"BLOOM"

and

"SO WHERE TO NOW?": THE FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN AND THE MISSING CHILD."

KERYN CLARK

10404230

Bachelor of Arts, University of Western Australia, 2006

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Abstract

Bloom is a fictional autobiography narrated from the perspective of South African Grace Little who immigrates to Australia in the last years of Apartheid. Grace, runner, writer and self-confessed coward with an acute fear of bridges, returns to Canberra on a four day research trip after an absence of 20 years. She is writing a book about flying ants, a troubled African country and the experience of migration but suffers from writer's block. Many things haunt Grace; a disappearing mother, the loss of family, country, the collapse of her marriage and the memory of a pair of butterfly wings. She returns to Canberra in the hope of making sense of her fractured life. As she runs loops of Lake Ginninderra, Grace's life is revealed through flashback and fragmented memories as she meditates on friendships, motherhood, betrayal and homesickness. In June 1976 Grace sleeps through the Soweto riots that would begin the political upheaval in the country and lead to her reluctant immigration. But the riots have also affected the lives of other characters whose stories are told through Grace's recollections. They are Barbara, a black woman who befriends Grace, Simon, a would-be Jewish activist who wants to sleep with Grace and Walter, a black freedom fighter with a penchant for Russian dolls who lives next door to Grace in a grubby building at the beach. However it is Hèléne, a Melbourne lesbian who changes the way Grace thinks about her experiences and how they link to the memory of one night in November 1961, the night she wore the butterfly wings. The novel is loosely based on my life under Apartheid, my years in London as an exile and as an Australian immigrant.

My exegesis is a meditation on Grace's loops of memory and shame, which are linked to ideas of place, loss and belonging. I consider the writing process in and

through the works of authors Nadine Gordimer and Phaswane Mpe amongst others and draw on recent theorising on shame, trauma and abjection to reflect critically on how South Africa, and in particular the suburb of Hillbrow in which Grace grows up, has been represented in the knowledge of Apartheid and (post) Apartheid. It also seeks to examine the relationship between narrative and the self in very specific ways; of Bloom as fictive autobiography and of Grace as a white South African immigrant whose experiences complicate both easy assumptions of privilege and traditional modes of story telling such as the Bildungsroman.

DECLARATION

This thesis does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.

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This is not a journey I accomplished on my own.

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for

Tanya Dalziell

BLOOM

First houses are the grounds of our first experience. Crawling about at floor level, room by room, we discover laws that we will later apply to the world at large; and who is to say if our notions of space and dimension are not determined for all time by what we encounter there….

David Malouf.

Prologue

December 1995 - Perth

It all started to change about a month before the murders began. It started on that day I stepped out from the cool dark lobby of the hospital. The things I remember with clarity about the preceding two days were the texture and colour of my jade green smock imprinted with bunches of tiny white flowers, the smell of apricot scented toilet paper, that it was a public holiday in another part of the world, that I would never again see my mother, nor would I ever be a mother. I knew with detached certainty, as the doors slid open for me, that nothing would ever be the same.

I remember the street with the occasional joggers and the early risers walking past carrying newspapers and polystyrene cups of steaming coffee. I realised it was Sunday. I noticed the sky was the usual unremitting blue. The sun was hot even though it was not yet 8.00am. I watched two women with bulging bellies smoking in their slippers, talking and sitting on a wall. They looked at me in my jade green smock then looked behind me to see what followed. When nothing did, they turned to each other with raised eyebrows and lapsed into silence.

Josh picked me up and we drove into town. It stalled the inevitable trip to the house. I'd sent him home the night before because his presence was worse than his absence. His fidgeting got on my nerves. I didn't want breakfast. I wasn't hungry. Josh parked the car and crossed the road to buy a newspaper.

The world was strangely silent and appeared to drift in slow motion. It was as if I were watching it from a distance, as if I walked three feet behind myself,

unable to catch up. I'd always been able to cope; no drama was so big that I couldn't take it all in my stride. Grace, you always cope so well with everything, people said. It was true - everything bad that happened for as long as I could remember was gathered up, slammed down, and snapped tight. I simply got on with things. I expected that of me, and so did everyone else. Now, I felt odd. Different. It was as if my brain had cracked wide open and the substance that held it together was beginning to spill. A Hari Krishna with a shaved head and orange robes jumped out at me as I wandered in a daze down St Quentin's Avenue. We'd gone there for coffee, but when it arrived I didn't want it. I left Josh to drink his alone while I walked up and down the street with no particular purpose. The Hari Krishna waved a pamphlet in my face and pressed a prayer into my hands. I was going to need it but I didn't know it then. He told me I should smile more, that it would never happen. I turned on him, not comprehending. That's when the journey began. Somewhere between good intentions and double speak.

Sunday - Long Run - 24kms

Canberra 1991

'This looks like the arse end of nowhere. Where is the city? Where are the people?' My breath steamed the window glass as we cruised down Northbourne Avenue. 'Welcome to the bush capital,' Josh said, 'isn't it great? Canberra was especially designed to blend into the bush.' Just like Josh, I thought, a city that wants to be both the capital *and* invisible. Josh wanted to be top dog but also unobtrusive. It confused people. He did this easily enough through his choice of clothing; a sign I should have seen as a warning of things to come. But I didn't – I glossed things over in the early days – I was so relieved to have found a normal boyfriend. His closets were filled with inoffensive, identical stock-standard stuff: beige trousers, brown lace-up shoes, cotton work shirts in plain colours, brown socks and medium size underpants that came in economy packs of three. His ordinary-ness was part of my early attraction to him. I wanted someone reliable - someone who didn't eat brown rice, practice Zen Buddhism in the centre of the room or quote Marx at every opportunity. But I was to learn that Josh's ordinariness contradicted an intense desire to achieve at everything. He wanted to be noticed but not to stick out. Canberra was perfect for him.

Josh was driven. This was another attraction since my earlier boyfriends had been too busy discovering themselves to do anything. My grandmother was giddy with delight. Josh was polite. He owned a car – a shiny maroon Cressida – a gift from his father. Her granddaughter would finally stop mooching about. My brother Blueboy didn't spend much time analysing the Josh phenomena; he simply snorted 'small man syndrome.' For his part, Josh thought my brother was

a fuckwit. This assessment wasn't helped much when Blueboy pitched up to our colour co-ordinated wedding in a green jungle print short sleeved shirt, no tie, and a pair of yellow *velskoens*. He had written 'Left' and 'Right' in black felt tip pen on the appropriate foot. He was such a wee devil. From the beginning I was a thin slice of ham between the two men in my life.

I'd never seen anything like Canberra. I saw a wide expanse of nothingness; dusty acres of wattle and eucalypts sprawling out before me; a vista of desolation with identical small brown uninspiring houses peeping out from the bush. I would never have contemplated moving to such a place in South Africa but with immigration, everything changes. All the familiar reference points disappear along with your ability to make rational decisions based on what you know. A new country is a re-birth of sorts.

In a new country we discover how little we know about anything outside our comfort zone – how much of the familiar territory is taken for granted. But once the protections have been removed and the bubble wrap of familiar communities discarded, and you have packed yourself off to the other end of the world with less care, less stuffing than your crockery, you are down to the fundamentals. It is in this space of bare bones which rub painfully against each other like tired knees we are tested. It takes real emptiness to understand the meaning of full. At the time of our immigration, someone I knew in Johannesburg made a living flogging the virtues of staying in South Africa based on the ideas of courage and big things. 'How,' he would say, 'could you possibly compare a lion or an elephant with something as insipid as a kangaroo?' He had small man's

syndrome too. But I remember his words well because that's when I began to internalise the belief that I was a coward. I've since come to learn that in competition with celebrities like lions and elephants, it takes balls to be a wombat. On that day, as we cruised down Northbourne Avenue in a car we paid too much for just to get into the credit system, I felt like a Victorian in crinoline bumping along in an ox-wagon as it lurched across the dusty plains of the New World. 'You've got to be joking,' I said.

Twenty years later I circle Canberra on a flight in from Adelaide and try to remember it. The city huddles beneath the clouds and in the twilight below the rivers and lakes glow as molten pools in a landscape of light and shadows.

Next to me, a Japanese student with an Australian accent plays a computer game on his IPhone. We have not spoken once during the trip, acknowledging each other only at the arrival of drinks. I order dry white wine. He orders sparkling lemonade. I sit back and sip; wonder when I lost my taste for sweet things. I wonder too if he lives in Canberra, if he was even born when I lived here. It occurs to me I have returned to remember how to be miserable. Something is blocking my book and the University has sent me here to try and discover what it is. The city sprawls shapeless in my mind. I remember it sucked the life out of me. The seatbelt sign pings and we buckle up. The student stashes away his computer game; the cups and last bits of rubbish are cleared; the lights are dimmed and we begin our descent. It's Saturday night. The airport is small, dull and green-tinged from the fluorescents. The coffee shops are closed, the porters are tired and I've missed the last Airliner bus to the city. Great – welcome to the

sticks, I think. I find a taxi and give directions to Belconnen.

The University has booked me into a hotel in Benjamin Way. I panic in the taxi. A rigid back and a sullen head of oily black hair rebuff all my attempts at conversation. I can chirrup for only so long before I lapse into silence. We drive through the city and out into the bush for what seems like hours. I surreptitiously check that his credentials are pasted to the sun visor. It's a habit I've fallen into since the three girls went missing in Perth and, when all but the first of the bodies were found, the place was awash with theories a taxi was involved. There are no lights anywhere and I realise now that no-one knew me here. I lived like a secret stashed away in a brown brick Govie in one of those endless cul-de-sacs. I came. I left without a trace. I would give anything to be missed. Should I call a friend in Perth and tell him where I am? Perhaps it's a bit silly. I check the door for handles. I suppose if I had to I could always throw myself out and roll into a ditch. I always like to know there's an exit. Ahead I see traffic lights, a relief. We turn into a wide boulevard pegged neatly into place by two stark rows of English elms. It is July. In the orange glow of the street lights I sense the vague promise of suburbs but the roads are wide with double lanes and it's too dark to see across to the other side - even when I squint.

It seems odd to have a motel clumped out here in the middle of nowhere but then that's Canberra; a city built with every conceivable service and hardly any population to enjoy it. Josh used to love reminding me, when my spirits flagged, that Canberrans enjoyed the highest standard of living in the country. It gave him a sense of one-upmanship when Judith phoned to brag extravagantly about her

exciting life in Sydney and I would sink to new lows imagining it. 'At least we don't have fight through the traffic all day,' Josh would to say by way of compensation.

We turn into the motel driveway; the reception area is white granite, wide and empty with a lone clerk propped up at the desk. I push aside thoughts of *Psycho* and check in. The room is functional. There is a bed with a striped quilt, a built-in melamine desk at the window, a television, a telephone, a chair and a print of an exotic flower hanging off centre. The plan is working – I start to feel depressed. I phone Perth. I unpack. I email friends in other parts of the world, facilities that weren't available when I first lived here; when my link to the world was a post office box on Alinga Street. Perhaps this trip was a mistake. Perhaps this entire chapter can be cut from the book. Would anybody really be interested in what happened here?

The bed is surprisingly comfortable and the room warm. I sleep well. In the morning of their own accord, my legs find their way to the river. I'm rugged up in running tights, two long sleeved Nordic camping vests, a rain jacket, gloves and a beanie. I breathe in ice; blow out smoke. The mist obscures Lake Ginninderra. There are very few people about even though it is close to 9.00am. I plod down to the water and jog around the building works that are throwing up apartments with views. The mall is still there; Belconnen is famous for it. The concrete box takes up the block and looks like a triple storey World War II bunker. It was there we once won a hamper for being the best form-filling customers in the entire database of the St George Building Society - or so said a beaming woman in a red

suit and short dark hair. Josh was proud of our hamper; he liked that we tried to be the best at everything. Closer to the water the wind picks up. It howls down from the Brindabellas; the reeds and the plane trees groan in misery; bend out of shape. I dig in.

I pick up the pace on Emu Bank – now I remember. This was where I caught Carol H. at the tail end of a 15km road race two weeks after we arrived. How was I to know, as I chased those skinny legs around two circuits of the lake, what would happen here; how all the power and determination I felt right then would bleed away? On that day, I caught her on this stretch. I'd trailed her all the way, watching those legs for any sign of fatigue. There was none. I cursed her tenacity each time we crossed the bridges and belted into the wind. On Emu Bank I sized up the situation with one kilometre to go. I knew I'd have to catch her off-guard, kick hard and hang on. I moved up to her shoulder, trying not to breathe. To our right Carol's husband stood with a pram; a big blonde baby draped like a jumper over his arm. He shouted at her. To our left, Josh jogged towards me in his light blue track suit, looking svelte; every inch the winner in his silver shoes; his fine blonde hair trailing like a halo in that light. I groaned. I dreaded these high-speed pep talks. Always, when he'd finished his race he'd jog back in the field to see what I was doing. He was shouting: 'Move, move, Grace, pick up the pace – dig deeper.' Carol's husband was shouting at her too. 'Run, run, she's tired, go now!' They were like two gamblers with a stake on the horses as we hurtled down the path. Carol, momentarily distracted, turned to look at where her husband stood outside the Bella Vista. It was a gift. That's where I struck.

Today the foreshore is empty and the Bella Vista is closed. Through the large front windows I notice that the chairs and tables are neatly stacked. It's good to know they're still in business. We ate there the night they opened, when the gluey smell of new carpet and cement dust still hung in the air. After that weeping into the entrée became a Friday night routine. I wasn't allowed to eat a mains size; Josh was watching my weight. The Italian owner oozed through the tables talking to diners. When he stopped before us he would throw up his hands, theatrically avoiding my red rims entirely, my obvious misery, ignoring Josh's teeth grinding suppressed fury, as he paused to admire a beaded cardigan or a blouse (second hand clothing parcels from my grandmother) as if, in sheer disbelief, he had never seen anything like it. Now that I think about it, he probably hadn't. I was glad to see he was still in business. I felt I owed him.

