of small children, Benjamin was not looking for treasure, but for things that mattered to him. This is the dream of amateurs and writers, as well as some collectors: to find and articulate a connection, if not in then through the object and its relationships. Benjamin opposes the allegorist and the collector, yet both are driven by what he calls ‘the struggle against dispersion’:

Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found. It is the same spectacle that so preoccupied the men of the Baroque: in particular, the world image of the allegorist cannot be explained apart from the passionate, distraught concern with this spectacle. The allegorist is, as it were, the polar opposite of the collector. He has given up the attempt to elucidate things through research into their properties and relations. He dislodges things from their context and, from the outset, relies on his profundity to illuminate their meaning. The collector, by contrast, brings together what belongs together; by keeping in mind their affinities and the succession in time, he can eventually furnish information about his objects. Nevertheless—and this is more important than all the differences that may exist between them—in


\textsuperscript{109} Benjamin, \textit{The Arcades Project}, p. 460.
every collector hides an allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector.110

Finding marks the beginning of the objects’ entry into the subject’s collection, and while that relationship can be called bourgeois, acquisitive, mercantile, capitalist, it may also be sentimental and creative. As against those who would like to storm the barricades of personal property and abolish all ties to things, Benjamin believed (connoisseur that he was) that only in private ownership do subject and objects get so tangled up with each other and come to matter. The abolition of personal ownership is catastrophic for the collection and brings with it the dereliction of meaning:

The phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter.111

It is as if the object can only receive proper care and get what it needs when attached firmly to an individual, where it can be jealously guarded.

Amongst the detritus of modernity, Benjamin saw how objects wear out and break or become redundant. He saw how they are replaced, and how, despite the commodity’s amoral soul, people come to attach themselves to things and find a kind of love. For a Marxist philosopher Benjamin was remarkably original and fearless in his adoration of things. Ownership (although I prefer the word attachment) is the precondition for love between person and object. Benjamin relates the sense of responsibility we feel for a collection not to some animating principle, but to something a little like an origin, or to use the museum word—provenance. Possessions are passed on like stories, with the biological family (and masculine inheritance) as the model of transmission:

Inheritance is the soundest way of acquitting a collection. For a collector’s attitude towards his possessions stems from an owner’s feeling of responsibility toward his property. Thus it is, in the highest sense, the attitude of an heir, and the most

110 Ibid., p.211.
111 Maleuvre, p. 98.
distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility.112

A man of his time!

Romanticism yielded to Formalism and New Criticism; interpretation not as anatomy lesson where the cadaver is generic, disposable and functional, but as a minor procedure on a patient who is quite healthy and very much alive—albeit briefly anaesthetized. A small incision is made (imagine a laparoscopy); the parts are carefully located, inspected, then promptly identified (this is the theme, that is the tone, here lies the imagery, and the style is this, etc) and put back exactly where they were found. Hopefully there will be no scar. God forbid that analysis uncover something untoward, like a growth or a foreign body! Since the organic work of art has by definition no superfluous details and no elements that cannot be folded back neatly into the body of the thing—since there is nothing that does not belong here—such findings would be nigh impossible. In the organic model of literary interpretation all details—no matter how aberrant their initial appearance—can, indeed must, be integrated into the whole, since the work of art is itself organically constituted.113

When Paul de Man led the deconstructive turn he did so in terms that we now accept within cultural and critical circles, championing disunity and ambiguity, irony and allegory, the fragment and the scrap over the totalizing organic metaphor that shaped nineteenth century poetry and philosophy.114 But with the privileging of the minute, the partial and marginal we can sometimes forget where we came from (as Naomi Schor so brilliantly argued all those years ago), and where that history marks the present.115 Popular resistance to interpretation and analysis continued to borrow from familiar life-and-death narratives: too much analysis kills off the experience of the aesthetic object. Ruins the fun. Analysis is murder! That poor image/text was alive until you began cutting it up!

113 Schor, p. 85.
115 For a contemporary appraisal of Schor’s 1987 book, see Forward to the 2007 edition, by Ellen Rooney.
Do you sometimes wonder what a formalist dream-object would look like? I think it might look like a hard-boiled egg—a freestanding and self-referential object that has neither embellishments nor trivial decorative elements, nor any of the excesses associated with the fiddly feminine or the garrulous baroque.\textsuperscript{116} It would have its own bags packed and be ready to start ‘a life of it’s own’. By bringing the detail of/on the egg back into focus, and by focusing on the history of the object and its temporal and special trajectory, I want to return to my own trajectory, and to my own history.

My egg is not a finished object. The appearance of seamless plenitude is a feint. It has been emptied (of life). It is a shell, and yet it is more than just a surface: “The shell itself is marked by what it shelters; that which it encloses is disclosed within it.”\textsuperscript{117} It is a latent object that can signify both life and death.\textsuperscript{118} It is both animated and mute. Like Keats’ Urn, my egg appears to be both irreducible unique \textit{and} exemplary; dead and inert and yet able to \textit{carry} thought; to contain. Capable, like Heidegger’s pot, of ‘shaping the void.’\textsuperscript{119} This is a lot to ask of one egg. Freud calls the capacity of psychic material to be interpreted in many ways, \textit{over-determination}. My Auk Egg is over-determined (if not over-cooked).

But there is more.

When my father died he left me his collection of Latin and Greek books, as well as a problem of storage. I was able to reach for Horace and find the appropriate passage in \textit{Ars Poetica} in both Latin and in English: ‘nor does he begin the Trojan War from the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[117] Nicolas Abraham is writing here of Freud’s Ego; he makes an analogy between the surface theories of Freud and the kernel, which is Freud’s (anti-systematic) intuition, which resists systematization. N. Abraham, ‘The Shell and the Kernel’, \textit{Diacritics}, vol. 9, no. 1, 1979. With psychoanalyst Maria Torok, he is best known for his theory of ‘transgenerational haunting,’ by which repressed secrets and unprocessed traumas are ‘encrypted’. The process of mourning is central to his work. These theories are a foundation of trauma theory, as exemplified by the work of Cathy Caruth. See, C. Caruth, \textit{Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History} Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
\item[118] Johnson, pp. 68-71.
\end{footnotes}
egg, but always he hurries to the action, and snatches the listener
into the middle of things.120

Ab ovo means from the egg, and refers not to eggs at all but
to stories and ways of beginning them. This exegesis is about
beginnings and ends. During the period of writing it the lives of
my parents have ended. My mother-in-law has died. My life with
our daughter has begun.

To begin ab ovo is to begin at the chronological beginning,
and it references the twin eggs of Leda and Zeus from which
Helen was born. The Trojan War can be traced back to the birth of
Helen, who is the engendering principle of action. In Ars Poetica
Horace defines beginnings that start ‘with the egg’—ab ovo—as
inferior to the great epic convention inaugurated by Homer in The
Iliad, which begins in media res—in the middle of the action.
Dramatically, narratives that open with action are far more
affecting than their counterparts.

In the spirit of montage I offer the following adjacencies
and complications:

I was familiar with W.B. Yeats Leda and the Swan (1923),
in which a violently figured rape occurs.

My father was a rather disembodied chap. When we were
kids we liked to say that he was a bit of an ‘egg head’.

For many years my father was (almost) bald.

My favorite books as a child were Alice in Wonderland and
Through the Looking Glass. I particularly liked the drawing of
Humpty Dumpty, the egg who broke.

My mother used to say that my father had his head in the
clouds, but what she meant was that he had his head in his books,
and not on domestic issues.

Books are like clouds, I guess. There are now iClouds on
the Internet and Kindles in the Clouds.

My mother used to say that my father couldn’t even cook
an egg.

I read somewhere that Walter Benjamin was unable to
cook an egg when he walked across France to save himself.
Where would I have read this?

120 Horace, Horace, satires, epistles, aArs poetica, trans. H.R. Fairclough, Loeb Classical
My father was nothing like Walter Benjamin.

I am now firmly in *media res* when I ought to be *ab ovo*. Before the Aberdeen Museum, before the word *Pingouin*, before *Wunderkammers* and classification and Monsieur Dusfresne and Madame Ussel of Eu and the ship-builder from Dieppe, the Egg was something else altogether. That part of the story is missing and I am not sure it will ever be found.

In so many ways the Egg is all wrong. On the one hand, what could be less partial, more seamless than the Auk Egg in the Aberdeen Museum collection, coddled and protected like an only child, paraded only on special occasions? But the egg is not complete: as an exhibit it functions as the mournful remains of the extinct Auk. It is a shell of its former self.