A black swan and a few ducks pick desultorily at the edge of the lake. A lone student cycles down the path from the University of Canberra. There is the small wooden bridge still slippery underfoot when there's frost and I cross it and head west towards John Knight Memorial Park. Two people without necks walk towards me. Their heads are burrowed into their shoulders to shield them from the wind's bite. The pathway is strewn with leaves and shards of torn bark. Today I have to do my long run – 24kms or three times around the lake. I'm training for a marathon in Perth in August. I jog gingerly as I pick my way through the plane, eucalypts and Chinese pistachio trees.

Before Canberra I spent a week at the University of Adelaide where I attended a series of Master Classes. After an intense semester of Perth heat and

teaching first year students I was sent to the classes to get some feedback on my book – new sets of eyes were needed to unlock what seemed to be a snarl of events which had culminated in a solid, un-identifiable, molten lump; in the way of a fine gold chain caught in a knot. Careful handling was required lest it snap. I was filled with the dismayed sense that I had no idea what I was writing about. There seemed to be no clear point, no linear structure, no identifiable plot, no conflict to be resolved unless you count one tired marriage disintegrating in a dull house on a dry street somewhere in Perth at the time of the murders. There was no beginning and no ending, just loops of frayed nerves, childhood events and random images juxtaposed against each other seemingly without end. Each time I tried to write the story about immigration, loss, a troubled African country, and what happened in Australia a small girl with green eyes and a blunt cut bob stepped onto the page and stood there mute. She appeared and disappeared, dissolving and emerging in the shade and light of trees. An unstablefloating image much like the old daguerreotypes which were not properly sealed she has been exposed to the subtle currents of air and the pressures of human touch. Her inks have faded and transmuted her into a ghost; a ghost who floats along the path and drips ice-cream. Here is my dilemma. How do you find the words to tell of a life?

Johannesburg - 1963

You could say my story begins at the zoo. It is the place that I loved best and my memories always return there. Zoo Lake sits opposite Johannesburg zoo. When they named the lake the city fathers must have thought long and hard about it. The zoo and the lake are separated by Jan Smuts Avenue, which begins in the northern suburbs and leads into the city. It gets bigger and louder the closer it gets to commerce although these days, business has changed course. Gold is found in the opposite direction - Sandton.

Sandton is a gleaming Shangri-La flanked by the new American Embassy where suits replace overalls and international banks stand sentinel - Goldman Sachs - smart people with sharp noses for money. Here opulence looks like the Italian Renaissance particularly the Michaelangelo Hotel riven by those rumours, thick with denial, about Colonel Gaddafi's investment money.

Marathon runners have a love/hate relationship with the hilly section of Jan Smuts as it veers from the relative flat at the zoo and begins a steep ascent, curving and winding past stone walls that hide mansions draped in ivy. These were the homes of the first mining magnates in the days when Johannesburg had nothing to recommend it but thick veins of gold under the ground and rare thin air.. When there's a breeze the aged trees move to the sound of birds and the gentle clink of old money. It was my ambition to own a house there. Now of course, I never will.

Jan Smuts Avenue has always been a test of fitness. If the hill can be negotiated or even cruised without stopping, runners believe they are fit to run

anything. We would smile to ourselves when we read American running magazines which boasted of hills that broke hearts and minds and we would say to ourselves, 'you ain't seen nothing yet.'

On the zoo side, if you tune your ears to a pitch above the traffic, you might hear the roar of lions or the call of some other wild beast roaming a cage or swinging from trees to the delight of visiting school children.

These languid symbols of Africa are bored in the afternoon shade. The pavements around the perimeter of the zoo are another favourite training spot for runners. Partly because of the coolness and the beauty of the shade trees and the graceful well maintained gardens the northern suburbs are famous for; partly because the elegant opulence of the old character houses in Forest Town offers a pleasing vista; and partly for there's always a chance that you might see some animals – sometimes a buck or even a white lion cub on the far side, if you're lucky. Busloads of children still spill out of the line of traffic on Upper Park Drive and careen into the car park every school morning. They offload hand-holding, hat-wearing, single-file-lines, who screech like parrots while teachers blow order through silver whistles.

The zoo is the favourite haunt of non-custodial parents who, for one day each week, are given the chance to reconnect with the children of their broken marriages. These children are introduced to new boyfriends and new girlfriends in the car park. There is a mutual staring at shoes. There are bribes of ice cream, candy floss or hamburgers and chips from the tearooms. It is always uncomfortable and I know this because I have dripped many an ice cream down

the front of my dress at the zoo. The zoo for non-custodial parents was my zoo. Many is the meal I have squirmed my way through, dressed to the nines in my tartan skirt, my long bobby socks and my white blouse with frills on it. My father with his lope, his height, his grin and sometimes his hat cocked sideways. His girlfriends with their mothering skills on display, full, mad, unchecked, wiping away drips and spills. It was like an interview.

I was only interested in riding the elephant up and down the long Zoo paths or visiting the solitary polar bear as it dragged it's matted filthy feet around and around its stone enclosure. The zoo was for me a place of contradiction. It was an escape for the day from the flat where I lived and a chance to see my father but it was also a landscape of desperate loneliness where, in their eagerness to please, people revealed the wounds in their lives. Here, on a Sunday, there were the long shadows of men striding out along the path and the small shadows of girls holding their hands, bobbing along with the desolate sense of something ending. The zoo smelt of sugar, warm tar, dust and animal dung. I once nearly had my hand chomped by a stocky, big toothed, bad tempered donkey.

Outside the enormous wrought iron main gate, on the opposite side of Jan Smuts Avenue, there is Zoo Lake. It looks more like an extended pond than anything that might invoke images of Geneva or Lake Como. There are swimming baths, lawns, weeping willows, gum trees, public toilet blocks and tea rooms where old ladies are brought for tea and scones by their daughters. The lake was built to provide work for the poor during the Great Depression and although it is situated at the confluence of several well-heeled suburbs, it has always been a

place where ordinary people could go and enjoy themselves.

Here you will hear ducks, dogs and the soft swish of oars as lovers and non-custodial parents row out onto the water. I was always afraid of the water and hated the feeling of the boards as they moved underfoot. I would kick up a fuss and cling to the sides and cry until we reached dry land again. At the side of the lake there are sluice gates and slimy green weeds hanging in fronds that would appear to a child on an outing, one who came equipped with a wild imagination, like the Niagara Falls and a swamp all at once. It spelt certain doom should a boat drift too close to it's hissing, slimy green edge. She might have screamed louder and thrown herself on the bottom of the boat terrified the whole thing could tip over. To an adult it looked exactly what it was. An overflow drain where the storm waters gushed or the algae grew depending on the season.

A small island sits in the centre of the lake stinking of duck droppings, rotting vegetation and busy with the chatter of egrets. Once a year on the 5th of November the Guy Fawkes firework display was set up there. It always rained but people came from miles around anyway. Idiots who drank too much beer threw handfuls of lit jumping Jacks into the rowing boats causing rowers to scream and plunge into the water. Occasionally someone drowned. We would come down from the flat where we lived, up the long hill of Jan Smuts and down Empire Road a bit, and wait to be given sparklers when it grew dark. We would watch the fountains change colour according to the lights under them and for a couple of seconds when the sparklers hissed small faces would flare with wonder..

Once, before I was born, a pennywhistle shrilled from beneath the trees. On that day the newspapers said what an outrage it was when the white population and the black population got up together and danced as one. When I was nine two boys fishing in the lake caught a plastic bag. Inside was a woman's head. The newspapers that day were diligent in reporting the details including the fact that all her teeth were missing. I was obsessed with murders. I clipped all cuttings out of the newspapers and fastidiously pasted them into a blue photograph album. My grandmother didn't know whether I was psychologically disturbed or would grow up to be a detective.

In the days when I rode elephants down the paths at the Zoo or visited the polar bear circling its enclosure, or sat on the bank of Zoo lake under the weeping trees sucking oranges and waiting for the fireworks, or eating my grandmother's risotto and swirling around the fence posts until I was sick, there were no clues to suggest to a nine year old that within a few short years everything would change.

Johannesburg 1976

Twelve years later I moved into Elizabeth Mansions, a small bachelor's flat in Braamfontein. . I would soon meet my neighbours, a nymphomaniac rumoured to knock naked on the door of new male tenants (I always suspected this was wishful thinking on their part) and an old man with red bandaged hands that oozed pus and flakes of skin. He walked about the streets in bedroom slippers, a brown chequered dressing gown with a turban of bandages wrapped around his head. Every day he stopped people in the street and begged for the fare to get to the hospital. He liked to offer his hand to shake and smirk when people averted his blue watery gaze only to recoil in horror when they saw his hands. Guilt earned him a few cents more. This was a country specialising in high wire acts – there were no safety nets for anyone.

On my first day in my new place I made myself at home. It was a small flat; one room with a two bar electric heater set into the wall, an old fashioned stone sink and workbench which served as both kitchen and entrance hall, no place to stand a fridge, which was fine because I didn't have one, and a bathroom off the main room boasting a treasured original clawfoot bath.

I pinned up my set of *Mucha Art Nouveau* Four Seasons posters; painted the base of the clawfoot bath daffodil yellow; poured myself a few liberal mugs of Autumn Harvest Riesling and toasted the city – or rather the OK Bazaars across the street. Since I lived *in* the city, a few hundred meters around the corner from the university, my only direct view was Solly Kramer's Bottle Shop adjoining the OK. How convenient. Braamfontein was a largely commercial area dotted with a

few residential buildings including Elizabeth Mansions. Highway Mansions, the block next door was full of university students. There was a gulf of difference between students who slummed for a few years while they studied and those who lived there permanently. The border separating us was a run-down Art Deco movie theatre specialising in Marx Brothers Festivals. Once, outside the movie house a banner for *The Star* tied to a telephone pole read 'Smith Says No Black Rule in Rhodesia.'

During the day the cars in the streets beneath my window honked endlessly but ceased at the close of a working day. The whites returned to the suburbs; the blacks returned to the townships. The streets that night, my first night, were deserted and quiet save for the distant wail of police sirens. I thought nothing of them since my childhood had been spent in the adjacent suburb of Hillbrow where sirens were part of the general ambience – I was used to them. In fact moving from Hillbrow to Braamfontein was the inner-city version of shifting to a quiet neighbourhood. The Old Fort prison was halfway between Elizabeth Mansions and Hillbrow, in an almost direct line or a brisk 10 minute walk in either direction. In those days I believe prisons held criminals and the apparatus of the State was there to protect us. After my first night at Elizabeth Mansions I slowly came to understand that in our world things were different.

Braamfontein is and was a place most people simply work in or pass through. On the day I kneeled in the bathroom painting my clawfoot bath, a white executive from one of the big insurance companies might have sat at a traffic lights in a shiny BMW washed and polished by hands and a face he would not

have noticed or would ever recognise. He would not have noticed me either had I hung out the window to wave. He might have glanced up as he waited and seen a grubby window and a girl with long brown hair as she stared down at him. He would have seen a line of sun warped books, a curtain hanging off the hook, an ugly collection of cheap plastic half-used hand lotion and shampoo bottles, perhaps even a dusty vase containing a bunch of dried Proteas and, if it crossed his mind at all, he might have wondered how anyone could possibly live there. At the same traffic light, an African worker, squeezed in and hanging from the handrails of a township bus might have glanced up too and seen the face of white privilege. We were the white inner-city life that separated the two halves of the city from each other; the suburbs and the townships; the haves and the have nots.

Braamfontein was as close to a sacred site as it is possible to have if you are an inner-city child born of a government keen to flex its racial superiority and its modernity. I've often pondered the fact that on the first night of my adult life, the geographic significance that small corner of rented territory was to my life was not revealed to me: the Queen Victoria hospital where I was born; the Johannesburg morgue; the university and the Braamfontein crematorium were all within walking distance of each other and where I stood. If I were Indigenous, this would be the place of ancestors; the place of dreaming, bones and ashes.

On that first night I stood at the window sipping my wine and watching the street. It was a clear, cold June evening; the kind of nose-blocking freezingness that in my mind only the Highveld is capable of producing. I had no phone, no radio and no newspapers. Television had only been introduced a few years

earlier and was well out of my range of affordability. My two bar electric heater worked overtime. My room contained two single mattresses. There was one to sit on and one to sleep on. I owned a record player, Bob Dylan and Buffy Sainte Marie records and a pile of books. This was the sum total of my life at twenty-one and I was living on my own for the first time.

Even though it was a commercial area and I was alone, cut off from the rest of the world, I felt perfectly safe. I felt I belonged and I was connected to the world about me by a shared history and blood. I had no premonition of what was about to unfold or that I would be exiled and homeless within a few short months.

With the sun gone the temperature dropped quickly. I closed the windows, lit some candles, put Buffy Sainte-Marie on the turn-table and settled down to drift into a different world. I opened a book. The book I was reading and becoming increasingly indignant about was *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.* It never occurred to me that the struggles in between pages were unfolding outside my window. Wrapped in a soft warm blanket of ignorance day one of my new adult life had been a roaring success. I had moved myself. I had my place. I had a yellow clawfoot bath. I was at peace.

I missed the start of the revolution entirely.

The next day, before my shift began at eleven, I lay up to my neck in bubbles enjoying the luxury of my bath. I was a waitress at a steakhouse franchise out in the northern suburbs. Diners couldn't believe it when they asked what I was studying and I told them that waitressing was my sole occupation. It was assumed I must be studying something as the only white people who worked as waitresses were students, travellers or European immigrants who owned their own restaurants. People in the northern suburbs assumed a lot of things. I couldn't believe it either. I gained top grades at school and used to dream that one day I would miraculously wake up and find that I'd turned into a lawyer as I slept; that I'd discover I'd been moved in my dreams to one of those grand houses in Parktown that were all laid out on quiet streets. It would be one with pressed tin ceilings and large sash windows; a gleaming dark blue BMW would purr softly as it waited for me in the garage. I hadn't imagined a life swabbing down black and white chequered plastic tablecloths for a living, but there you have it. I couldn't afford university. I had no experience or training at doing anything else. I was a waitress with a rented bachelor flat in the city and an almost mystic belief in figures of authority. I was the blinkered child of a totalitarian state. Apart from the fact we were under international sanctions and had no idea what the rest of the world was doing, I was reasonably happy with my life – give or take the sash windows and the dark blue BMW.

Outside my building the streets were filled with the usual traffic noises. It was only when I turned into Jan Smuts Avenue on my way to catch my bus at Pop's Corner that I walked straight into the riot. The road teemed with dogs,

police in battle gear, barricades and screaming, placard-waving students. I was confused, trying to process the fact that a few hundred metres from my window, in the police state that was South Africa, I was witnessing a demonstration by whites. In my universe, civil disobedience was virtually unheard of. The first placard I managed to read between the jostling bodies and the police pushing back with snarling German Shepherds was '*Soweto we bleed for you.*' Instinctively I turned and looked West in the direction of the township. I saw smoke. I had smelt it the night before and hadn't paid any attention since the smell of smoke on cold Johannesburg nights was not unusual. Most of the townships didn't have electricity or heating and smoke from thousands of wood fires would often drift across the city. In fact if Johannesburg in winter has a singular smell it's smoke.

A girl I knew, a psychology student, was waving a placard. I grabbed her arm. 'What the hell is going on?' I shouted. It was difficult to hear anything above the noise. She screamed back 'Don't you fucking read the newspapers?' She marched me into Pop's Corner, jammed her finger down where *The Star* stood in smouldering piles and triumphantly marched out without another word. I never saw her again. On the front page there was a photograph of a boy carrying the lifeless body of Hector Pietersen. Soweto was in flames. Finally, after years of waiting, the barbarians were at the gate.

As my bus headed North down Jan Smuts Avenue and I sat with a copy of *The Star* in my lap, the white students moved *en masse* in the opposite direction – towards the city. In the crowd, Simon, a second year law student was swallowed up and jostled along in the direction of Elizabeth Bridge. All he wanted to do, all

any one of them wanted to do on that day, was show solidarity with the students in Soweto. On Elizabeth Bridge Simon saw a line of policemen with dogs blocking the exit from the bridge. Slightly built and not given to overt displays of heroism, he was in no mood to hurl his small frame onto a blue clad wall of Afrikaner Nationalism and their salivating Alsatians trained in the art of counter-terrorism. He turned and ran in the opposite direction.

Pushing his way back through the crowd he managed to reach the tail end of the demonstration just in time for the rear guard action. A line of police sealed off the exit from behind and the students found themselves trapped on the bridge. The police charged. In the melee that followed Simon was hit over the head with a truncheon and dragged, kicked and punched into the back of a Kwela-Kwela. It was the type typically seen about town with wired grilling covering the high windows with bunches of brown fingers hanging out next to the squashed, desperate faces of those rounded up when found to be without pass books. They were bound for prison or work camps or both.

On this particular day the Kwela-Kwela was filled with dishevelled northern suburbs white university students who had been picked up at the demonstration and shoved in the van. The van remained stationary on the bridge for some time, no doubt to give the students time to contemplate their lives at the hands of the State. Perhaps an hour passed. Blood dripped from Simon's head onto his shoulder. He was fast beginning to regret his act of political activism. Among the students in the van were members of the Student's Representative Council, someone whose father was a lawyer and someone else who proposed going on a

hunger strike. 'For us to be on a hunger strike, we have to be here long enough for them to want to feed us,' the boy whose father was a lawyer said. Suddenly, after an hour, the doors were flung open. Crisp June air and pale winter sunlight filtered into the van before it was blocked by Die Rooi Rus. Major Theunis Jacobus Swanepoel, red hair, red moustache, brass buttons and gold braid. He was a study in sharp creases.

He was armed, as were all the policemen. The day before (and unknown to us since we descended quite quickly into chaos), it was he who'd given the order to open fire in Soweto. Life was getting uncomfortable. The students squirmed on the steel benches. What now? 'Okay Jew Boys,' he barked, 'the parrrrtttys over. You'd better all run home to your mommies before I get crrrrrosssss.'

'What did you do?' I asked, years later, a plate of steamed fish in front of me, the starched white linen tablecloth of the university club restaurant between us and behind us, Matilda Bay, blue, untroubled, dolphined. 'I ran home,' he said, 'and then I kept going. I didn't even stop for a roll at The Bread and Butter Basket. I didn't stop until I reached Australia.'

In the tiny red-brick semi-detached house on Vilakazi Street, Barbara, a twenty-two year old black mother of two heard the sound of whistles, chants, running feet and *Nkosi Sikele* being sung en masse. She pulled her hands out of soap suds where she washed pots and pans in an orange plastic bucket and dried them hastily on her skirt. She ran into the dusty front yard to see what the commotion was about. Her husband taught at the nearby Phenfeni High School. He had warned her trouble was brewing. The new curriculum stated that all

maths and science subjects had to be taught in Afrikaans and the other subjects in English. This infuriated the students who understood its intent; a calculated move on the part of the government to provide an inferior education and to preserve a cheap, accessible, easily exploitable workforce. The students from the surrounding schools were to march to the nearby Orlando West Stadium to hold a protest rally. The narrow streets seethed with people – students mainly – who bubbled over the pavements and came face to face with the blue line of police at the corner of Moema Street just as the white students would do the next day. One of the schoolboys picked up a bottle and threw it directly at the face of Die Rooi Rus hitting him in the cheek. Major Theunis Swanepoel, called in from leave to attend to situation, was crrrrossss. He ordered the first shots to be fired.

Walter was just another face in the crowd. Of all the black and white photographs that were taken on that day he could have been anybody. One of those smudged, bobbing blobs in grey shorts and white school shirts that stretched back as far as the eye could see. Prancing, running, fists raised – frozen in time on the day they made history. He picked up a rock and threw it at police. The blood thumped in his ears. Even though it was cold he was past caring and the adrenalin racing through his body kept him from feeling. When he'd left for school that morning he had no idea how his life would change. He was sixteen and had no intention of working in the gardens of the northern suburbs, hacking bits of rock down a mine or sizzling spare-ribs in a steakhouse for the well-fed white diners.. That was *not* going to be his life. He wanted to be an engineer and this slop of an education would deny him that opportunity. He managed to avoid

being shot or arrested that day by staying in the pack; by running down alleys, jumping over corrugated iron fences, panting and sweating in small box houses as police with dogs, guns and tear gas tore through the streets. But within days rumours filtered through the underground information system which flourished in the townships that his name had spilled out of someone's mouth in the interrogation room. The police were looking for him. Someone knocked on his grandmother's door. Nameless, faceless, it doesn't matter. Information was exchanged and the informant darted back into the anonymity of shadows. Walter packed a satchel. He didn't have time and he didn't have much. His family scratched together a small amount of money and the goodbyes were said before he disappeared into the maze of alleys and into the inky African night.

'What did you do?' I asked years later in Perth as he smoked in the stairwell of an old 1960s building across the road from the beach and I leaned against my window box trying to get cool on a hot evening. 'I crawled through the country and across the border into Botswana. I didn't stop crawling until I got to Russia.' He was matter of fact as he flicked his ash into one of my plants.

As I rode on the bus down Jan Smuts Avenue in the direction of the Zoo, I read *The Star* newspaper. I wondered what it all meant; when this bushfire, like so many others, would be stamped out. Thirty years later I would wander through the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, and find it difficult to believe that I had been a law-abiding citizen of the country at that time. It seemed like another world; someone else's era and country; Jim Crow and the Deep South perhaps but nothing I had once belonged to. I would feel dwarfed by the giant

mustard coloured armoured vehicles which had patrolled the townships at night and were to become a familiar presence in our lives. I would step into the tiny replicated windowless cells where detainees were held before and after interrogation and I would step quickly back out again as the walls closed around me. I would pause to look at a blow-up photograph of the white students as they demonstrated outside the university on that day and my attention would be drawn to an arm on the far right of the picture. It was just an arm, the face and the body attached to it was turned away from the cameras as if the person who owned the arm was talking to someone. It was an arm I knew. It was the arm of the friend who'd I stopped to ask what the hell was going on. I would recognise her jumper. I would realise with shock at the Apartheid Museum that it was me the arm was talking to. I was there, on that day, snapped in that moment, just outside the lens of history.

Adelaide 2011

I landed in Adelaide at 10:00pm on a cool, wet Monday night. From the air, the suburbs sprawled out like an Indian tapestry embellished with beads and sequins; the type you find laid out across the flea markets of the world. From above, the empty roads glistened in neat grids. It wouldn't be too difficult finding my way around. An Eritrean wrapped in a scarf and listening to Bob Marley pulled up in a taxi. His face was young and soft with thick black lashes that gave the appearance of smudged eye-liner. I give him an address on North Terrace.

He was chatty. He told me that he wasn't really a taxi-driver. He was doing an IT degree at the University of Adelaide. 'It's hard to get jobs,' he shrugged. I understood perfectly. I asked him how he found life here. He thought for a minute and said 'quiet.' It was the standard response of people who don't wish to offend. I told him that the first few years are always miserable but that things would improve. '

One day you'll look back to this time and realise you have carved out a history. One day you will retrace your steps back to the first point and marvel at the distance you've travelled.' He didn't seem convinced. I wasn't either when I first heard it. I asked him how I could get to the river. I realised after I had checked in, when I was tucked up in my hotel room rummaging through the bar fridge, that in ways I didn't quite understand, I was retracing my footsteps to 'back there.' The question was where was *there*?

An alarm pierced through the darkness at 5.00am. I groped for my phone in the dark thinking it was the alarm I'd set the previous evening. I was completely disorientated; flailing about in a dark room trying to find the source of that screech. It dawned on me slowly – a fire alarm. I wondered if I was supposed to leave the room immediately and head for the fire escape as I had been trained to do a thousand times in dull jobs in dull offices. Finally, in my slippers, I padded down the cement stairwell which opened out into a frozen car park behind the hotel.

I was one of a throng of sleepy, confused guests with one poor girl turning blue in a pair of shorty pyjamas. The sun rose between the buildings as we stood there and shivered, waiting for the fire department or at least to see huge gusts of smoke and flame billowing from somewhere. A truck arrived with all bells pealing red alert and firemen disappeared inside the hotel on this ordinary Tuesday morning in Adelaide. Finally, they found the source of fire – someone had been smoking in his room and triggered the alarm. We all trooped back in. I decided that since I was up I'd run down to the river.

I'd visited Adelaide years before when our marriage was threadbare. We were en route to Perth to another new job and another new life. If I'd once thought Josh's ordinariness equated to stability I was wrong. We were constantly on the move and I felt permanently dislocated. Adelaide was a detour to run a race which Josh won and a stopping point to take several photographs of me swatting flies and looking miserable. I remembered the

paddle boats moored near the Convention Centre, the old bridges and the way steam rises from the river in the morning. Refreshed and alert I returned to the hotel for scrambled eggs before walking up North Terrace to the Master Classes held in a stuffy little room above a courtyard in the Arts building. It reminded me of the courtyard in Arts faculty in Perth where men with balloons for stomachs rehearse Hamlet outdoors to an audience of peacocks perched in formation; their turquoise feathers trailing over the balconies like the tattered plumes of cavalier's hats.

My fellow writers included a film-maker in his 60s called Bert. A tall sun-blasted man from Perth who quickly moved over, detected my accent and spoke of his anti-Apartheid activism. Next to him was Hèléne from Melbourne; a short, cropped, plus-sized lesbian who wore frameless spectacles. She arranged herself behind a small fortress of technological equipment; an Ipad, a Blackberry; a Kindle and a laptop – just in case we ran out of things to do. She was smart, loud, vulnerable. I could tell when her sleeves moved up and the scars on her wrists became evident. There was also Colleen, a bubbly blonde who wrote about Egypt; Margaret, an older woman, a self-funded retiree who once wrote for the BBC and took charge of everything, including her own death. Finally, there was Maude, a red-head who wrote about sex and sheep-shearing. Her face was heavy with stories from the past.

We'd been asked to send pieces of our work ahead so that M.T. a fiery Russian Jewish immigrant, along with the other participants, could provide

feedback on it. I'd never told anybody about Bewdley Street much less write about it. I was too ashamed about what happened there – too unsure of how to make sense of it – too laden and suffocated with guilt to speak. To make any kind of comment was to reveal myself a coward. I simply buried it. Now everyone in the room would know.

I'd left South Africa for London a few months after the riots. I know now it was knee-jerk reaction but I wasn't alone; the planes were full in only one direction. I left vowing not to return until Apartheid was gone and we could all find some way forward. I uttered grand pronouncements at the airport; vague, idiotic bullshit to cover the fact that I was running. I grandstanded in front of Blueboy in his army gear (he'd been called up in the newly declared State of Emergency), and grandmother with bright smiles painted on their faces. 'The Government should do this' and 'The Government should do that' I said, smoking up a storm and jangling my copper bracelets in blissful ignorance that London would make short work of me.

When M.T. strode in and began to tell the story of how she came to be in Australia I felt my eyes prick. Here was someone who understood the magnitude of being plucked from one environment and stuck somewhere else as a consequence of political upheaval; the tearing away of every familiar thing. I struggled to breathe. When M.T. said she wore black for her first three years in Australia I was relieved. The symbolism appealed to me. I wished I'd thought of. 'It was only the birth of my daughter,' she said 'that

allowed me to see Australia through her eyes and affect some sort of bonding with the country. After all, my daughter is Australian.' She shrugged as an afterthought. 'I am connected to it by blood.' She rummaged through the pile of work in front of her and picked up mine. It was my London story. She looked up expectantly. 'Who's going first?'