In elevating the egg to a ‘find’ (I baulk at calling it ‘a discovery’) and positioning it as a starting point, I have abandoned altogether the chance of hatching a beginning replete with narrative potential. Like the other extinct species that inhabit the margins of my novel, the Egg might be only a monument for what is long past, and become the site of a (personal) nostalgia for what *could have been*.\(^{121}\) A memorial. An Epitaph.

My egg is a long way from home: it is officially homeless and kind of stateless. The egg is all that remains. Can we recall the islands where Auks nested by the thousands, far to the North of Canada and beyond? The egg is a dependent object: it can neither be reproduced nor reproduce itself and therefore is the perfect object for the writer. The Egg marks the end of a particular period in European history, and functions as a reminder of what we have ruined—and continue to ruin—in order to reach the present. ‘In the figure of the ruin,’ writes Andreas Huyssens, ‘the past is both present in its residues and

\(^{121}\) Nostalgia comes from the Latin *nostos*, meaning home, and *algos*, meaning pain, and was originally a literal sickness identified during 18th century European wars when soldiers became ill for no other reason than they were a long way from home. See: A. Huyssen, ‘Nostalgia for Ruins’, *Grey Room*, vol. 23, 2006. ‘In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to turn history into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.’ S. Boym, ‘Nostalgia and Its Discontents’, *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2007.
yet no longer accessible, making [it] an especially powerful trigger for nostalgia."\(^{122}\)

Nostalgia simultaneously engenders desire and yearning for the past and for the future. Species extinction is central to contemporary consciousness: we are mapping the disappearance of habitat and counting down breeding pairs, the destruction of the rain forest, and the flooding of valleys to make dams. We know we are complicit. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo captures the contradictions of contemporary First World existence in what he calls ‘imperialist nostalgia’:

A particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed. Imperialist nostalgia thus revolves around a paradox: a person kills somebody and then mourns his or her victim. In more attenuated form, someone deliberately alters a form of life and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to his or her intervention. At one more remove, people destroy their environment and then worship nature. In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ to both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination ... Nostalgia is a particularly appropriate emotion to invoke in attempting to establish one’s innocence and at the same time talk about what one has destroyed.\(^{123}\)

Further marginalia: when the Berlin Wall fell I was living in New York. Soho was flooded with Russian watches and mock-constructivist posters and T-shirts. Fragments of the Wall (or bits of old rock, depending on your take) began to appear on the street, trapped in aspic or boxed up like a Joseph Beuys installation.

The collecting of eggs from the endangered nesting places of birds in the 19\(^{th}\) century was undertaken for both the love of nature and in plain disrespect for the lives of animals.


Fragments of the Berlin wall lifted from the rubble and sold into the market are both a souvenir marking the end of an era and the reliquary of a (lost and mourned) past.¹²⁴

Modernity loves ruins and authenticity, writes Andreas Huyssens and the more the substitutions, the more we seek out the original:

The desire for the aурatic and the authentic has always reflected the fear of inauthenticity, the lack of existential meaning, and the absence of individual originality. The more we understand all images, words and sounds as always already mediated, the more, it seems, we desire the authentic and the immediate. The mode of that desire is nostalgia.¹²⁵

The egg carries a trace of the real. As in the romantic ruin, authenticity is only present as an absence: it is the imagined present of the past that can only be grasped in the trace of its annihilation.

It is clear how the Egg can function in the creative component of my thesis, how it can straddle different registers to enter my novel as a fictionalised object and be put to work generating narrative. The egg is one in a series of (real) museum specimens that the adult daughter in my novel is loaning for an international touring exhibition on Extinction. The Egg will be exhibited in the novel and become the first entry in Caroline’s fictive exhibition that lends its name to my thesis: Extinctions.

And so I begin to write.

¹²⁴ ‘An authentic relic, Pierre Fédida speculates, cannot be thrown away. Because it can no longer circulate in an exchange economy, it also cannot be substituted by some other object (as is the case in Beuys’s work). Depleted of use-value, the relic reminds the mourner of his power over the dead. Neither a fetish or a relic can be substituted.’ C. Scribner, ‘Object, Relic, Fetish, Thing: Joseph Beuys and the Museum’, Critical Inquiry, vol. 29, no. 4, 2003, p. 649.
¹²⁵ Huyssen, p. 23.
4. Everything You Always wanted to know about Mimesis but Were Afraid to Ask.

Imagine a blockbuster about the history of representation. First you will need an appropriate genre, and then a suitable character. I propose the *bildungsroman*, the classic novel of education.\textsuperscript{126} This will be the story of one plucky copy’s struggle to be taken seriously, to transcend its role as metaphoric walk-on and to become a thing in its own right, instead of a mimetic try-hard.

There are historical grounds for such a plot. The distinction between the natural and the artificial extends from Plato, with representational forms cast in various supporting roles along the way—secondary copy, belated bastard, dependent parasite. Like an orphaned child in a 19\textsuperscript{th} century novel, the copy is used to being called names. Though partially redeemed by pop-art and post-modernism, and now the digital era (there being no originals to copy), our brave little copy has spent much of the past being vilified for its illegitimate origins and inauthentic status.

Illegitimacy is linked to origins. The story of Oedipus and his search for the truth of his origins is a central narrative in the western tradition. ‘The pleasure of the text,’ writes Barthes, is ‘an Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn…the truth.)’\textsuperscript{127} Illegitimacy has its uses, particularly in the great traditions of epic literature. After trial and tribulations both Odysseus (and Bambi) will recover their familial origins and achieve closure, but


the copy can never recover its origins, and must soldier on alone, shadowing the real like Sancho Panza.

Literary theory has made much of illegitimacy and the search for origins. J. Hillis Miller reads *Oedipus Rex* to build a deconstructive, post-structuralist critique of origin:

The paradox of beginning is that one must have something solidly present and pre-existent, some generative source or authority, on which the development of a new story may be based. That antecedent foundation needs in its turn some prior foundation, in an infinite regress . . . Any beginning in narrative cunningly covers a gap, an absence at the origin.128

But we are slipping over people and things, from real to fictive eggs. Perhaps language cannot help but animate and enliven inanimate things and words. In animating the copy and ascribing it subjectivity, I make it capable of struggle and desire; it can now get into character and take up narrative position and start acting upon objects and have objects act upon it. Already the copy is behaving more like a person than a thing. This slippage between the represented and the real feeds our capacity to imagine the unimaginable, and makes it difficult to police the boundaries between the scrupulous language of critical theory and the loose banter of the enthusiastic reader. Writers long for their creative copies to be animated by their readers. Readers want books to ‘speak to us’, ‘disturb us’, ‘move us to tears’. Perhaps books have a secret life of their own, and only ‘play dead’ in order to let the reader imagine that it is s/he who animates the book, much as Woody and Jessie and their mates in *Toy Story* ‘play dead’ so that Andy can do what he wants with his toys when he comes into the room.

The other way to animate a thing is to cast it in the lead. In classic children’s literature teddies, dolls and other toys carry the burden of speaking for and to children. They have an instructive role; they teach children that only humans can be really human, certainly, but also that things have a function: it is through our relationship to things that we learn to attach to

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people. The much-loved old Ted and the Velveteen Rabbit\textsuperscript{129} function as surrogate spaces to be passed through on the way to individuation, like one of Winnicott’s ‘transitional objects’.\textsuperscript{130}

In Kate DiCamillo’s gorgeous picaresque story \textit{Edward Tulane}, the eponymous china rabbit finds himself crossing gender and class as he moves from his secure position as narcissistic snob (replete with fob watch) in a bourgeois home, to being the adored and disheveled companion of poor little consumptive Sarah Ruth and her brother Bryce, who have nothing but an alcoholic father to stand between themselves and ruin. Through the experience of Sarah’s death, Edward is able to finally feel love and its tragic twin—loss. In line with contemporary theories of child development and attachment, having learnt to love and having lost, Edward is now capable (after a long stint on the bench in a doll-makers shop) of loving again.\textsuperscript{131}

But Edward is not a copy; nor is he a clone. He is in denial; he does not know he is a toy. It is the reader who understands that Edward must endure loss if he is to be finally capable of empathy. \textit{Edward Tulane} is a story about the humanizing and democratizing of a doll. It is not a story about copies, but about affect. Writing cannot reproduce the real, but it can produce the feeling of the real. We want our words to move readers and viewers. We want tears and laughter, or if our art is less wedded to catharsis and marketplaces, to disturb or to \textit{problematise}, as we used to call it. Perhaps this is good old-fashioned realism: the fantasy of animation and full-blooded humanness, and the willful substitution of a text for feelings?\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{129} See ‘Pinocchio’s Story’, by Kanye West... ‘I want to be a real boy.’ Being real means having the right stuff’. Benjamin would have liked that.