London 1977

The house on Bewdley Street was a dilapidated Victorian Terrace with nothing to recommend it but its proximity to some of the best live music in London, a macrobiotic food shop and a Chinese takeaway that sold the softest, fattest spring rolls on any continent. And of course there was the small bookshop up on the High Street where I spent most of my free time. I arrived in London late one winter. In my knapsack I carried a newly minted marriage certificate, a pair of cowboy boots and a lot of corduroy. Like anybody else from broken societies I came expecting to discover some answers, and if not answers, then at least some peace, so that I could live my life like normal people did in the Western world.

My generation grew up in the shadow of the revolution and it instilled in some of us a curious recklessness. I'd married a friend on impulse, an anarchic artist called Barri who came with a British passport. Barri grew wild hair down his back and drew obscene drawings of the Pope which filled my grandmother with dismay even though she wasn't religious. I met him during the first weeks following the riots when nobody knew exactly what was going on. The streets around Braamfontein that I'd thought of as quiet had, post riots, settled into eeriness. Everyone was on edge. The independence I'd toasted with *Autumn Harvest Riesling* was a distant memory and had been replaced by fear. At the restaurant people talked of nothing else but leaving the country. Everyone was an expert on what was happening with the revolution and knew for certain that soon the streets of Johannesburg would be soaked with our blood. I didn't need

any encouragement to be panicked. I'd grown up with my grandmother who'd fed me stories about the Mau-Mau and the revolution in the Congo. For years she'd been stockpiling small packets of sugar, rice and bush tea for the imminent catastrophe. We'd practiced tying sheets into a rope and dropping them out of our window of a seven story building 'just in case.' Instructions were to 'jump out of the window, shimmy down the sheets and run for the police.' She promised, as a favour to me, to cut my throat on the Night of the Long Knives to safeguard my honour when they came for me. First me, then Blueboy with herself last. About the future I wasn't exactly feeling confident.

The night I met Barri I simply turned up at his flat. He was a friend of a friend and I heard he lived there and I needed someone to talk to. The State of Emergency had shut down the city and my mood had shifted from independent to terrified.. I flitted from my flat to Barri's and knocked on the door. I'd never met him before. He opened the door with a hand-rolled cigarette in one hand and a copy of Saul Bellow in the other.

Barri was an intellectual who favourite saying was 'I love humanity, it's just people I hate.' When he wasn't chain smoking he sketched pornographic versions of the pope. I was twenty one and Barri was my own personal finger to the world. We married at the Johannesburg Magistrate Court. I wore an Israeli wedding dress borrowed from a friend. When the Magistrate swept into the room wearing a black cape and a serious expression, Barri said 'don't laugh Robin, here comes Batman.'

English Customs Officials adopted a cynical approach to marriages of

convenience and hard luck stories. When they saw my South African passport, which was about the dirtiest thing you could show to a customs officer in any country, we were separated and I was detained for hours for questioning. Eventually they allowed me into Britain but only on a two month non-working visa. Before I could claim citizenship I needed to have my marriage validated by the British Home Office in Croydon. My life as a refugee began one grey windswept February.

'Why didin' youse join the freedom fighters then?' one punk rocker called Ajax or Vim or Omo asked when I explained I was South African and trying to get away from our political system. He had spiked hair with yellow tips, which made him look like a cockatoo. 'It's wot I would 'av done innit.' I tried to explain that one slightly porky hippie with a penchant for acoustic music and poetry would be as effective in bending the bars of our totalitarian state as a moth drilling through fly-screen. At best I would get myself banned and at worst swell the ranks of the prison population.

Besides I felt guilty and useless, as if the monstrosity of our history was my personal burden to drag along behind me like a gigantic sack full elephants. Post revolution people will tell you how much they opposed Apartheid all along and how so many of them left the country so that they wouldn't be complicit. If so many people opposed the system it's a wonder that it managed to survive and flourish for as long as it did. I didn't oppose the system. I didn't even *think* about the system. I was twenty-one and only thought about myself. The fact that forty million people lived in misery had nothing to do with me and I wanted nothing to

do with them. You don't grow up in a country where the apparatus of the state has been carefully designed to erase from your mind every flicker of conscience and humanity without them succeeding at it. That's why it's called hegemony. I said nothing to Vim. I was too impressed by his Doc Martins and leather jacket. I wanted more than anything to fit in.

It was hard to find a place to live. I survived through a network of friends of friends and their acquaintances – the diaspora of young South African Jews as they drifted from their moorings in Houghton, across Europe to Canada and America. I bunked down where I could. Living rough, sometimes without bathrooms or toilets, grist for the endless mill of star struck letters I wrote home. Home – the place starved by sanctions and me, so hungry for a bite of the world I didn't discriminate too much about what or how much of it I chewed.

While I waited for news from Croydon I got by on cleaning jobs that paid low rate money under the table, no questions asked. I saw an ugly side to life I'd never seen before and for the first time came to understand that even though I came from a suburb considered working class, ours was a different type of working class. We were protected by the state apparatus I despised so much and now that I had seen the real world, couldn't wait to return to.

I didn't know the people in Bewdley Street when I moved in. Theirs was just another house in a street full of boarded up houses waiting to be renovated and repaired by the Greater London Council in an ongoing tax-payer funded vicious circle. There was a shortage of available housing and to deter squatters empty houses were destroyed by the very Council workers who would later be called in

to the fix them. Houses would stay that way for years as a result of rorting and bureaucratic mismanagement while the housing crisis continued. I came to understand that governing countries had nothing to do with social needs and everything to do with making a profit. Squatters took matters into their own hands and because of this did not have the protection of the law or much say as to who moved in with them. In a world without state protection it was dog eat dog.

I found a room in a squat as a lucky-hand-me down after months of looking and a series of mishaps that saw the last of my money and my passport stolen. One of the girls I cleaned with told me about it and I took it. Barri and I had gone our separate ways although he lived in a squat nearby and we remained friends.

I loved my room which was covered in faded floppy pink roses in full bloom. The house was in good condition for a squat and the plumbing intact. I assumed, wrongly, that a shared passion for music and homelessness would cause housemates for forge natural alliances since we were all at rock bottom. There was Flora from Mozambique who was a cleaner like me. Flora's presence in the house helped me feel more at home. We got on reasonably well given our home countries bordered each other. Hers harboured terrorists and mine the terror. Our relative calm was disrupted when her mother arrived for a visit and took a liking to me. When she left she gave me the silver bangles I'd admired on her arm and this did something to Flora. Her attitude changed towards me.

Richard, a student of the Humanities and Flora's husband, was English. He was all floppy red hair, leather patches and corduroy. Sometimes he wore army fatigues in a radical display of postcolonial subversion. Or so he said. He also

wore a beret like Che Guevara, a look I secretly suspected he'd pinched from a television show. He frothed at the mouth when he was angry which was usually when people disagreed with him. Beneath an amiable façade was the belief that he knew more about colonised countries that the people who lived in them. I wondered if Flora had married for a passport as I had done. It was the only reason I could come up with to explain her attachment to this wimp.

Marcus looked like Neil Young and spent most of his time lying on his mattress zonked out on heroin. For the most part he was likeable. He was French and good looking in a dreamy kind of way probably because he was always stoned. It was not unusual to watch Marcus fix his meals and pause mid-way through to fix himself. The first time I watched him tie the tubing to his arm, pull it tightly with his teeth and plunge the needle into his soft white skin I was transfixed by a type of horror. Heroin went way beyond smoking dope in toilets the way South Africans displayed their activism. This was heavy. His room was under the stairs, next to mine and it was there he spent most of time, listening to acoustic music with the sound turned down. Days would go by without seeing him and all the while he would by lying in his room with his face turned to the wall. I was shocked when he turned on me.

Then there was me, front room to the right, on the street, single mattress on the floor, two planks to hold my books and a boxed set of Victorian values handed down from my grandmother and her mother before her.

I tried hard to make an impression and rid myself of the feeling that somehow I had fallen out of a time warp adorned with beaten copper ashtrays

and Springbok skin purses. I'd assumed, wrongly, that because Flora and I were the only females in the house, because we were both from neighbouring countries, because we were both cleaners that we were allies. I knew nothing about perpetrators and victims. I thought *I* was a victim – at least that's what my grandmother always said.

Flora lived the same life she would have lived had she stayed in Africa. She buffed and polished Richard's life to perfection. She cooked, she cleaned, she washed and she ironed. She supported him financially through his degree in the Humanities with the money she earned from her cleaning job in the city. Out the door at 4.00am, a quick polish of St Paul's at 5.00am, back at 11am to cook his breakfast, out at 12 noon to the Chapel Street market to buy vegetables for his dinner. As a reward Richard wrote weeping tomes about how his ancestors had colonised her country, enslaved her people and exploited their labour for their own selfish ends. That fact that Richard was exploiting her never seemed to occur to either of them.

To my mind this was the counter culture. We were above the bourgeois fascist imperatives of the Establishment. We rejected the exploitative values of all capitalist pigs – bosses and everyone's parents. I, in particular, rejected everyone's parents since I didn't really have any in the normal sense. We contrived to create a new world order from the seedy discomfort of our squats in London N.W.1, 2 and 3. However, even revolutionaries have their breaking point and for the revolutionaries at Bewdley Street it was a white South African in their midst.

Three things happened to me when I lived at Bewdley Street that defined the way I would act in future. The media coverage South Africa was subject to at that time set in motion a chain of events that would change my life. Viva la Revolution – or something like that.

Before these events I became very ill. I couldn't eat, swallow or even drink. I lay, day after day, on my single mattress. Mary, an Irish girl I'd met at the pub who'd become my best friend, was worried about me. After a week of visiting and seeing me lying there wan and listless, she took matters into her own hands. She thought I was dying. I did too. She tottered up to the nearby local National Health Insurance doctor's surgery and succeeded in getting a doctor to make a house call. It was unheard of. The doctor came to my small arbour of fading English roses and squatted down next me. I was well aware of what conclusions he might be drawing from the general squalor of my surroundings. It didn't take him long to diagnose glandular fever. I was instructed to stay indoors and rest, drink fluids and take a course of antibiotics.

The following Saturday night I stayed in and had a quiet night. I was on the mend but the illness had left me weak. I listened to music on the turntable I'd saved up for with my cleaning money. It had taken two jobs and six weeks but finally I owned something. I read *Cry the Beloved Country* which left me teary and home sick.

The antibiotics made me sleepy and I went to bed after I finished writing a letter. It was past midnight when I awoke. I know this because I had heard distant chatter as people moved along the street when the pubs closed for the

night. They'd be on their way to the High Street to find some late night kebabs, spring rolls or even a curry I thought, my mind heavy with sleep. I drifted off. I was awakened a second time by the soft swish of my sash window being prised open and I sat upright just in time to make out a pair of legs as they dropped into the room beside my head.

The room was dark. The lamplight from the street illuminated the huge figure as it moved towards me. Boz? It couldn't be. Boz? He was dressed in the black tracksuit familiar to all who knew him and which fed the myth that he was a boxer. In truth nobody knew anything about Boz. Some said he was African American, others that he was West Indian. Some said that he was a prize-fighter; others that he'd done prison time. There was even mention that he was a former US Marine on the run from something.

Boz was older than the people I hung out with down at the Hope & Anchor, a live music venue on the corner of Bewdley and High Street. I'd met him once or twice briefly through my ex-boyfriend Oliver. When I use the term boyfriend I mean it loosely. Everything Oliver did was loose. He was the great grandson of a German philosopher and the son of a famous British painter. Oliver was raised in the British cultural aristocracy and moved in most circles with an easy sense of entitlement. Because of this entitlement he could live a life of debauchery and get away with it. We saw each other briefly but broke up over my boxed set of Victorian virtues.. He said I was nice, too nice, it wasn't me, it was him. In spite of this we remained friends. Here I was sitting upright and rigid with fright as Boz, an acquaintance of his, moved towards me. A voice came out of my mouth. It

sounded husky and strange as if it had travelled a long way.

'Boz, what are you doing here it's the middle of the night?'

'I've come to sleep with you. I bet you've never slept with a black man before,' he laughed a rich throaty laugh.. My spine was ice.

Our conversation took the form of short jabs as we circled each other. A great yammer set up inside my head as I tried to remain calm. My voice attempted measured friendliness. 'You've had too much to drink Boz, go home.' My voice attempted reason. 'This is irrational Boz, you'll regret it in the morning.' Boz gracefully made his way to the door and locked it. For his size he was surprisingly agile. This lent weight to theories he'd been a boxer. He came over to the bed and pulled off his sweater. I could barely breathe. The room was in darkness. It was lit only by the orange glow of the - street lamp as it filtered through the thin curtains. My voice sounded plaintive. Plaintive is not good. Plaintive gives away too much. 'If you don't leave I'll scream.'

Boz stood with the streetlight illuminating the side of his face. He looked down at me. 'If you scream I will kill you,' he said. His voice was pleasant.

I noticed the dull orange sheen on the face. I heard footsteps out in the street coming from a long way off. I moved quickly from friendliness to flattery to logic, discarding each one as inept, too flimsy for the situation.

Boz moved over to the door and lay on the floor in front of it, his hands crossed behind his head as if he were at a beach. There was only one way out of the room and that was through the window. It would mean straddling the gap between the basement drop and the spiked street railing and clambering over the

top. I understood the irony of the situation. In front of me stood my grandmother's worst nightmare. If she were in the room she would have killed me. 'There are people in this house Boz,' I said sensibly. 'All I need to do is call out to them.'

'They won't be able to get to you in time – besides they hate you,' he said 'You're South African.' It was true – I was the only person on the ground floor apart from Marcus and, if he was in his usual state, he didn't count. The others occupied the rooms on the second and third landings. Boz said he had a knife and although I didn't see one I was not willing to take a change. He was at least three times my size. His hands alone could snap my neck and my short life as a London nobody would be over. Minutes ticked by. Sure of himself Boz stood up and moved towards me taking off the last of his clothes as he did so. He climbed in and lay on top of me pinning me against the floor and the wall.