\textsuperscript{130} ‘Transitional objects and transitional phenomena, a study of the first not-me possessional’.


\textsuperscript{132} The fantasy of the personified text—the fantasy that we can really have another’s experience, that we can be someone else, that we can somehow possess a culture we do not inhabit — elides the gap that \textit{imagination} (preferable in my mind to identification) must fill. We must find not ourselves in the other (or the other in ourselves) but the other as we can know them without being them. The speaking voice of the other we hear in lyric poetry, the life of the other we observe in novels, can teach our imagination. Literature conceived of
But all forms are not equal; all campaigns are not fair. It appears that the less mediated or obtuse (the less difficult and more real) the more animating literature can be. The marketplace is more than happy to feed the fantasy of the text as sentient; all the easier if the text can be read as equivalent to and substitutable for the writer’s own experience. The groundwork for such easy (albeit risky) marketing strategies is laid by the popular language of reception: blurbs speak enthusiastically of loathing or adoring characters, of books and films that grab you by the throat, of stories that won’t let you go—as if the copy had will and desire; as if a thing could speak directly to the viewer/reader unmediated by language and genre and market and history and place.

But even the copy is not what it used to be. Unlike teddies and rabbits—who are mostly content with a rich and happy emotional interior life—clones have often been cast as tragic figures. The clone shares with the toy the trace of mass-production, yet it agitates the boundaries between the real and the copy. The clone is aligned with mass-production and repetition and with labour and mechanisation. The distinction between toy and clone is not always absolute. When Mickey Mouse disobeys his master and uses magic to avoid work in The Sorcerer’s Apprentice the broom replicates itself in what appears to be an object lesson in capitalism: if you’ve got a big job just hire more workers, and if you haven’t got any more apprentices, automate. The machine workers in this animated universe are a terrifying allegory of commodification and rampant viral reproduction. The cloned images collude with the economies of single cell animation (multiple identical brooms all doing the same thing calls for less drawing) to make products whose

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this these terms is, I think, the ally of justice’ A. Hungerford, The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2003, p. 157.


134 ‘To describe something as realist is to acknowledge that it is not the real thing. We call false teeth realistic, but not the Foreign Office. If a representation were to be wholly at one with what it depicts, it would cease to be a representation.’ T. Eagleton, The English Novel: An Introduction, Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2005, p. 9.

sameness is terrifying. While it might be the case that movement is a sign of human life (when things start to move they are said to be ‘animated’), it is also the case that when things begin to move like humans they eliminate the need for humans, as is the case with automation in the factory. The brooms upend the hierarchy between master and slave in a mise-en-abyme that is as much a cautionary tale of rampant mass production as a moral lesson for Mickey Mouse.

Children’s stories structure the reader’s relationship to the text through mobilizing identification and empathy with things. Traditionally, the desire to be real instigates a tragic narrative because the desire is doomed from the start: it just cannot be. It transgresses some rule of species, or race, as if whiteness were the measure of realness, and all else was less. In Douglas Sirk’s 1959 melodrama, Imitation of Life, Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner) is the light-skinned ‘coloured’ daughter of Annie Johnson, the black housekeeper to glamorous actress Lora Meredith (Lana Turner) and her blond daughter Susie (Sandra Dee). Sarah dreams of ‘passing’ and is consumed by desire and loathing of her blond double, Susie. The tenor is poignant, then tragic: if the false double (like Sarah Jane) is able to transcend its object-hood and achieve full human subjectivity it is only a delusion, a wish-fulfillment, a Freudian dream that will evaporate upon waking and transform into tragedy. This is the message of Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Little Mermaid” too (the real story, not the Disney one). Passage into ‘the real’ can be a costly and painful affair.

Post-modernism challenged modernism’s insistence on purity of form, and placed kitsch and mass culture into the galleries and cultural institutions. Contemporary discourses of the body and technology cast such absolutes aside. They assert that we are seeing the collapse of hierarchies and the merger of the boundaries between the human and the animal and the

136 And economic: the stabilization of character and the representation of mechanical reproduction enabled the Disney studio to extend the use of cells and scenes with little adaptation required from artists.
137 The film is a powerful critique of dominant race relations; we understand that the tragic outcome is not the ‘fault’ of the Sarah Jane, but an indictment of white America.
machine, and between the prosthetic and the body, between people and things. Perhaps to even speak of a copy, or to assert the distinction between the human and the inhuman makes me as old-fashioned.

Artist Allan McCollum complicates the tense historical relationship between the real and the artificial. His copies are neither surrogates nor artificial objects, but ‘copies produced by nature.’

In The Dog From Pompeii (1990) and Lost Objects (1991) he takes iconic relics and fossils and subjects them to the logic of (mass) production. In Pompei, McCollum makes infinitely reproducible casts based on the original ‘natural mold’ left by the body of a dog from the explosion of Vesuvius in 79 A.D. As W.J.T. Mitchell writes: ‘traditional notions of the relation of copy and original, not to mention the status of the artistic ‘authorial’ function, are clearly under considerable pressure in these works.’

Yet the tenor here is not nostalgic. Universities uphold the distinctions between genres of writing, between the creative and the critical, between originality and copies. There is nothing necessarily rigorous about the collapse of a boundary.

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140 In Lost Objects fossil dinosaur bones from the Carnegie Natural History Museum are cast in concrete from rubber molds.

141 Mitchell, p. 269.
Literary criticism offers a philosophical and critical language with which to delineate the boundary between the literary and the non-literary, the animate and inanimate, and to explain the propensity of language to animate the inanimate, enliven the un-living. ‘The easiest way to treat a thing as a person is to address it’, writes Barbara Johnson, ‘to turn it into an interlocutor or at least a listener through the rhetorical power of language.’\textsuperscript{142} The most well known figure is \textit{apostrophe}, and it is synonymous with Romantic lyric poetry: O Egg, thou art old!

Unlike talk about things, \textit{apostrophe} situates itself in the field of direct address: ‘the spoken word is what knits the utterance together.’\textsuperscript{143}

When I left school and first went to University, American New Criticism dominated. We were taught to identify a \textit{pathetic fallacy}, which with its cousins, \textit{personification} and \textit{anthropomorphism}, whipped the cloak of personhood off the text and revealed it to be a set of identifiable linguistic figures. Russian Formalism severed the poetic text from its referential double and treated it as a self-involved machine in possession of what Roman Jakobson called the ‘poetic function.’\textsuperscript{144} Later, under the influence of French theory and with an eye for the reader, we were taught to speak not of realism, but of \textit{vraisemblance}. We called the excessive realist detail of 19\textsuperscript{th} century novels ‘the reality effect.’\textsuperscript{145}

When I first read Roland Barthes’ \textit{Mythologies} it was revelatory, although Barthes would have scoffed at the religious associations of that word. Demystification seemed such a powerful narrative, revealing the ideological function of the naturalization and disavowal of the artifice of representational forms. When form is taken for content, History is reduced to Nature, production reverts to ideological consumption, and myth

\textsuperscript{142}Johnson, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., p.7. ‘\textit{Prosopopeia} (the voice from the grave) is the figure of reading because reading brings alive the voice of the dead author and makes all texts ‘speak’.’
\textsuperscript{144} In Jakobson’s formulation the focus is on the message itself and therefore on its construction as a message. In the poetic function the typical linkage of combination with contiguity is broken. In the poetic function, the principle of equivalence is projected from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.’ L. Waugh, \textit{Roman Jakobson}, in Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory edited by Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman, Baltimore, 2005, litguide.press.jhu.edu, (accessed 29 April 2009).
covers all with an illusory transparent gauze. This denial of History corresponds to the world of myth. Forms parade as if they were transparent when in fact they are fully swathed in political and ideological garb.\footnote{R. Barthes, Mythologies, London, J. Cape, 1972. While Barthes became increasingly suspicious of systems and grids and structuralism, he always argued for the specificity of literary forms. Such specificity shifted the work of art away from human bodies and a naive claim for transparent reference towards what he called écriture.} (In 2013 it seems very quaint, this 1960s book, and a little bit too easy, almost a teenager’s attitude. I chastise my thirteen year old for his relentless petty analysis of every advertisement on television. Okay, I get it. It is tiring, all this seeing through things. Surely there must be more than superficial mastery and self-congratulation?)