'Kiss my head,' he said.

At that moment there was a loud rap at the front door and caught by surprise Boz jumped just enough for me to push him and bolt for the door. I grappled with the key, unlocked it and raced down the corridor. It was Oliver. Dear sweet falling down, shirt hanging out, dead drunk Oliver with his shoulder length hair plastered about his face and half a bottle of Pils dangling from his fingers. 'Couldn't find a party,' he slurred 'waiting for a cab is a bother – be a love – may I?'

Oliver moved unsteadily to my room where he found Boz putting on the last of his clothes. Boz accused me of tantalising him. Me? Oliver believed my side of

the story. He knew me well. He didn't believe Boz when he said I'd invited him in, teased him and then rejected him. I wasn't so lucky with other people. People didn't want to believe my version of events. Behind my back and sometimes quite openly, people called me a 'racist.' Women I knew took his side. Big blonde Americans who attended feminist consciousness-raising sessions seemed unable to separate race from gender and exposed themselves in their hypocrisy. I never went to the police. I didn't see the point with an issue was too huge, complex and unsolvable. Was I really a racist? I came to think that what the world expected of me was to offer myself up as some sort of sacrificial apology to massage the conscience of the First World.

Shortly after that night I was standing in the Hope with Mary. We had no money as usual. A Pernod and orange for Mary and a pint of Strongbow cider for me were all we could afford and they had to last. We hung out, listened to the jukebox and people-watched. It was an average Saturday night. Sometimes the management opened the doors to the basement if it was a slow night and we could see the band for free. We were hoping. It was shaping up to be a dull night. A man came up behind me. I could tell it was a man by the way Mary's eyes lit up. He tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around and he spat in my face. The spit began to ooze down my cheek and satisfied, he walked away.

We were dumbstruck. I put my hand to my cheek. Mary fumbled for a tissue. People watched, crouched over their drinks to see how I would react. I couldn't react. What was I supposed to do? Nothing like that this had ever happened to me before. It was inconceivable to me that people could be so

influenced by what they read in the news that they could hate perfect strangers and enact violence upon them without even bothering to find out their point of view. I finished my drink and left.

About a week later I was back at the Hope waiting for Mary. She was late. She was always late. She liked to say it was because she was a Gemini – as if being late added to her mystique. Finally I saw her tottering down Bewdley Street in her tight jeans and stilettos. She looked worried. 'You'd better get home,' she said, 'they've trown yer tings into the road so they have.'

I tottered up Bewdley Street in my own tight jeans and stilettos. As I drew closer to the house I could that the street was littered with books, records, my record player, my single bed and my clothes. A typical squatters pile of junk lay in the road. My letters from home floated about and my Tibetan bells hung from the street railings in sad streamers where they'd caught after they were thrown. I bounded up the front stairs. As I passed my room I could see the lock had been broken and the door kicked in.

The drone of a distant television and the flicker of blue light came up from the basement. We'd converted it into a living room with some mattresses and an old black and white television where Mary fed her addiction to cricket that summer. I stooped under the low door frame. There they were Richard, Flora and Marcus with a serious case of the nods. 'What the hell's going on - why is my stuff thrown out on the street?' Flora's eyes shone with hatred. She jumped up and started poking me in the arms and about the chest.

'You white racist bitch,' she screamed, 'you murderer! You killed Steve Biko!'

Steve Biko? I'd never heard of Steve Biko but soon the entire planet would along with the fact that he was murdered by the white South African security police. Flora was demented. Somehow this was *my* fault.

Flora poked me all the way back up the stairs and onto the second floor landing using her finger like a blunt sword. Meanwhile back at the Hope Mary rushed to the house of friends near Finsbury Park Station. It was another squat where Barri lived with a German and two Italians. She warned them there could be trouble, they'd better come quick. They all trooped back to Bewdley Street and arrived at the bottom of the stairs at the exact moment a blow to the head sent me flying head over heels down the stairs. Flora could sure pack a punch. Over I went in a wild tinkling of her mother's silver bangles and came to rest, a weeping clump of white supremacy, at Mary's red stilettoed feet. "Fok" she said.

The shit, the vomit, the wet tongue doing somersaults in my mouth, folding, expanding; threatened to shut off the oxygen supply, to crush life, mine, if I succumbed to It. It changed shape, It coiled, It slithered, It caressed my neck, and It tightened its grip so that the head and the tail became one collar of pressure. It slithered into my mouth, down my throat, curling, doubling over, undulating, sliding, expanding, choking, dragging me backwards, closer and closer to the edge of something crushing. There was darkness behind my head, a roaring vortex, a hideous eye, a floating space. Vertigo. Double over, lean forward or you'll fall into it. Fear smelt like shit. All that stood between me and the precipice was … what? To remain present in the moment, to cough, to stamp my feet, to inhale, hourly, Friar's balsam under a towel, to feel the steam on my face and my nostrils sucking

in air. Everything is shutting down. Something is wrong. I need to breathe. I … can't … breathe. Please don't leave me alone. I will fall into the hole behind my head. I will swallow myself whole. There is no air, only a rush of wind. There is no space only the abyss. There are too many people but I am alone. There is too much talk and none of it means a damn thing.

London was in the midst of a garbage crisis. The council workers had been on strike for weeks in a city re-mapped by an architecture of rubbish which appeared in some places like solid walls of waste. In the late afternoon gloom of my third northern winter I crossed my room in the house near Finsbury Park station and made to close the bedspread that hung across the window. It was a few months after the xenophobic attack at Bewdley Street. Outside the soft persistent English rain appeared as silver threads, illuminated by the passing headlights of motorists. Streets glistened; tyres swooshed on wet roads. I could see the hulking shapes of slippery piles of rubbish standing like an army of trolls on the sidewalk. Jesus, I wished whoever was responsible would get their act together and fast. London was disappearing under a tsunami of Sainsbury shopping bags and it stank.

Apart from my day job at a wine company in Camden which I loved for the perks, I'd become a recluse. It was best to keep a low profile and I was tired of fielding a barrage of abuse every time I opened my mouth and people heard my accent. I refused to pretend that I was Australian. News reports coming out of South Africa were not good and I didn't want to attract any more attention to myself than necessary. Even the people in the house were split about allowing me

to stay there but Barri was a smooth talker and technically we were still married. Before we could get divorced I was stuck in Britain for however long it would take to obtain a British passport. The irony of waiting for a passport I once longed for and now no longer wanted. By now I couldn't care less about a country drowning in its own rubbish. From a distance, the revolution foundations of the Apartheid state in dissolution appeared a lot more honest and attractive than daily life on London streets.

After my somersault down the stairs at Bewdley Street, Mary picked me up and dusted me off. Together with Barri we moved through the ruins of my room. The door had been kicked open and the lock broken. Splinters of wood and clothes lay in piles about the room. I laid a blanket on the floor and the others hurled my stuff into it. There wasn't much. My portable record player hadn't been damaged and was placed inside the blanket. The mattress was hardly worth the effort of dragging it down the street so we left it. We collected my letters, books and other small things from up and down the street and un-snarled my Tibet bells from the street railing where they tinkled miserably. They sounded childish as I took them down and packed them away. Whatever magic I believed they represented was packed with them. That part of my life was over forever. Richard, Flora and Marcus had gone back to watching television as if nothing had happened. It was hard to process it.

The weeks drifted by as I waited for citizenship. But on that evening of low sky and silver rain something was different and it began with a grainy interview of Bette Midler on Barri's small black and white television. She looked so happy.

She looked like my mother holding court. Short vivacious with energy Bette Midler was the reason I sat down to watch the interview in the first place. She had always reminded me of my mother and I wanted to see her again even if it meant searching for ghosts in someone else's face. My glandular fever had recurred in patches and in that state of physical un-wellness and emotional fragility I wanted my family. The interviewee asked Bette Midler a question. She touched his arm and made a joke. He laughed. I didn't. All of a sudden I wanted to vomit.

I thought it might be food poisoning and went to the bathroom to wash my face and get a drink of water. I opened the door and switched on the light. The tiles were pink, *very* pink I thought, *too* pink. I stared at the pinkness trying to decide whether the tiles always this pink. The ceiling appeared to drop to an inch above my head and the walls compressed around me. I felt I was trapped in a small pink box. A small hot pink box. Under the layers of winter clothing sweat streamed down my spine and then chilled. I couldn't breath. Behind my head a space opened up and my ears roared. The only way to escape it was to stick my head further and deeper down the toilet as the dark roaring space opened up behind me and swallowed the back of my head.

I curled around the pink toilet bowl vomiting and shitting, sweating, trembling, struggling to breathe, as the room swirled and shifted, tilted and dropped, lying with my face on the floor trying to get cool. Everything smelt of shit and that was a relief because shit was real. I wasn't going mad, I was alive, the shit proved it. But I couldn't breathe. So I vomited harder and I thought of my

mother and imagined I could feel her cold hand on my back.. When the walls stopped moving and I lay like a wrung out thing next to the bowl, my tongue became the snake that swelled in my throat and choked me. I trembled as I cleaned up. I left the bathroom and moved to the kitchen to make a cup of tea with sugar and returned to my room trying to put on the appearance of normal. Bette Midler was gone. Mary looked up.

'Jeez you were gone a while,' she said.

'Yes.'

'You okay? You look like shite.'

After that first one, the attacks came frequently. I didn't tell anyone. On the bus, in the pub, at work, on the street, sitting alone in my room – I wasn't safe. Not from the choking tongue that swelled inside of me. I began to anticipate and fear them. My tongue became an unpredictable magic trick. It was like one of those Chinese tablets that swell to fantastical shapes when dropped in water.. A monstrous shape. Only this phantagorism was inside of me, a dark, darting, slithering thing that arrived without notice and brought with it an abyss.

If I'd gone to a doctor twenty years later he would have diagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. But I didn't dare go to a doctor because I was young – what would I say? I was terrified I would end up in a mental asylum in a straight jacket of thick white cotton and with my arms strapped firmly to my body with leather straps.. I spent the last few months of my stay in London living under a tent of steaming water poised over bowl into which I had poured a few drops of Friars Balsam. It was an attempt to create a small comforting atmosphere of

humidity using an ancient memory from childhood. Under the tent, in the steam, I could breathe. I could think with clarity and feel the soothing presence of my grandmother. It was a healing space but long after my return to Africa and the moved to Australia something inside of me always felt cold.

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Emu Bank. Second Lap. I plod along. Why do I do this to myself? I have no idea. It's a compulsion that keeps me going. A replacement for the custard slices, chocolate éclairs, donuts with a squirt of red jam in the middle; boxes stuffed with petit fours in pastel colours; soft, spongy, sugary things that could be crammed into my mouth.. There is still no sign of life. The mist dissipates to reveal washed out suburbs with frosty lawns that glitter in the sunlight. Despite the sun it seemed colder than it was an hour ago or maybe it's just that I've slowed down. The weather has settled in my bones. My knees pound together like mortar and pestle grinding away what's left of my cartilage. My mind casts about for something to think about to keep the pain and boredom at bay.

This habit of mentally hoarding things to think about began on those long trips with my grandmother when she took us to visit Uncle David, her childless brother. Aunty Gwen, his tall, thin wife, carried her childlessness like a disease. Gran referred to it in hushed tones as 'Aunty Gwen's lot.' From this I deduced it wasn't a very good lot. To watch her smoke and twirl her Scotch behind the lace curtains of her house in Vanderbijlpark I understood too that 'her lot' came with a certain kind of social neglect. It was as if the community considered Aunty Gwen's lot with suspicion. After all, what was anybody supposed to do with a woman in her fifties floating like a stray log across a sea of well-oiled, labour divided *Wehrmacht* family units? Aunt Gwen didn't bake cakes, not even for us. Her range of sweet things extended to packets of Bakers Red Label lemon cream biscuits arranged in a neat circle on a plate with a white paper doily. She didn't

attend school fetes. There would be no point. Nor did she attend Church even though there was one with a large set of noisy bells at the end of her street. If baking for school fetes and attending church represented the entire range of social possibilities available to married women at that time, all that was left as comfort for Aunty Gwen and her lot was miniature Chihuahuas and scotch. The spinster version of Aunt Gwen, on the other hand, after a long, soul shrivelling old age, had the choice of dying a lonely death in an assortment of one bedroomed or bachelor flats in suburbs like Hillbrow. Feistier versions, women who rebelled against the tight social order of the Republic could frequent a Ladies Bar in one of the hotels - provided they could find a man to accompany them. Women were not allowed in bars on their own; or in men's bars at all. It was always understood that ladies who frequented Ladies Bars were not ladies at all.

We dreaded these visits to Aunty Gwen and her Lot although Blueboy was never one to openly express this. His was a strategic, watery acquiescence born of the knowledge that I would provoke a fuss for both of us. When it came to family politics I was the I was the whirring fly dropped into the still substance of our odd, cobbled together family ointment. This allowed him to retain the popular position of 'man of the family' or 'dear wee chap.'

Uncle David lived on a dull street in an iron-ore and steelworks town about 77 kilometres west of Johannesburg. He had a pre-fabricated house faded to a pale lime green and a hard packed earth backyard which appeared from a distance to be covered with a crop of mushrooms. On closer inspection these turned out to be the crumbling remains of grey dog shit. The child, the surrogate,

was Fritz who, with his long body, wet nose, and stumpy trunk legs would sniffle about with his bright red penis endlessly erect, and shit.