The veil of the text ceded to the pleasures of the text. We called the reader’s collusion with the veil of the text “the willing suspension of disbelief”. For Wayne Booth, the reader of fiction is a sophisticate who has learnt to read ‘as if.’\footnote{W. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, Chicago, University of Chicago, 2010.} The ‘as if’ posture of the reader is a positive condition of imagination that makes one ethically vulnerable to beliefs that are not one’s own. In Booth’s example of reading we are not so much duped by the text as more than willing to forgo that every-day person ‘who goes about paying bills, repairing leaky faucets, and is failing in generosity and wisdom’\footnote{Ibid., p.138.} and enters instead into an ethics of expansive encounter. By assenting to construct oneself in the image of the reader that is solicited through the text, the reader has made an ethical decision: she has opened herself up to alterity that is not only itself an ethical action but that creates the possibility for ethics—a relationship to another.

The field of literature has developed a shifting methodology for setting the text adrift from naïve intentionality and the single orbit of the author. But within the University there is still disquiet at the idea of the Creative Copy scuttling around the corridors. It is as if the Creative text were a little bit monstrous or discomforting, as if it might be too hard to contain and categorize on its own. And so we have the Exegesis. Some think of it as a leash, others as an anchor. It is as if the Creative text must be tethered not through anything so naïve as the stake of Intentional Fallacy, but rather by asking of the writer to perform

\footnote{R. Barthes, Mythologies, London, J. Cape, 1972. While Barthes became increasingly suspicious of systems and grids and structuralism, he always argued for the specificity of literary forms. Such specificity shifted the work of art away from human bodies and a naive claim for transparent reference towards what he called écriture.}
some kind of quasi-theoretical performance which will bind her to
the text in some kind of lasting generative relationship, like a
cabin boy to a mast.

The writer is compliant, servile even: she has been
prepared to do anything to get her copy through the door of the
University. She has relinquished any stake in popular
entertainment, genre fiction, escapism and giddy transcendence;
she has sworn off naïve forms of affect such as ‘just making you
feel good’ and has instead accepted a somber undertaking: to
produce a literary object which will yield knowledge, albeit a
different kind of knowledge to that which is produced within the
Academy. Creative knowledge, if you will pardon what was once
an oxymoron but is now an Industry. We are in strange territory.

There is general acceptance of this new knowledge in the
Academy. Universities have carved out a niche for the Creative
copy, yet the novel/poetry/drama is still politely but resolutely
stood to one side while the Author/student goes about madly
supplementing their work with something exegetical, thereby
confirming, the deconstructions would have said, a constitutive
lack at the core of the Creative work itself.

Here in the West we like to believe that individual
creativity is best kept unfettered, not corralled into anything too
specific less the University find itself cast in the unpopular role of
Dictator. Exegetical freedom is the norm: a student does not have
to write about their creative work. Of course, if they wish to
adhere to the scriptural roots of the word exegesis\textsuperscript{149} they are free
to provide an authoritative commentary on the copy—let’s call it a
glove for the hand, or a hard shell for the soft egg. Students are
clever things and love nothing more than to explain what
something really means. But surely by opting for the Exegesis as
meta-commentary the poor old creative copy risks being cast as a
walk-on, a substitute, a shadow, a mere example of theory and
thus as dependent and hopeless ornamental appendage? A
handbag on the muscular forearm of Theory.

Far better, I think, to write something else. This essay is
that other thing. It is what is left over. This is all that remains.

\textsuperscript{149} Metzer and Coogan, (eds).
5. Epitaph for an Egg

A baby alone does not exist.150

At the centre of this essay is an egg, albeit a de-
materialised egg floating in the liquid space of the internet. The
finding of an egg in (non)space initiates an inquiry into the nature
of finding; is it ever an innocent event? Finding the egg figures as
both haphazard and ruthlessly determined and motivated: what
could be more designed for my purposes than this particular egg?
Despite playing with a decentred, counter-theological model of
writing (performative, writes Barthes)151, the narrative returns to
the Author her position as the origin of thought: it is I who does
the finding here, I who am doing the writing ‘about.’ The egg is
the object of the narrative and is subjected to examination,
deployment and metaphorisation. This is the same ‘Author’ who
in Barthes’ essay is well on the way to dying and yet miraculously
precedes and outlives his (sic) offspring:

The Author is always conceived as the past of his own
book: the book and the author take their places of their
own accord on the same line, cast as a before and an
after: the Author is supposed to feed the book — that is,
he pre-exists it, thinks, suffers, lives for it: he
maintains with his work the same relation of
antecedence a father maintains with his child.152

Literature has a long tradition of imagining itself as an
exclusively paternal line engaged in vigorous jousting with its
precursors. In this version of literary history, the past bears down
upon the new work like an all-powerful Freudian patriarch.
Influence, like heredity, is figured as a psycho-theoretical concept
which engenders a productive anxiety (Bloom’s ‘anxiety of

150 Winnicott, ‘Transitional objects and transitional phenomema, a study of the first not-me
possesional’.
152 Ibid., p.78.
influence’). In the deconstructionist model of my youth, strong writers enacted a wilful misreading of their literary predecessors—a misprision. ‘Misreading’ establishes a difference from what preceded it, and founds the claim of originality.

So how original am I? How far will I go to distinguish myself? There is more than a little intellectual sadism in the mobilisation of objects for theoretical and creative ends, and it is either a miracle or a sleight of hand when the whole thing resolves without anyone getting hurt. The Egg has been like the girl who climbs into the box on the magician’s stage and allows herself to be cut in two in full view, and yet emerges miraculously whole and undamaged.

The egg enables me to scramble together apparently random ingredients: the question of origins, the tautologising and universalising drive to knowledge, the history of objects and Romanticism and the manner in which they stand-in for and contain and enable thought. In the egg I have found a mast upon which to raise the banner of metaphor.

But this Egg is much more than a familiar prop. It is more than a neat trick. It is grounded in time and place: there is indeed a real egg that belongs to a Museum in Aberdeen, where it can be seen if not touched. It is historical. It has been places, and if it has lacked agency it has certainly had things done to it. Though its provenance is at times occluded, its rarity supplements the gaps in the record. Yet it is not quite what it ought to be, or where it ought to be. It is an anxious, unstable object that has crossed discursive boundaries as well as espistèmes—the Age of Wonder, the Enlightenment—to end up being co-opted into some kind of minor, hybrid sphere of writing in a corner of the University.

It is an almost-object, almost a fossil, a bit of a fake, somewhat a souvenir, potentially romantic and sentimental. It is

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154 Whether covert or overt, this model held sway in my undergraduate studies. Griselda Pollock produced a neat formula to critique the Modernist avant-garde strategies of overcoming the past: like a set of moves learned prior to a courtly tournament, the fresh kid on the block first tips their hat (*reference*), bows (*deference*) and then trumps the establishment with a new move (*difference*). Feminist critiques of the dominant model had an incendiary force when they arrived on the scene. G. Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Histories of Art*, London, Routledge, 1999; G. Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits: Gender and the Colour of Art History*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1993.
a melancholic thing that appears to refer to an absence, a hole, to a part that can never be played again: fugue-like, it is the remains of a species that was hunted to extinction in the 19th century. It is one of those ‘orphaned objects’ (though I baulk at the capacity of the noun orphan to be reduced to mere modifier for any other state of being). The egg is a curiously compact and compressed symbol ripe for elaboration. In this sense it is poetic, a genre of writing typified by compression and latent metaphoricity. (I tell my 13 year old son, who is decidedly uninterested in poetry, that the poetic is a remarkably effective place to store a great deal of meaning in a very small place. I appeal to the economy of poetic form, its capacity to yield returns, its value for money, but still nothing.)

And yet the Egg is curiously sterile and intransitive: at the level of the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic it is neither substitutable nor serialisable — as I have said before, it has been relieved of its most common function as scientific specimen: to stand in for and represent a species. Paradoxically, the egg is weighted down by the very conditions that free it from its representative duties: it cannot transcend its particularity. It is inscribed with a detail, a fragment, a word that functions as an epitaph: Pingouin.

We can read the egg through the history of the detail and its relationship to the discourse of the sublime, as articulated by Naomi Schor in her study of the genealogy of detailism in classical, modernist and poststructuralist aesthetics. The history of the detail has helped me to think through the relationship of the characters in my novel to the spaces they inhabit and the often mass-produced objects they share those spaces with. I find these relationships to be profoundly moving, if contradictory.