Vanderbijlpark was not the type of town people wrote stories about it. It was not a town filled with endearing characters. Pioneers did not flock there with their heads full of mysteries nor were they drawn by magic or myths. It was a functional town and its reason for being was clear from a distance. Tall brick chimneys grew out of the long yellow veld and belched grey smoke into the sky. Rows of identical company-owned pre-fabricated houses clustered around them to accommodate the white workers. It was a town built on steel and iron ore not poetry. The terrain was flat and uninviting. The streets were straight and each suburb had its church. There was also a determined social inclination towards purity that held restless hearts in check. When the bells peeled it was as if melancholy settled over the town like fine dust.

If God heard the prayers of Vanderbijlpark it would be in November when thousands of Jacaranda softened the town into a shady purple place.. When the summer storms came in waves of soggy bruised petals fell to the ground and clogged up the drains. It was magical. In November just before the holidays, children across town walked to school oozing eyes the size of billiard balls with doctors' certificate tucked into cheap cardboard suitcases warning of the pink eye season. Apart from us, no children visited Aunt Gwen's house. It was a garden filled with dust and it ached with emptiness. Blueboy and I would sit on the *stoep* in a patch of sun and play chess. In this picture is always seems to be Jacaranda season.

Uncle David said he'd been hand picked by the government to work in the steel works because of his unusual set of skills. Exactly what they were always remained a mystery to me. He'd fought in the desert campaign during the war and stayed in the trenches long after it ended. He liked to clink his scotch, puff *Van Rijn* cigarettes and reminisce about the desert and Rommel, the man who'd been the most important person in his life. Their desert campaign stretched across Sunday afternoons that seemed to take years. The way he told it the Allies would have been lost without him.

Uncle David painted watercolours. His only subject was fish which struck me as odd for someone so attached to the desert. Entire shoals in fantastical colours circled and gawped on the walls of his small living room trying to find a way out. He took up painting as therapy to cope with the large and small disappointments in life.

On Sundays Gran, out of loneliness or a desire to keep in touch with what was left of her family, would announce a trip to Uncle David's. This announcement would cause my heart to sink. It was boring enough living in the flat but a visit to Uncle Davids was death. She had no other friends with the sole exception of Mrs Agnew, the caretaker of our building. Mrs Agnew was about eighty and her hair was the only hair I've ever seen that fitted the description of candyfloss which she wore pinned into a bun at the nape of her neck. She was a widow, the sole provider for her blind son who looked to be in his fifties. It was hard to tell on a face like that – a face that was both baby and scarred; a face that didn't get out enough for life to have left any other marks on it. I never asked why

he was blind. I only knew he was entirely dependant on his aged mother. There weren't too many services available for the handicapped – there was barely enough for the fully functioning 99% of the country. Gran's friendship with Mrs Agnew did not extend to cups of tea or visits to each other's flats. Instead, it developed slowly over time out of a mutual but undisclosed sympathy of shared hardship. Both were weighed down by responsibility. Gran had been lumped with us, who she fervently prayed would be off her hands and earning a living as soon as possible. For Mrs Agnew it was different. A daily, nagging worry about what would happen to her son once she was gone.

Since both Gran and Mrs Agnew had been born in Scotland each brought out in the other an ancient tongue. A shared memory and a comforting sense of belonging even if it only lasted while Mrs Agnew sorted through the mail for the building. Gran would lean against the glass door of Mrs Agnew's office that faced a small courtyard with a view of the shared laundry. With the exception of trips to Uncle David, Gran's only other excursion was to buy groceries on Thursday and when she returned and came through from the garage she would lean against Mrs Agnew's door and they would both break into Gaelic. It was as if hearing aloud the language of the old country returned them to their childhoods and to a time of unblemished expectancy that the world would go their way. Now they both knew different. The brief conversations opposite the laundry settled a deep need in both of them.

The African cleaners who maintained the building lived on the roof in cramped servant's quarters. They were all male. It was not unusual to hear their

tinny transistor radios filter into the night sky or to smell the *putu* they were cooking; a combination of burnt porridge, naked flame, paraffin and paprika. Nor was it unusual to see Old Simon carrying a steaming pot of something up the stairs in the cleaner's version of a dressing gown – an old white vest. This signalled he was off-duty as much as his khaki shorts and chunky car tyre sandals signalled when he was on duty.

Old Simon was not even old. How his name became antiquated is a mystery to me. Was it the sinewy loops of his ear lobes devoid of ornamentation that could be counted in inches much like the way a tree is aged by counting the circles around its trunk? Old Simon and all the other cleaners were very protective of the older ladies in the building. Perhaps it had something to do with African respect for age and ancestors or an understanding that in our society these women were vulnerable and that their lives scraped together moment by moment hung by threads. Mrs Agnew and my grandmother received genuine respect, a paternal fondness borne of a shared hardship and an understanding of human need that existed outside race and politics.

Maids who worked for the wealthier tenants did not live in the building. Most of them only worked part-time. They would arrive in an assortment of pink and green shifts wearing flat shoes and berets on their heads. You could hear them shout to each other from the balconies. They understood the politics in the building better than anyone else. They lived with us, around us, inside our flats unnoticed for the most part.

Tenants would have been perturbed to know their lives were the subject of

lurid discussion downstairs in the launderette. *'Haikona wena! Hai! Thet one in Number 55, hoo, Eish but she is a medem hai!'* The days of our lives nit-picked to a chorus of smug clucks at our delicious disasters as the women bent over their embroideries and changed loads in the machines. I know this because we couldn't afford a maid and I would sit in the laundry with them. Watching the clothes spin around in circles, watching the sun move across the small courtyard, watching Mrs Agnew's candy-floss bun bent over the paperwork in her office. Watching and smoking. Occasionally, it would be me on the sharp end of rebuke. I would be hauled over the coals for banging on Gran's front door in growing irritation at the thin voice as she called out 'who is it?' 'who is it?' while Springbok Radio played so loudly no-one could have heard the answer. 'IT'S ME FOR CRYING OUT LOUD – OPEN THE DOOR!!!!'

'Haikona man Grace, eish but you are cheeky to Grenny ne?' A pink tongue clicked.

After Bewdley Street, I rented a flat in the same building as Blueboy and Gran. I'd come home for good. I had no interest in the rest of the world after the hypocrisy I found there. It could go to hell as far as I was concerned but I needed a place to stay. I was shown Mrs Agnew's son's flat. She could no longer afford it because rent control had been lifted and rents were skyrocketing. Unbeknown to most of us the landlords were in collusion with the government. The government, in trying to address the housing problem they themselves had created, looked for a resolution and their eyes fell on Hillbrow with its high vacancy rates. As a result of the political instability caused by the riots the foreign workers who tended to

prefer Hillbrow for its European atmosphere and nightlife had largely returned back to their home countries. Unwilling to drop the Group Areas Act in the white suburbs, the regime turned a blind eye to racial integration in the inner city by allowing the landlords to charge what they liked to a black population desperate for accommodation.

Mrs Agnew's son was forced to move in with her. Her own bachelor-apartment formed part payment for her caretaking and supplemented the tiny wage stipend she existed on. I was shown the blind son's flat in the hope that I would rent it. It was situated on the cold side of the building and was the barest room I'd ever seen. The walls were marked by greasy fingerprints where he had felt his way. The windows looked out into the alleyway and caused my heart to drop. I couldn't live in it. Instead I found a bachelor flat situated a floor between Blueboy and my grandmother.

Some months later, after I had seen the blind son's flat, I struggled down Banket Street carrying shopping bags in both arms. I had estimated how far I needed to walk with my arms extended and figured I could make the trip. Since I couldn't drive and didn't have a car anyway, I did my grocery shopping locally but it was still a stiff walk back to the flat. Halfway down Banket Street the handles on the plastic shopping bags simultaneously snapped. Tins of Royco Tomato Soup, boerewors, potatoes and onions spilled across the pavement. The eggs broke and the milk gushed into the gutter. Shit. Shit. Shit.

People stepped over me. I cursed the world and everyone in it. Selfish. Selfish. Selfish. Shit. Shit. Shit. I didn't hear the stick. Tap Tap Tap. 'Can I help?'

It was Mrs Agnew's son. 'Thanks, that would be great.' I handed him a bag of oranges. We walked back to the building, laden and silent. His stick probed the ground in front of him like a nose sniffing out directions. It snuffled over curbs, around corners, against the sides of the building. It flailed into thin air when we came to a crossing. We passed the Aquarian Bookshop. Tap tap, tap tap. We passed alleys which smelt of urine and sour pineapple beer. I didn't look at him. I'd always been afraid of his eyes and the way were, white, half closed, empty. When we arrived at the building he helped me into the lift and the cane snuffled off to Mrs Agnew's flat on the ground floor. I realised when I was settled with a coffee, that I'd hadn't asked his name. It didn't seem important. To everyone in the building he was known only as Mrs Agnew's son.

That's how it was for all of us. It was as if we were marooned on a small island in the middle of the densest square mile in the southern hemisphere. We were card-carrying members of the superior race; conscripted to uphold a lifestyle that wasn't ours to share; burdened with the expectation that we would and should amount to great things; blamed as if it were our personal shortcomings if we didn't.

I had noticed, and not without a sense of relief, that Gran's trips to Vanderbijlpark went only one way. There was no reciprocation. It was as if Gran had no real currency in the world. All she had to offer was enthusiasm, two grandchildren (one surly), bush tea without milk and warm homemade scones. She established a pattern of searching for love; going out of her way in the old brown mini. She offered propitiatory gestures to long-lost friends who barely

remembered her in the way of a plant that bends and twists out of shape in the search for light. She contorted for love all her life. No matter how much she extended herself she never succeeded in scaling the walls around her.

Each trip to Vanderbijlpark was whipped into an occasion of epic proportions. The brown Mini-Minor Gran used for Thursday shopping trips was given over to Old Simon to wash and polish for a few extra cents in the shared car park under the building. There he was with his stomach hanging out of his long shorts with the red strips at the bottom, knee-guards made of cut up car-tyres, earlobes flapping, face beaded with sweat. He polished the life out of it.

Next there was a trip to the garage on Louis Botha Avenue for the car to be filled, the tyres pumped and the oil checked. Scones needed to be baked and sandwiches made for the road along with a flask of Rooibos tea. Padkos. We piled into the mini. Blueboy and Gran in the front and me at the back as we grated our way in second gear down Empire Road towards the M1. Out came the instructions for the trip.

'Children should be seen and not heard.'

'If they offer lemon cream biscuits take one. Say no to the second.'

(Eyebrows took off like doves in the rear view mirror to make sure I was listening.)

Say 'I'm sufficiently full thank you very much' and make sure there are no crumbs flying off your lips when you say it.

'Don't loll on the couches – sit up straight with your hands on your laps.'

'Don't tease Fritz the sausage dog. Don't even *look* at Fritz.. You don't want to encourage him.'

'Don't stare at the natives as we drive past Soweto. If one of their chickens runs out into the road and we accidentally run over it *we* will get the blame for it. It will become yet another example of petty white callousness. They will throw stones at the car and pretty soon there will be a riot. If the car breaks down they'll drag us out into the dirt and butcher us with pangas and sell our parts to their witchdoctors for muti. We'll probably wind up pickled in bottles in one of those muti shops in Diagonal Street. As for you Grace, I don't need to tell you what they'll do to girls like you.'

A lot could happen on the road to Uncle David's. And I knew what they would do to girls like me. Gran had told me on the nights we tied sheets together, peering over her glasses in a secret woman's business way affecting an unasked for intimacy which drove me crazy. Blueboy, sitting near the lamp and concentrating on his knots, was spared the grisly details. I never slept before we drove through Soweto. I willed myself into a state of exhaustion, praying in the dark that when we drove through the township I would be asleep or slithered as low as I could go on the back seat short of drilling my way into the carpet. I would pray to God (if I was awake) that as we bumped and inched our way across the dusty Highveld of our soon to be battle-scarred Republic nobody ran over anybody's chickens.

Blueboy and Gran were both born in July one day apart. Emotional water signs they moved in perfect harmony with each other. They understood each other's moods and way of being in the world in a way I never could. Whether it was in the flat or in the car they would sit listening in companionable silence to Springbok Radio. *From Crystal with Love*, *Doctor Paul*, *Hospitaal Tyd*, *Midday*

Mirror or to the doleful songs of praise the South African Broadcasting Corporation dished out to the faithful every Sunday. I don't know how we survived it. I was always the outsider, excluded from one family group by an accident of astrology and the other, by who knows what. Blueboy found a home with Gran. I found one inside my mind.

In the Mini, percolating in the heat to the drone of choirs, I escaped into my own world. In the front, Blueboy was only just visible. Sitting upright in his short pants with his stick legs and his knees as round and knotted as knobkerries, his ginger hair and elephant ears only just managed to poke up from the top of the seat. I would take comfort in this. If a chicken was run over and piccaninnies picked up stones they would see him first. I felt guilty at offering my brother to quench the bloodlust of any potential rioter but then again, according to Gran, girls like me had a lot more to lose.

Who would have thought that Blueboy would grow into ears and knees? That he would inherit the antiquated mini because as a man it was expected that he would, could and should have more of a life, occupy more space, expand into a six foot future. It never occurred to anyone, least of all me that I should know how to drive. Poverty had shrunk our expectations to the four walls around us. Plus I harboured a deep unfathomable fear of the road and wasn't motivated to learn. Who would have thought that for someone so keen to find the exits, one day it would be me slumped in my grandmother's rocking chair listening to Springbok radio while she bustled about in the bathroom watering her plants. Lavishing care and crushed egg shells on her ferns and succulents, Hillbrow

stalwarts, for their ability to thrive in the dark airless bathrooms across the city.

Perhaps Aunt Gwen's childlessness was an act of God. It was clear she felt uncomfortable around children. Between puffs which drew attention to her yellow arthritic fingers the gulps of scotch which bobbed down her scrawny throat she became indignant on Gran's behalf. That she should be lumbered with two socially inept children when she had enough troubles of her own. Why, she demanded, did the children's useless father not look after them or pay maintenance?