In 19th century philosophy, the detail blocks the dynamic rush of the Imagination, fatigues the eye, and in the end induces anxiety rather than the elevated pleasure of resolution of thesis and antithesis associated with the Hegelian sublime. Schor reads the detail through Hegelian philosophy, arguing that the devaluation of the detail in the late 18th and 19th century was bound up with the rise of realism, naturalism and the novel, as

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well as with the feminisation (and debasement) of the detail. The detail disturbs the classical ideal of coherence, unity, homogeneity and harmony.\footnote{Ibid., p.56.} The resurgence of interest in particularity and the detail (and the \textit{thing}) has now been historicized: it is a marker of the post-modern and is exemplified by the wilfully paratactic Barthesian ‘oeuvre’ and Walter Benjamin’s \textit{scraps}. The elevation of the detail and its modern resurrection (for example, in Barthes’ late works) follows a trajectory from the secularisation of the detail in classicism and its relationship to organicism, to the revival of interest in the local and the specific, the anecdote and the detail in post-modernism.\footnote{On the detail and its relationship to New Historicism and postmodernism, see Liu.} Schor writes:

[There is] according to Hegel a sort of transference onto profane subjects of the love initially lavished exclusively on sacred subjects. If we admit that the detail is, as it were, sponsored by the religious, it follows that whatever the degrees of secularization attained by a given civilization, the detail will never completely liquidate its debt to the sacred. In other words the extent that the profane detail (with its cluster of negative connotations: the everyday, naturalism, prosiness, smallness, insignificance) is shaped in the mold of the sacred detail, it will forever bear the stamp of its religious origins. Even camouflaged by the fetishism peculiar to our dechristianized consumer society, the detail enters in a relationship – however degraded – with the sacred. God, as Mies Van Der Rohe and others are credited as saying, dwells in the details.\footnote{Schor, ‘Desublimation: Roland Barthes’ Aesthetics’, p. 35. In my novel, Frederick treats his collection as relics. The writing particularises them. For Bataille, and Callois, the sacred (and the profane) do not disappear in the modern world, but were displaced onto the individual and the things they cherish: ‘It is with good reason that...we use the world ‘sacred’ outside the properly religious domain to designate what each of us considers embodies what is most precious, what we each possess as a supreme value, what is venerated, and for which we would, in necessary, sacrifice our life...Everything takes place, as though the mere attachment to a supreme end and the consecration of one’s life to it (which means devoting one’s time and energy, interests and ambition, and if necessary sacrificing one’s existent to is enough to render a particular object, cause of being sacred.)} For Hegel, Romanticism was conceived as sublimating the detail: transcendence sublates ‘what is without significance’, as in the Dutch still life painting that Barthes noted. By the mid-19th and early 20th century, embellishment and the ornament were firmly located within the secular and read predominantly through
a moral-industrial landscape of value, waste and excess. In his influential article ‘Ornament and Crime’ the Viennese Adolf Loos opposed the Art Nouveau and Viennese Secession movements as regressive. He had an eye firmly on the industrialised hubs of Britain and the USA:

Since ornament is no longer a natural product of our culture, and consequently represents either backwardness or degeneration, the work of the ornament-maker is no longer paid for at the proper rate. The plight of the wood-carver and turner, the criminally low wages paid to embroideresses and lace-makers are well-known. The ornament-maker must work for twenty hours to make the income of a modern worker who works eight hours.159

The labour required to make unique objects exceeds the amount paid the producer of the work and thus degrades the product. What was once elevated is now viewed with suspicion and resentment; the ornamental is unnatural and unnecessary and is synonymous with decadence and profligacy, and with artifice and sensuality, and with femininity.160

Under the influence of the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, Adolf Loos associated ornamentalism (which included writing on one’s own body) with primitivism and recidivism. ‘Tattooed men who are not behind bars,’ he wrote, ‘are either latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats’.161 For Loos, a prophet of modernism, the functionalist machined object eliminated random imperfections and the unique signature of the hand-made and crafted object. Such excess is not imagined as love, or devotion or art, but as waste.

Early in the 20th Century Loos prefigured the logic of the commodity and the connection between the proliferation of ornamental detail and mass production. Schor writes that Loos understood that the ornament controversy ‘is ‘nothing less than purely rhetorical, or to put it another way, rhetoric has invaded the market place. ‘The real crime of the ornament is not aesthetic

161 Ibid., p.50.
but economic.’ Schor contrasts the positions of Baudrillard and Barthes towards the ornamental detail (Baudrillard deplores while Barthes applauds). But for both it is the detail that helps the consumer to discriminate between mass-produced objects, just as the aristocratic viewer learnt to discern the extraordinary from the ordinary in the Wunderkammer. For Baudrillard, as for Loos, the detail that adorns a mass-produced object is designed to mask its ‘mass-produced reality’ and to convince the consumer that the mass-produced object is in fact a ‘model-object’.

Whilst commodification marks the things we love, we love those things not just for their style, or design, or brand, or value, but for another kind of singularity which is often located in a mark of wear or a blemish that distinguishes, say, my mother’s milk jug from all the others made in the same ceramics factory. Our attachment to things and our ambivalence towards those very attachments are markers not just of late-capitalism, but of the tendrils of the sacred in the profane, of the elevated sitting in amongst the ordinary.

All of this is by way of accounting for the ambivalence that I feel both towards the Egg, and towards this essay which is like a proliferating detail that has long exceeded its usefulness! But the egg is not a commodity, at least not in the sense of being mass-produced. The serial object of Baudrillard’s scorn is paratactic, ‘heterogeneous, without organic links.’ The Auk Egg’s value is determined by the limits placed on its reproducibility: it is a kind of bio-art, effaced, defaced, terminal. But despite its singularity, the orphaned egg is no tabula rasa. Being so thoroughly defaced, the Egg could hardly be said to be natural at all. It has been framed by the practices of museology and effaced and defaced by the human hand.

There is a perversity in the assertion that the textual detail Pingouin can be read as defacement. I have tracked the passage of

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162 Ibid., p.54.
163 Ibid., p.56.
165 Schor points to the primacy of the linguistic model. ‘Baudrillard’s aesthetic is structured like a language. On the one side there is the model object clearly articulated and ruled by a syntax, on the other, the disarticulated serial object afflicted with a sort of aphasic disturbance.’ Schor, ‘Desublimation: Roland Barthes’ Aesthetics’, p. 56.
the egg from curiosity within the *Wunderkammer*, to scientific trace within a natural history collection. No doubt it is this provenance which led to the inscribing of the egg: what was once everyday practice in collections (writing on artefacts) would now be considered an act of vandalism by a rogue curator. Yet the very detail that has guaranteed the continuity of the egg (as unique) and assured its ambivalent position as both scientific object and curio also connects us to what has become the profane and the sacred in our postmodern world.

Michael Taussig relates defacement to what he calls the *public secret* and (after Hegel) *the labour of the negative*. He asks, does defacement destroy the secret or empower it?

Defacement is like Enlightenment. It brings inside outside, unearthing knowledge and revealing mystery. As it does this, however, as it spoliates and tears at teguments, it may also animate the things defaced and the mystery revealed may become more mysterious, indicating the curious magic upon which Enlightenment in its elimination of magic depends.\(^{166}\)

For Taussig, defacement (in which I include the act of writing ‘Pingouin’ on the Egg) is not negative in its effects but is the basis of a poetics that ‘lures absence, that of which we would otherwise not know anything, into presence.’\(^{167}\)

Without re-invoking the concept of wonder with it semi-mystical aura, Taussig offers another way of thinking about the seductive power of the object and the presence of the egg in this essay. Can we conceive of identity in a form that is not grounded in a mythologised absent origin, which is then pathologised as tragic lack and unrecuperable ab-normality, but as *something else*? Defacement is not an origin; there is no specific content that is revealed: the egg is a potential negative space of knowledge.\(^{168}\)

The act of naming-as-defacement enables what Taussig sees as a process of poetic re-enchantment of the ordinary very close to Romanticism:

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\(^{166}\) M.T. Taussig, p.2-3

\(^{167}\) Ibid., p.4

\(^{168}\) ‘In its undetermined proliferation, negativity speaks for something that is arguably as real as anything else we know, even if it can be located only by carving out a void in what is being said...To put it succinctly, one tries to grasp/conceive the object of thought, one fails, missing it, and through these very failures the place of the targeted object is encircled, its contours become discernable.’
What begins as poetry becomes dulled through usage and we no longer see that the very facts of our existence are not facts but artefacts. And it is precisely here in the very nerve centre of this active forgetting that, with its burnings, its savage markings, its cruel and often clever cuttings...defacement exerts its curious property of magnifying, not destroying, value, drawing out the sacred from the habitual-mundane, illuminating what Nietzsche saw as the metaphoric basis of all existence, but effaced through usage, passing into practical illusions of factual truth. Defacement puts this habitual operation of effacement into reverse.\footnote{169}

But how habitual and prior is this operation of effacement? In the case of the Auk Egg, the act of defacement (Pinguoin) operates \textit{at the same time} as effacement. Defacement both problematises the egg as scientific specimen and member of species \textit{as well as} effaces the violent act of collection and preparation (voiding of the animal matter in the egg) which transformed the egg into cultural artefact. All this is contained and managed by the careful lettering upon the face of the shell. Such courtly defacement is a far cry from the ripping, cutting, slashing that Taussig typifies as defacing. This is a decidedly decorative defacement.