She had to be careful here. My grandmother, resigned as she was to my mother, became edgy and defensive when she was criticized. Aunt Gwen only occupied the precarious position of sister-in-law and she did not want it to appear as if she was suffering from an extreme case of sour grapes, so most of the criticism was directed at my father. Aunt Gwen spoke about my parents through us. As if we were invisible and not uncomfortably poised on the green velveteen couch in front of her with a plate of Bakers Red Label lemon creams between us as shoals of fish circled her walls. It was as if we were images only, one dimensional, cardboard cut outs, water colour people without thoughts, feelings or the ability to absorb and internalise the things she said. The questions she raised troubled me all my life. I could not answer why didn't my father want to take care of us.

In Vanderbijlpark Park I encountered my first conscious dilemma. I didn't want to put a child through the torment of not being wanted by the world or sit through the mind-numbing tedium of small town Sunday afternoons. These

thoughts were bundled up in my mind under the heading 'family life.' At the same time I didn't want to be a childless woman, not one like Aunt Gwen anyway, with her bad circulation, her erect sausage dog and her arthritis. Nor did I want to be like Gran or Mrs Agnew, hopelessly shabby, trapped by genteel poverty into a life in which old ladies ate dog food even as they kept up appearances. Children it seemed were a problem and brought with them a dilemma I was never able to resolve until that December, a few weeks before the murders began, when it was resolved it for me.

In Vanderbijlpark when the church bells peeled across town I sat upright on the green velveteen couch with my hands in my lap and looked straight ahead. I had survived Soweto on the trip out. I could make it through Aunt Gwen. I wouldn't touch the lemon creams. I ignored Fritz and his bright pink penis as it banged against my leg. Vvvvanderrrrbijjjlllpppparkkk. The word catches in the back of the throat like a cough that bubbles up unexpectedly, like something that needs to be spat out.

Emu Bank was always the place of beginnings. Legs fresh, watch clicked on and raring to go, a sense of purpose that hadn't yet succumbed to monotony or the residual aches and pains of yesterday's runs or the lactic pull of tired muscles. Running is the thread that holds together the snapped off pieces of my life. Without it things disintegrate like one of those fake wands magicians offer to unsuspecting volunteers at magic shows. From the audience the wand seems solid enough, but it's an illusion.

At Emu Bank with the university, the trees, the foreshore restaurants, the promise of cool and at least some passing entertainment my body flies a few inches above the pathway light and effortless; my muscles do not creak or twinge, my knees pump up and down like well-oiled pistons. In this fluid motion there are glimpses of immortality. Over the far side of the lake, particularly if running loops, early enthusiasm begins to flake away. Fatigue finds weak spots; doubt creeps in. It's hard to believe that after three decades of running and everything that has happened, I am still afraid of the long run and that I won't make the distance.

The peninsula between the two bridges and their corresponding toilet blocks feels melancholic. If it's a windy day like today, trees creak, bark is shed like skin and out on the lake, waves whip into stiff peaks like egg whites. The weather roars across the water and clouds skid by in fast-forward. Depending on the day and the density of mist it's easy for your imagination to run away with you. On a clear day, a view of the mall across the water helps you see it for what it is. The concrete functions of a small town dropped from the sky into the middle

of the bush. In the past, the winding, rolling path along the peninsula allowed for some stride outs and fast surges over the short hills to break up the monotony of the flat sections. I wonder what the strollers make of those of us who bowl along driven by something coiled tightly inside. The far side of the lake is where I'm most in need of something to think about.

The peninsula loops back to the second bridge on Ginninderra Drive. It is the last bridge with the most remote toilet stop located away from the road in a small private parking lot. It always makes me nervous. This bridge takes you towards Coulter Drive and it is here that the presence of Brindabellas is more obvious. In the distance they loom in shades of purple and icy winds can blast unmoored pedestrians off their feet. On the far side and sheltered from the wind, the sudden stillness allows for boredom and fatigue to set in. It is as if we need something to fight against and when the roaring stops and the body and mind in this reprieve, turn on each other.

'I think I'll do one loop today.'

'NO! training schedule says two.'

'I think I've got a stitch, I mustn't overdo it. I don't want to get the flu.'

'Training schedule says two – don't be a wimp.'

'My family has a history of heart problems – maybe it's not a stitch, *wait*, feel *that*, a stabbing sensation in my back?'

'No-one gives a shit about your heart Grace, keep moving.'

I cross the first bridge on Ginninderra Drive. The beanie flies off my head. God I wish I was back in Perth instead of out here in the cold with ageing knees

and no clear purpose. I take the off-ramp to the left and I plod towards the peninsula and the first of the sandy beaches. My body moves according to its own memory. Out of sight of the first bridge and a good two kilometres to the second I am in no-man's land. Bush all around, choppy water out front, birds cry, trees creak, branches stripped, bark torn.

Years ago, on two separate occasions, I came upon toilet blocks in the bush defaced by shit. Shit was smeared on the taps and clogged up the sink and from the roof of the facility, ribbons of soiled industrial toilet paper streamed in the wind. It was impossible to drink from the taps, to even think about it, and I was forced to move on to the next block 5km down the track. On a hot day, 5km can seem like a long way. On a cold day like today another urgency surfaces. Out in the bush, the unexpected presence of human shit smeared on walls is frightening.

Today on the peninsula the branches of trees rattle and leaves whip past feet that have acquired a soldierly monotony. I need to stop for a drink. If the car park at the far end is empty I'll dart into the women's toilet block and use the sink. As I approach I see a silver sedan with a man sitting in the driver's seat. He looks at me in his rear view mirror. I know this because I conduct a furtive surveillance of my own from my behind my Oakleys. For the last two kilometres I haven't encountered anyone on this stretch. What is he doing here at this remote women's toilet block hidden from the road? Who is he waiting for? It's cold. The wind howls. Why? A quick scan of the surrounding bush doesn't reveal the presence of a wife or a dog or any reason why a man should be sitting alone in his car outside the women's toilet block. I decide not to take the risk and push on.

I cross the second bridge on Ginninderra Drive. This leads me towards the western foreshore and Coulter Drive. Here I feel safe. The suburb I lived is somewhere over here and in the pit of my stomach there is the rising sense of some kind of return; a sense of the familiar. Even though I still don't have my full bearings (I've only been in Canberra fourteen hours), I remember there should be an underpass close by.

Josh found it by accident one day when, bored with running loops of the lake and negotiating the ugly light industrial section around Nettlefold Street, he veered into the bush and found the underpass. He came home beaming at this discovery as if in this short tunnel under the road, he'd found a short cut to putting things right. I scan the reeds for the underpass. Too much reading has shortened my vision. I find it suddenly when two overweight women bundled in wool arise, as if by magic, from the bowels of the earth. Their short arms are tugged along by dogs tearing along on a leash. Dogs.

Johannesburg 1989

'Christ Grace, if this is how your dogs behave what will your children be like?' Children. My throat constricted and my stomach tightened at the thought of it. Blueboy was irritated. He and Johanna parked their Renault outside the gates on Thirteenth Street and fought their way inside, fending off the dogs as best they could. Blueboy had grown into a man of angles and bones, the comic streak that used to have me in fits increasingly offset by deep pools of depression. Jessie, our blonde Alsatian with moist brown eyes, hurled herself at him. Boz, a black spaniel from the RSPCA, tore around the garden yelping, spurring her on. She leapt, she growled, she snapped at their throats. I hated those dogs.

Josh strolled out of the kitchen carrying a pink mug of coffee. He looked bemused. He was unmoved by the noise and unphased by Blueboy's obvious irritation. His spectacles steamed in the heat that rose from the coffee and slid down his nose. He balanced his cup and slid them back up. He wore the look of someone who has let loose the elements of a storm and watches, calm and content, as people are drenched. We were leaving the country soon and in the midst of all the packing and preparations, I'd forgotten I'd invited Blueboy and Johanna to dinner. 'Why are you here?' I asked, delighted nevertheless. 'You invited me Grace, don't you remember?' he said clenched.

Johanna the peacemaker loved the dogs and managed to gloss over the mood by waving a box of wine and a packet of chips in the air and sailing into the house to find a bowl and glasses.

I never understood Josh and his dogs. He'd offer them food from his mouth yet recoil in horror if he found the tiniest crust of unidentified food on a plate. He would also recoil if he placed his hand inside a letterbox to retrieve a letter and touched something unexpected. He was squeamish, almost prissy in his fastidiousness and not like dirt or slithery things. It was if the dogs reached some secret silly part of him and were exempt from the rules that governed every other part of his life or the rest of us. He would whip the dogs into frenzies for sport and encourage them to jump higher and higher towards the face. They frequently leapt over the wall and attacked postmen and garbage collectors as a matter of course; they mauled, tore and terrified everyone. When neighbours complained Josh refused to believe them. Each morning when I opened the kitchen door, a barrage of fur, saliva and teeth flew at me. 'Don't be so irritable Grace, the dogs are our security.' Indeed they were. At Christmas, normally the time when postal workers, garbage collectors and anyone who had ever provided a service to the house would go door to door expecting their Christmas boxes, our house was given a wide berth.

When Josh wasn't home I would lock them outside and block my ears to their whining and scraping. When Josh returned he let them back in again and they would leap around me, triumphant. It was a relationship of three and the outsider was me. Despite this, when the time came, Josh simply turned his back on the dogs. This capacity for abrupt change and shifts in affection and direction concerned me. Even thought I hated the dogs I would not have been able to abandon them. The fact Josh could abandon those who were dependant on him,

became a hovering worry in my mind every time he raised the subject of children. The day they were driven off, jumping into the back seat with their tails wagging thinking they were in for a treat, haunts me still. They were not being taken out for a treat.

I tried to remember a time when Blueboy was unhunched, less stooped, less given to shapeless duress and unpredictable storms. When he wasn't so angry with the world. Was it before the army? Before they found my father? Perhaps he too felt that everything was slipping away. I wanted to tell him that this leaving wasn't my fault, that Josh had sold the house without consulting me. It was in his name and there was nothing I could do. But I was too much of coward; too torn between conflicting loyalties. Instead, I hid behind a wall of fake hilarity and that simply irritated him. We had always been close, confused, but taking comfort that we were together. I felt my leaving was a betrayal and that as I pushed away in a lifeboat he stood ankle deep in water watching from the decks.

Someone once said that to live under Apartheid by necessity demanded a cauterisation of the human heart. A fiery red branding iron or a blow torch had to be applied to the loose tendrils of our humanity to sear off all feeling so that we would be able to function. If it's hard to be the victim of oppression it is equally dehumanising and difficult to watch particularly when there is very little power to change the system. As we gasped for air and swam in circles in our goldfish bowl of history we suffered collectively from a hardening of the arteries, a de-sensitised state or particular form of callousness produced by long-term exposure to institutionalised racism. It was as if even the air we breathed was thick with a

particularly toxic radiation. Without some sort of sealing off, it was impossible not to absorb it. And compartmentalisation was something we became experts at – people, suburbs, children, dogs; entire communities all moved about by a roll of the dice on our beloved country monopoly board. Dogs barked. People barked. Everybody bled and everybody barked. Even so, in spontaneous and unscripted ways our lives sometimes overlapped and the fragile humanity that flickered between us glowed with poignancy.

It was July. I was sixteen. My grandmother moved about in the kitchen making breakfast. For her it was always the same; stewed prunes, black Bush tea and dried toast for her blood pressure. She liked it burnt and would prop her toast against the white tiles of the kitchen to dry it out thoroughly. The slices would lean there like a row of old sooty teeth. Afterwards you could hear her crunch from the across the room where she sat in her spotted dressing and dropped crumbs everywhere.

I'd started my waitressing job out in the northern suburbs and was up early, hanging about waiting for my shift to begin. Outside, another clear blue freezing cold day kicked into gear on the Highveld. Street kids emerged from skip bins, stamped their feet and shook off the building dust. With cupped hands to keep small flames alive in the wind they lit the first *stompies* of the day and fanned out across the city. Springbok Radio blared out its usual inane morning shows for housewives. Competitions, phone-ins that sort of thing. How Blueboy managed to sleep on the veranda in all that racket was a mystery to me. The phone rang. It was Aunt Cathy. She had a particular type of booming voice that I've heard in

people who spend a lot of time shouting over each other at the tennis club. I recognised it instantly although I hadn't heard it in awhile.

Our last contact with Aunt Cathy, or anyone from our father's side of the family, had been years before. In the fall-out from the divorce and the ongoing shrapnel of recriminations from both sides, Blueboy and I had been set to one side. Like potted plants moved into the shade on a veranda while decisions are made about where to plant, we seemed to have disappeared from the family's view. In the early days after the divorce the families on both sides had been addicted to the delicious scandal of it all. Aunt Cathy often arrived un-announced in that first year with her sister, Aunt Millie, and they would take us down to the Zoo.

They were an odd couple for sisters. Aunt Cathy, tall and slim with tennis arms corded into ropes and Aunt Milly, short, plump, permed with small hillocks of feet bulging from the rims of her whitewashed shoes. They would fill us with ice-cream and pump us for information as to what my mother was doing with her life. With an ice-cream in my hand I was happy to spill the beans about each new boyfriend who'd crossed the threshold at Miller's Mansions and, with the detailed eye of a mini-court reporter, provide entire lists of all my mother's sins and faults. I must have said something one day that was passed along because all it took was one quick amputation from my mother and half the family was gone.

Aunt Cathy's message was unexpected and brief.

'Your father's dead. Blacks found him early Tuesday morning.'

Toast popped up in the kitchen.

A few minutes later my grandmother appeared in the doorway in her blue and white spotted dressing gown with a collection of safety pins pinned to the lapels. She never used the safety pins for anything but the collection grew until she resembled an ageing punk rocker in polka dots and rayon.

'Who was it Gracie?' She crunched on charcoal.