To think of writing as defacement helps me to account for the ambivalence that characterizes all writing that proceeds from the excision of an object, and its subsequent interpretation. Ethically, to interpret is both to deface and efface. It is to write upon and in that act, to write over and erase.

Throughout the writing of this essay I have found the Egg to be (pace Taussig) seductive: at other times I experience its particularity as sentimental and manipulative (obvious), if not downright irrelevant. I also locate my ambivalence towards this object through the complicated history of the ornamental and the detail.

\footnote{169 Taussig writes as an anthropologist, albeit a most disobedient one. His reference to the sacred is linked to the body, and to practices which are culturally specific. How can this be of any relevance in our discussion of creativity, origins and the egg? George Bataille challenges the cold, clinical abstraction that science performs upon the object in order to detach it from the totality of the world. But such an action is not possible to perform upon the sacred, because for Bataille the sacred is identified with the totality. G. Bataille, 'War and the Philosophy of the Sacred', in \textit{The Absence of Myth: writings on Surrealism}, London: New York, Verso, 1994.
Having up to this point found an object to contain my ruminations, I must now acknowledge that I have arrived at the uncontainable part of this essay, which begins with the University, with books and with lost opportunity, and ends with a line across which I am finally able to step.
6. Endings

I always start with beginnings. I have rehearsed this scene before, and now I am ready to start again.\textsuperscript{170}

Many years ago I came upon a title on a shelf of the Murdoch University Library. Although I doubt the accuracy of my memory, I believe that the title and the name of the author were embossed in gold on cream cloth. I invoke the physical materiality of the book not just to lend it a false mystique, but also to situate this opening scene. This is well before the Internet, back in the days when anyone could wander in the stacks to seek out the latest issue of a favorite obscure book or journal, should the desire take them on a Sunday afternoon.

It seems perverse, even reckless to suggest that content (a word that asks to be undone) might be more easily accessed in the past than in the present—what could be more democratic than the Internet? Yet as the global has become the dominant paradigm through which we intersect with the local, we experience ourselves as characters in a narrative of increasing complexity. Our connections to friends, family, community and beyond are necessarily mediated by technology, so is it any wonder that we sometimes feel that there was so much less at stake in the pre-digital era?\textsuperscript{171}

But perusing the shelves is one thing; borrowing requires membership. Even back then I recognized that the taking down and putting back of books and journals from the library stack did not grant me entry to what I thought of as a kind of higher calling: the University.

It is no coincidence that the book to which I am referring was called Beginnings. In this 1982 publication, the eminent theorist and critic Edward Said distinguished between ‘origins’ and ‘beginnings.’ Origins are linear, dynastic, and divine, while

\textsuperscript{170} In the final weeks of this thesis I returned to my exegesis for my Masters Degree, written eight years ago. I was somewhat surprised (and rather embarrassed) to see that the same title by Said played a role in the opening pages. Have I not progressed at all? \textsuperscript{171} See the work of sociologist Sherry Turkle, for a measured and fascinating study of the ways in which the internet and connectivity is impacting on human relations, particularly young people, in ways that produce ‘new solitudes and new intimacies.’ S. Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect more from Technology and Less from Each Other, New York, Basic Books, 2011.
beginnings are secular. To write of a beginning is to be shadowed by arbitrariness, while to speak unconditionally of the beginning is to theologize and centralize knowledge. Said called the two different modes or modalities of the imagination and thought the *transitive* and the *intransitive*. The former is projective and descriptive, the other tautological and endlessly self-mimetic. The first leads us to ‘beginnings with (or for) an anticipated end or at least expected continuity’, while the second ‘retains for the beginning its identity as a radical starting point’.173

In an early review J.Hillis Miller argued that Said was concerned with ‘negotiating discontinuity’, signaling in what was then a radical gesture (*radical* meaning both fundamental and drastic) a commitment to a poetics that ‘refused to yield to classical models of literary narrative or closure’.174 Hiller writes that Said was addressing the difficult concept of a production or assemblage ‘which is not disorder or heterogeneity, and yet not reducible to the familiar models of order – organic unity, dialectical progression, or genealogical series – in which origin fathers forth a sequence without break to some foreordained end.’175

The rhetoric of resistance has now jelled into familiar rhetorical gestures, with the good student of culture always-already on the side of arbitrariness, eschewing anything that sniffs of totalities or canons or aesthetic literariness, yet there remains something meaningful and, I would argue, *necessary* in this desire to chart a path between the rigidity of an all-too familiar destination and the chaos of the arbitrary.

Nowhere is this clearer than right here in the closing pages of an exegesis. The Thesis *is* an assemblage of sorts. Its order is retrospective and it behaves as if it knew what it was doing all along, but by its very nature it complicates any clear identification of the origins of both the exegesis and its uneasy verso, the novel. Which does not mean that there are no beginnings to speak of. Creativity does not emerge *sui generis*.

173 Ibid., p.44.
175 Miller, p. 2.
‘Thought thinking itself’ is one way of characterizing the speculative movement that Said proposes as he teeters in the metatextual oscillator, tossed between the necessity of the intention to begin and the impossible position of the authorial ‘I’ within that beginning. For Said, writing is in spite of the author, yet impossible without the author and there remains no option but to acquiesce to consciousness-of-self and perform our process as it unfolds, teetering uncomfortably on a tightrope stretched between contradictions. Deconstructionist high wire has lost its radical allure, and we are now unfazed by challenges to closure. We gesture weakly towards the politics of difference, but we have moved on. Literature Departments have turned to Cultural Studies, thereby staking a claim for relevancy, and now they too are under threat from Communication Studies. The margins (at least in a philosophical sense) have gone central, still leaving a few mongrels outside the university gates, nodding reverently at the figure of Thought, which might or might not be in there somewhere, happily thinking itself.

This chapter opens with a library. In so many ways that would have been the proper place to begin. How comforting to imagine the life cycle of an exegesis (to borrow again from the organic metaphor): to narrate the Thesis as a kind of *bildungsroman*: ideas seeded, watered, blossoming and thriving in the protected enclosure of a library, knowledge begetting knowledge, the way things used to be, supplemented by the promise of all writing and all thinking about writing occurring in an eternal (university-based) present. But the process of beginning anything that can be called a *creative project* is made possible not by an endless present nervously nibbling its own hairless tail, but by the capacity to imagine beginning anew in a new world, and thereby producing not just a beginning, but an end.

A boundary must be manifest so that the past can be ‘fixed, achieved, and no longer binding’, writes eminent American poet Louise Gluck. Gluck writes of a period in her life when she could not read, think or write, where she existed in ‘a state of

impoverishment’. Reflecting on this period and upon the eventual creative abundance that followed, Gluck captures the private terror of trying to imagine a future beyond the present, and how necessary that is for living:

The future is not assured; that is its drama. It can show itself in two shapes: as ongoing reality – a present extended indefinitely – or as a new world. In the second case, a boundary asserts itself, making a culmination or transition. To stand at that boundary is to be divested of the past, which for the first time, in its distinctness, needs to be called the past.¹⁷⁷

One reason I have written this thesis is so I can cast it into the past tense and declare: I once wrote a thesis. I will then ensure that I have a future beyond the thesis, even if (so that) that future has nothing to do with the University. An authoritative text such as Edward Said’s functions as a line from which the writer can begin to get on with something that began in the University. I begin in a University library, (again) with a book by a famous theorist, but I cannot remain there. This exegesis is marked by a profound ambivalence towards and impatience with, for want of a better word, ‘theory’. My anxiety (which both Freud and Klein see as a result of ambivalence) is palpable in the ‘splitting’ or straining between genres of writing, in the sudden return to a standard omniscient academic voice (one thinks of a medieval rack where the body is stretched in different directions to the sound of tendons and joints popping), in the mandatory meta-critical reminders which accompany the exegetical quest. This is the anxiety of someone who does not quite know where she belongs and is not sure if that is in-and-of-itself a strength, or a terrible weakness.

Beginnings was published before Said’s great work Orientalism, the latter being a foundation text in the field of post-colonialism. Its ordination enacts the very things that Said decries, making his book a kind of origin for the field. But no beginning or end, be it in life or books, is merely a problem of theory or philosophy that can be resolved in the academic register; hence the need for discourse to strain and stretch itself. I might once have mounted a purely literary-theoretical defense of

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p.132.
an exegetical style (tags: poststructuralist, de-centred, post-colonial, deconstructionist, feminist, queer, etc&), thereby proclaiming myself both a believer in small-b beginnings and in the truth-value of the bounded fields of theory, but I am now far from the person I was. But must we repeat yet again that all literature participates in a cacophony of discourses, religious, sociological, political—particularly if that reminder has the unintentional effect of silencing less legible and less ‘writerly’ voices?

What is being registered here is a kind of boredom or familiarity with the predictable assertions of theoretical discourse. Were theory to take itself and only itself as its own subject it would cut itself off from the kind of pleasure and astonishment that accompanies an unexpected encounter with an object from outside its own circle: in this case, an egg. No institution can properly close itself off around the creative — if we can call it that — nor finish the account of why we write what we write, think how we think. But I am not ready to abandon the kind of deep thought and reflection—the difficulty, if you like, the rigorous anti-rigor of (literary) theory.

There is duty in an exegesis: things must be said.

I needed a new world, so I had to have a beginning, and then, inevitably, this end.

I have ended with Said’s Beginnings not because I am nostalgic (not at all) but because it locates me and helps me to finish. It draws a line under my long and tortured relationship with the University.

For many years I was unable to let go of the idea of writing and thinking within the academy. In my twenties I longed to be an academic and a writer, in that order, and yet I had no idea how to transform that desire into reality through the kind of application necessary for such things. I lacked all systems and structures. When I eventually fell heavily under the influence of Continental Literary Thought, I came to believe that Theory had burst its institutional boundaries and was to be the catalyst for transformation at both the personal and global level. (I still believe this in a way). By this time my longing for a career had
clarified itself, but I had behind me a clearly established pattern of baffling returns and failed assaults upon the University, which meant I had always-already failed in my mission. Thus the nostalgic tenor of my desires: a **longing**.

I had first come to the University of Western Australia straight out of school, to do an Arts degree. I was not comfortable at UWA, or at my family home where things were difficult. My oldest brother was a tyrant, and my mother was left to manage four children while my father’s work took him away. My mother was depressed and went through extended periods where she drank in secret, though it was no secret to me. I left UWA when I was nineteen, having failed my final year. In the early part of that year I was assaulted (we called it rape then) in one of the colleges after a night with friends at the UWA Tavern. I was very drunk at the time. As I write I am simultaneously struck by the overt intentionality of the young man’s actions and the inappropriateness of this detail in an exegesis. Nonetheless, in the interests of beginnings (and ends) I will press on. I was asleep in my friend’s car after declining to come up to a room at the college to play cards. He came and knocked on the door, woke me up and insisted that my friends wanted me to come upstairs. I was then shepherded up a series of steps to an empty room that must have been his.

I carried with me a deep sense of shame, and was unable to find a suitable **form** through which to “narrate” this event, either to my parents or my friends. I missed classes and became depressed and anxious, spending a great deal of time on the banks of the Swan River near the University Rowing Club, smoking cigarettes and avoiding the campus and HIM. I sat my exams in the full knowledge that I could not pass them and failed miserably. The next year, at the insistence of my father (and I am very thankful to him for this) I took a small portion of my bedraggled degree as a credit and transferred to the new Murdoch University. I was nervous about the move. A professor at UWA had warned me that **over there** they were busy studying Mickey Mouse. It was a move that saved me in so many ways. I myself had always loved Porky Pig. I was finally released from the stupors of New Criticism and fell in love with Theory. This new man in my life promised broad political relevancy and personal
transformation that left me dizzy with hope. I was as chaotic as ever, but I did moderately well and started Honors. I recall with a shudder a ridiculously overly ambitious intellectual inquiry into the metaphor of rape in the deconstructionist canon. I thought myself into a frenzy of literal and metaphorical Derridean slippages, fell ill and quit.

Alas, the story is not yet over.

In my early 30s I was working full time as the Curator of a Heritage site when I returned to do an Honours year at UWA in the Fine Arts Department. After completing all requirements to a standard far exceeding what was necessary (by then my normal compensatory bent) I took myself off to see the Dean of Arts, armed to the hilt with my line of A’s and my HD for a thesis on narrative space in the recently opened Washington Museum of the Holocaust. I wanted to do a PhD and I needed a Scholarship to do it. When I came to the office the Dean (who shall remain unnamed) was holding my Academic Transcript. He looked straight at me and informed me that with my record (all those fails, you see, so long ago) I would never, ever, ever, be supported for a PhD at this University.

I chose more study in another state and took years to complete an MA that should have been turned into a PhD. I wrote for performance. I wrangled marriage, life (my children) and death (of my parents.) I published a novel. I reviewed for theatre and dance, and wrote poetry.

And now here I am, middle-aged, back at the scene of the crime.

All knowledge begins with a line or a boundary. ‘It originates because of separation, delimitation and restriction; there can be no absolute knowledge of the whole.’¹⁷⁸ Any account, such as the story of my exegesis, is necessarily secular and partial. Or if you prefer a different discourse, you are only getting a bit of the story.

It is no longer uncommon in Universities to find the magisterial third-person omniscient dropped (if only momentarily) for the autobiographical register in the first-

¹⁷⁸ Said, p. 42. Quoting Nietzsche, Das Philosophenbush:112
person.\textsuperscript{179} It is accepted practice to foreground the wobbly influences of the emotional and affective aspects of personal life upon the ‘life of the mind’, although it is a move usually taken from within the safety of Academic tenure, not from the shaky grounds of middle-aged candidature.

Some beginnings would appear to belong to the category of arbitrary and contingent. Neils Buch Leander, following Said and Derrida, distinguishes between a \textit{start} and an \textit{origin}:

A beginning can be a self-initiated internal indication of change...characterized by choice, by free will and by agency...While I have chosen this, I could just as well have chosen that.\textsuperscript{180}

But a beginning can also be determining, and act as an explanation of what follows:

A beginning can also be read through an external event that originally constitutes an object, situation, or being...A beginning traces or institutes an origin, allowing us to make sense of why or how something turned out the way it did – or typically how we turned out the way we did.\textsuperscript{181}

In the language of the University, the Exegesis is an exercise in hermeneutics. In Paul Ricoeur’s theory of symbolism, hermeneutics is mobilized when there is an excess or surplus of meaning. The symbol has a manifest or surface meaning and a latent or hidden meaning, which is deciphered according to an opposition between literal and figural meanings.\textsuperscript{182} Ricoeur argues that there are two divergent ways of finding a hidden meaning. The first he names is the ‘a hermeneutics of faith’, with its roots in Biblical interpretation: ‘[It has] the function of recapturing or recollecting meaning. This hermeneutics of faith or the sacred seeks to make manifest or to restore a meaning, understood as a message, a proclamation, or a \textit{kerygma} (a

\textsuperscript{179} C.G. Franklin, \textit{Academic Lives: Memoir, Cultural Theory, and the University Today}, Athens, Georgia, University of Georgie Press, 2009.
\textsuperscript{180} N. Buch Leander, ‘To Begin with the Beginning; Birth, Origin, and Narrative Inception’, in Brian Richardson (ed.), \textit{Narrative Beginnings: theories and practices}, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., p.17.
religious proclamation.)’183 The surface text communicates a deeper, more sacred meaning, like a parable that tells the truth of God.184 In contrast, what Ricoeur terms a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ is grounded in the task of the now-familiar strategy of ‘demythologizing’ and is linked to the seminal figures of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. Interpretation is predicated on the duplicity and dissimulation of surfaces that, through ‘false consciousness’, mask an unpleasant reality. Accordingly, demystification and critical reading will uncover and reveal the truth beneath the surface and unmask the disavowed reality’,185 revealing the erasure and silencing of other voices.

Walter Benjamin drew upon the images of paper and flower to distinguish between different hermeneutic traditions. Ricoeur offers us a more contemporary pathway through which to track back the origins of this exegesis. We can follow the familiar critical and theoretical tradition, or we can return to another beginning, unearthed and unmasked as repressed event. Following the hermeneutic tradition we have either trauma, or we have words.

I am not sure Said foresaw the late 20th century turn towards trauma when he wrote Beginnings. Trauma theory troubles Said’s distinction between origins and beginnings and Paul Ricoeours’ opposing hermeneutics of faith and suspicion. The traumatic event can resist recovery. According to Ruth Leys, following Freud, the traumatic is not strictly speaking an event at all, ‘since it does not occur on the basis of a subject-object distinction.’186 In its very traumatic origin it voids the subject of their objective relationship to the aggressor and gives rise instead to an imitative or mimetic identification that compels the victim to repeat and return.187 Freud writes:

185 Holub.
187 Ibid., p.35.
In the best-interpreted dreams we often have to leave one passage in obscurity because we observe during the interpretation that we have here a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unraveled, and which furnishes no fresh contribution to the dream-content. This, then, is the keystone of the dream, the point at which it ascends into the unknown. For the dream-thoughts which we encounter during the interpretation commonly have no termination, but run in all directions into the net-like entanglement of our intellectual world. It is from some denser part of this fabric that the dream-wish then arises, like the mushroom from its mycelium.188

There is a necessary obscurity that attaches to trauma, and also to the beginnings of a creative project. Narrative complicates the stability of any asserted beginning. In narrative the division between the arbitrary and the determined is never clean. We are all familiar with those categories of represented events that parade their arbitrary beginnings — a child happens to walk home from school, a woman misses her lift and takes an evening bus in Delhi—and which resolve in very definite ends. The media (and a great many novels and films) play on these incidental representations of ordinary life in ordinary space, with people like you and me going about our business, as if this were a day like any other. The competent reader or viewer is deeply suspicious of the arbitrary; she knows full well that the unmotivated is the narrative precursor to the motivated. A woman drops her coffee cup in the sink as she grabs her handbag and heads out the door; a busy father opens the car door to let his son off around the corner from the school. We expect the worst in proportion to the foregrounding of the most mundane.

But I am not concerned simply with narrative conventions; this is not an essay about rape and representation.189 My interest is in what lies outside the inverted commas and tropes. In turning to things such as eggs, I have asserted my interest in what precedes and exceeds the text, and in what lies outside the enclosures of theory. Feminist philosophy and literary theory

189 There is a category of crimes that are magnets for the media; these are stories that start as secular and contingent (the walk home from school, the short-cut in the lane-way) and end as tautological and determined.
have attempted to figure this realm from within the University with a series of ‘third terms’. Such terms dismantle the binary with metaphors of lack, limn and lacunae, with chora and abjection.\textsuperscript{190} Yet for one who writes and thinks outside the University such internal dismantling is of little practical help. Any movement towards writing progresses through uncertainty (what the hell am I doing?) as it travels towards a kind of fragile resolution that is only achieved retrospectively—when it is all over. Yet in placing my self in relation to an object to which I am attached, I am able to write myself away from that object, secure in the knowledge that that object remains constant and will be there for me when I eventually return.

Can objects truly remain outside writing? As I have shown in this essay, my egg is firmly in the grip of writing. An appeal to what precedes and exceeds the text is difficult to uphold in an academic context. We are familiar with the sins-of-the-text: there are fallacies, intentional or otherwise, and there are those general charges which we understand fully—banal romanticism, naïve individualism.

But there are movements afoot. I am suspicious.\textsuperscript{191} I am not quite ready to give up the imperative to interpret (and then communicate that interpretation) for the more seductive

\textsuperscript{191} Janet Wolff explores the reasons for and implications of what she identifies as the evaporation of the social in cultural studies and critical theory, and the rise of broad fields of inquiry that foreground experience, immediacy and unmediated presence: “I am talking here about developments which might seem quite disparate: the turn to ‘affect’: the (re)turn to phenomenology: actor-network theory in sociology and science: theories of the post-human,...: theories of materiality: emphasis on the agency of objects: the turn to neuroscience in the humanities and social sciences...the transhuman, embodied knowledge, biopolitics...whether combined or separate, though, what these developments have in common, and what they achieve collectively is a more or less drastic threefold displacement: of the separateness (and primacy) of the human in relation to nature: of the primacy of the rational and the intellectual in human (and social) action: and of the primacy of analytic methods in the social and human sciences. All this is now in question, in multiple ways. At stake is the status of critical theories of culture— sociological, hermeneutic, semiotic, interpretative.’ Wolff is principally interested in the visual field and the rise of a new kind of animism and the ‘agency of objects’. She locates these shifts as a response in part to frustration with literary and cultural studies, which reduce the visual image to the semiotic model of a language, and which cannot account for whole realms that lie outside the poststructuralist model of a textualised universe. J. Wolff, ‘After Cultural Theory: The Power of Images, and the Lure of Immediacy’, \textit{Journal of Visual Culture}, vol. 11, no. 1, 2012. See as a counter, Mitchell, \textit{What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images}. 
immediacy of an ontological ‘encounter’, even for an extraordinary egg with a traumatic history of its own.

But am I just adding to the object’s woes? Using it for my own advancement? While trauma might be characterized as a kind of physical shock that is experienced as immediacy by the subject, the hermeneutic act itself has also been seen as a kind of trauma. ‘Interpretation violates art’, wrote Susan Sontag in 1964.\textsuperscript{192} As noted earlier, in the creative field there has long been a popular impulse to protect our creative work from the brute knife of analysis.\textsuperscript{193} This protest against analysis could be sympathetically understood as a kind of resistance to colonization, understood as cultivation. The poet and classicist Anne Carson writes of women sharing with outlaws and wolves the space outside the polis. The ancient Greeks called this the ‘\textit{apeiron}’ (‘the unbounded’). It is a space awaiting cultivation and temperance.\textsuperscript{194} To be unbounded is to be like an infant who is just born, with her limbs flaying against a space that offers no resistance, no warmth, no comfort. But perhaps this space is not so much outside of writing, as awaiting writing, as \textit{apeiron} awaits cultivation.

Susan Stewart writes:

> Our terror of the unmarked grave is a terror of the insignificance of a world without writing. The metaphor of the unmarked grave is one which joins the mute and the ambivalent; without the mark of writing there is no boundary, no point at which to begin the repetition. Writing gives us a device for inscribing space, for inscribing nature: the lover’s name carved in bark, the slogans on the bridge, the strangely uniform and idiosyncratic hand that has tattooed the subways. Writing serves to caption the world.\textsuperscript{195}

Stewart’s poetics is gender-blind. It allegorizes writing and makes writing stand for all that is ‘human’. Writing is constitutive of space and of nature; it also marks a boundary—a beginning. Like a caption beneath a documentary image, writing

\textsuperscript{192} S. Sontag, \textit{Against Interpretation}, London, Vintage, 1994. PAGE
\textsuperscript{193} This impulse finds popular expression in the resistance to Creative writing within the University, and to the debate around the merit of practice-based PhD’s.
\textsuperscript{195} Stewart, p.76
pins down the world that precedes it. But in the murky zone where creative projects emerge there is not always a visual image to caption, or a clear pre-existing gap waiting to be filled with words. As with the death of a loved one or with a traumatic experience which has robbed the subject of a particular imagined future, one is left not with words, nor with a living body, but with the space in which all that remains are their \textit{things} that stand in the place of what—of who—is no longer there.

Things like eggs.

All beginnings are personal and obdurate.

Both seminal texts and real-life trauma have their limits as suitable beginnings. Their limit is also their strength, as long as their truths are bounded and ‘meshed’ their effects are limited; they cannot be catastrophic. Perhaps that is why writers long for publication—we need our words to be ‘bound’, in all senses of the word.

A beginning determines the kinds of stories that can be told. A literary-theoretical beginning hops from text to text, from theory to theory, like a child following a series of stones set in the ground. The other beginning is not really a story at all, at least not one that I am confident of telling in any wholly exegetical manner.

One evening I found something: an object or if you prefer, an artefact. Like Ricoeur’s symbol, it was to become excessively poetic and productive and set in motion a chain of association that has threatened at times to make altogether too much sense, as in the vision of the paranoid subject. In locating an object at the opening of this Exegesis I have tied myself up to the history of that object, to the history of the subject’s relationship to objects in the poetic field, and to literature’s modes of using (and some might say) abusing objects for its own ends, a practice of which I too am guilty.

Speaking for myself, no bookish beginning or traumatic event can release the imagination and plot as thoroughly, as lightly and as joyfully as an unexpected encounter with an extraordinary object. And yet the unexpected, as well as the extraordinary, have histories. I bring to any encounter my own
history. I am also a writer, and as a writer I have an eye for the heuristic and hermeneutic potential of the object.

Through my encounter with the Egg, I have examined Romanticism’s engagement with the object. I have shown how thoroughly objects are caught up with those figures of rhetoric that address and conjure voices and things, and how attempts to dramatize an encounter are thwarted in their fantasy of a dramatic episode without the conventions of drama.

If this essay is evidence of anything it is that the mute and empty egg can be made to signify—which is not quite the same as being brought back to life.

Creativity is not magic or science. It is just a type of going about your life to the end, and trying to turn what you’ve found into something you care about.

And then we will see what remains.
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