I didn't answer her. I picked up my bag and walked out of the flat. Old Simon clanged along the corridor wearing his kneepads and his sandals. No matter what the weather he always wore sandals made out of the thick rubber of car-tyres with intricate geometric designs cut into them. All the flatboys did. He carried a mop and bucket. It was the beginning of his working day. He would start on the top floor, the 7th floor, and mop his way downwards. Afterwards he polished his way back up.

Sawubona Grece!

Yebo Simon*, unjani?*

Hee hee hee Grece, hai! *ngikhona hee hee heee.*

I couldn't really speak Zulu but it amused Old Simon no end when I attempted it. We went through the same ritual every time we passed one another and he would shake his earlobes and giggle. Hee Hee Hee.

My legs walked up Banket Street to the Fontana bakery. I was deaf and dumb. Soon a cake counter, a landscape of chocolate and sugar, appeared in front of me. My purse produced two dirty bus tickets, a couple of hairclips, my front door key and a crisp banknote. I ordered jam donuts, chocolate éclairs and custard slices in a voice I didn't recognise. I walked back to the flat. Old Simon

must have moved on to another landing because I didn't see him. Gran and Blueboy were drinking tea and listening to the radio. Blueboy took a jam donut. My grandmother declined.

'Dad's dead,' I said.

The funeral was held on a bitter cold day at the Braamfontein crematorium close to the university and Elizabeth Mansions. It was decided that I should be the family representative. Blueboy had lapsed into a strange kind of silence upon hearing the news. He lay on his bed and stared into space with a concentrated look as if trying to separate molecules of air. Gran decided he was still too young and the funeral would be too much for him. My mother was subdued on hearing the news but had no intention of going. 'Wild horses,' she said, 'could not drag me kicking and screaming into the same room as those two old sanctimonious bitches.' I squeezed as best I could into my old school skirt and an uncomfortable pair of platform shoes which murdered my feet by the time I got there.

I walked to the crematorium from our flat. It was about a mile. No big deal. I passed the African hospital on the left where black men sat out on the veranda in their pink hospital robes. To my right I passed the Old Fort prison. A few years later, when I made that visit to the Apartheid museum, I asked my guide if he took tours through the Old Fort. I'd walked past it nearly every day of my life, I told him, and I wanted to see what it was like on the inside. I'd always been mystified. He said he could take me to the gate but he would wait for me in the car. 'The feeling you get comes from the walls,' he said, 'the pain is too much and I can't bear it.'

'Do you think she's pregnant?'

I squirmed in my tight skirt, aware of the glances from women in hats. I felt as if my seams oozed custard slices. I looked around and saw Aunty Cathy who flung her strong tennis arms in my direction. She scooped me up.

'Oh! Grace! You poor little thing!' she boomed.

She handed me around the long lost relatives who pecked my cheek with side long glances to my stomach. The moment I'd been dreading arrived. Nora. Finally, we would be face to face. How long had it been? There she was, perkily blonde and dressed for mourning gold glinting between her front teeth. She looked more matronly than I remembered and, I noted, with distant female satisfaction, that mine weren't the only seams beginning to creak. Her pink foundation covered her bad skin and ended at her chin. It was as if she were wearing the pink plastic mask that I'd always seen. I groaned as she headed my way. What could I say to Nora my stepmother who'd been eighteen when she seduced my father?

Common. That's what Gran always said although I never quite worked out her exact ingredients for common-ness. To be pronounced 'common' by my grandmother was to have your fate sealed tighter that jam in a jar and covered by layers of cold white wax. She could spot common at a hundred paces. Drum majorettes, for instance, were common. Note please those common short skirts and white wet look boots from Scotts (particularly common). Basket bags and silver frosted eye shadow were common. Nora was common. According to Gran I was not. Lucky me.

'Oh I'm sorry, you poor little orphan, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' she wailed. She imprinted herself on my face and jacket.

She didn't need to be sorry.

I was never going to forgive.

We filed into the crematorium in a small herd of dumpy aunts with the sole exception of Aunt Cathy who loped between us in the way of a giraffe moving through thorn trees. There were also two professional mourners in grey suits whose shoes squeaked. They wore mournful looks when we filed inside for the service but in truth they'd probably just been discussing the weekend's cricket. Nora tried to drag me to the front pew to sit with her as part of the family. I refused. Why put on a show now? I wondered where her two new children were. The one that came after the seduction and the one that followed. We'd heard about them but had never actually seen our brother and sister. They were clean and new, free from the residual spills of a messy divorce and those stubborn, hard-to-get out stains of last year's love. I sat at the back and stared at the casket containing my father's body.

A heavy-footed organist began a battery of depressing hymns. I tried to imagine him in his coffin – or was he out of it? Could I really derive comfort from the fact he might be looking out for me? Was he looking down on us? Did he see me in my tight skirt? Did he feel sorry for abandoning us, for moving on to the next part of his life, without, it seemed to me, a prick of conscience? I felt lightheaded when I thought that I hadn't been in the same room as him for a very long time. It'd been years. Not a word, not a letter, not a phone call. And here we

were.

How thou on my head in early youth didst smile;

And, though rebellious and perverse meanwhile

Thou hast not left me ....Oh Lord Abide with me.

I'd always fantasised, in the times I searched for something to think about, that one day my mother and father would realise they'd made a mistake and that they still loved each other. I don't know where this dream began or ended but I woke up one morning and it was gone. In my fantasy we'd all move in together and sit around an Oregon pine kitchen table with a large chocolate cake in the centre of it. My mother would cut the cake into generous slices and pass it around while thick icing dripped onto the plate. The trouble was I could never imagine what happened after the cake was eaten. In my dreams my mother was forever busy with cake while the rest of picked at the crumbs.

I always did imagine there would come a time when I was old enough, when the world had stopped turning for other people and turned instead for me, when I would be able to say to my father: '*Sawubona Daddy ngikhona.'* You exist because I can see you. *Umuntu ngumuntu nagabantu* – a person is a person because of other people.

The hymns ended. Nora blew her nose prettily.

After the service I bolted out into the weak July sunshine. I noticed an old black man with grey about his temples wearing a shiny brown suit several sizes too big for him. He held a hat in front of him and stood and stared intently at the door of the crematorium where I'd just come. Petrus? It couldn't be. It was

impossible. Cars roared past. Petrus was years ago, another time; another town. It was! It was Petrus! I went over to him. I hadn't seen him for years not since my father moved up in the world to manage the Plaza Theatre in Pretoria.

In the days of Petrus my grandmother would pack an old brown suitcase and lug it and us down to the inter-city bus depot near Commissioner Street. She would pay the fare, sit us in the front seat diagonally behind the driver where he could see us and give each of us a grease-proofed wrapped packet of egg-mayonnaise sandwiches and a bottle of orange squash to tide us over. Our father would meet us at the other end. The journey took hours and Blueboy always wanted to pee. As we rumbled down the old Pretoria Road he would sit by the window and I would ride shotgun on the aisle. When our juice was finished Blueboy peed in the bottle and I blocked the view so noone could see him.

We absorbed the African landscape that way side by side trundling along with full bladders. The seasons, the yellow veld grass, the blue sky, cirrus, cumulus, nimbus, stratus, the Jacaranda wet season, the cosmos to announce the long dry. We absorbed by osmosis a way of knowing about the world in which a sense of place and feelings of abandonment moved in tandem with each other. With a packet of egg-mayonnaise sandwiches and a bottle of squash in my lap I had little appreciation for the fact that one day this would be history and these would the memories I would return to. We seemed to be small bundles of luggage on a conveyor belts that stretched from one city to another.

In Pretoria my father would meet us with a shy, awkward grin. I would see him first through the front window standing tall in his blue cable knit jumper, the

anxious comb of his hair which up close smelled of Brylcreem, his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows and that twisted look grownups get when they try to beat down happiness when it bubbles up and threatens to overwhelm them. How could anyone, especially a child, not love him?

He'd take us to a small gloomy Italian place on Church Street. It had chequered tablecloths and green Chianti bottles out of which plain white candles dripped stalactites. I would snap off the ends of wax and adore my father quietly. Above us, from a dusty tangle of faux vines and plastic leaves, clusters of synthetic grapes drooped about his head. Outside in the dry, white heat of Pretoria, there was a prison nearby. In it condemned men waited to die. We were ignorant of this as we sucked through our paper straws the sweet fizzy red juice of our small lives.

With a job as the manager of a local cinema came a room above another cinema across the alley from The Plaza and an adoring flock of women. To the circling usherettes with flossy beehives and perky tight bosoms my father represented an eligible catch. He was tall and slim and good looking – well, I thought so anyway. One of those usherettes was Nora and she plied us with fake affection in attempt to slither her way into his heart. It worked too. For awhile.

I met Petrus at the Plaza where he was a cleaner. He wore brown overalls and he cleaned the toilets, mopped the white marble floors of the foyer and polished the brass banisters that lead up to the balconies. He did this at least twice a day after each session. Because we had nothing to do we were always getting in his way, chasing each other across his wet floors, asking him silly

questions. He didn't seem to mind. Sometimes we shifted our attention to Mevrou Oosthuizen who worked in the ticket office. We were bewitched by the magic of her heavily ringed fingers as they flick, flick, flicked smooth brightly coloured tickets to patrons through a small glass window as if she were playing poker. The tickets where located in colour coded rows above her head. Each colour determined by price where the cinema patrons could sit.

Mevrou Pienaar was my father's landlady in the lodgings across the alley.. She was another adoring woman whose mind was always turned to fixing broken things. My father's room was above the movie theatre called The Opera House. Even we understood that The Opera House was a bug house; a place that offered coke and all-day double features for nineteen cents to people who didn't work. The riff-raff. The Plaza was a step above and showed films like *Escape from East Berlin* and *Ship of Fools*. The Opera House showed *The Mummy* and *GI Blues*. It was noisy up there in his room but we never felt alone. My father's window opened to the roof and from our bed (which was his if we weren't there) we could hear the sound of The Opera House's projection box and sometimes see the operator standing in the window having a smoke. At different times the sounds of rock 'n' roll, screams of horror and galloping horses drifted across the roof.

If we peered down into the alley that separated the two theatres we could see the doors open almost simultaneously and the patrons stream out at closing time. Soon our father would arrive home with chocolate logs or slabs of Nestlé's Milky Way. We always waited up for him. We didn't know how much or how little money he had nor did we care. We were children. It was enough that he

was there; a tall gunslinger who strode into room packing six-shooters of straight chocolate in both hands.

Then there was Nora. Then she was pregnant and the shoot-outs with chocolate logs ended. My father no longer stood at the bus stop biting down happiness. The trips. His life. With her pregnancy, everything ended.

I walked over to Petrus. He remembered me. *Dumel okai o ntse ophela* – I haven't seen you for a long time. Yes, he was still at the Plaza. No, he hadn't seen my father since he married Madam Nora and moved to Johannesburg. How had he heard of his death? He read it in the newspapers. Of course! There'd been a small article about the body of a man found by African workers early one morning. They gave his name and listed his next of kin as a wife with two small children. Petrus took two days off work and caught the train to Johannesburg. From the station, he'd walked to the funeral. In my mind I tallied the cost of two days out of work and a return third-class train ticket. Master Fred, he was a good man, Petrus said. Together we stood and watched the spectacle that was my father's funeral.

As the mourners were leaving Aunt Cathy called Aunt Milly and headed back into the crematorium. What was she going to do? Say a last farewell before the coffin was lowered into the furnace? Perhaps I should go too. I needed closure. I wanted to see my father but at the same time I was frightened of seeing him alone. What if he sat bolt upright in the coffin? I decided to trail in behind Aunt Cathy. 'The flowers,' she called to the group over her shoulder, 'were still fresh - it would be such a shame to see them destroyed.'

The official version of my father's death was that he'd had a heart attack as he left Speedy's Drive-Inn where he worked. It was late at night and he'd been working long hours. He needed to with all those extra mouths to feed. People said his heart attack must have come upon him suddenly, caused him to veer his old Morris Minor into a ditch where he was found early the next morning. I thought about it differently. If his heart had stopped it was Nora who'd killed it.

Canberra 2011

Legs numb. Survival shuffle. I finish my run.

'Where are you?'

Simon gets me out of the shower. I hobble across the carpet and fumble for my phone.

'Canberra'

'What are you doing there?

'Facing my nemesis.'

'Who is he?'

'It's an 'it' – not a he – I'm researching for my book.'

'Just remember my offer – I think you should take me up on it.'

'What offer?'

Simon sighs. 'My offer to sleep with you – Christ Grace, I think if you're going to write a book you need to have a decent sex life so that you will know what the hell you're writing about – I'm offering. You can put *that* in your book.'

'We've been through this – I'm not interested in having sex with you.'

'Yes but I don't understand why. I'm thin, I'm rich and intelligent – I come with perks and fringe benefits.'

'I'm trying hard not to imagine it.'

'Grace, I can make you *feel* like a real woman, like you're the only woman in the world. All my girlfriends tell me that. I make them feel as if they are the only woman who exists.'

‘And to think I’ve been feeling like a fake all this time.’

I first met Simon over a pair of pink plastic sandals. Judith was in a long-distance relationship with him. She was so dewy-eyed over his position as a senior partner in a top-tier law firm that she never questioned why he only ever entertained her at the Burswood Casino. She never asked why he flew her out for a weekend and then set her up in a rented room although they both referred to it as a penthouse suite.

‘Have you never spent a night in his home?’ I was incredulous.

‘No,’ she smirked at her nail polish, a habit she’d only recently taken up. Her toenails were painted too. ‘He says he likes to spoil me; that I *deserve* to be taken to the Burswood. He has a permanent suite there, a penthouse.’ The off-hand way she said this irritated me.

‘But what if he’s married? What if he has a wife and twelve kids stashed away in Cottesloe?’

‘You’re such a prude Grace, you worry too much.’

But Simon proved a hard man to pin down, even for someone with Judith’s tenacity.

I met Simon in Sydney over brunch in Kirribilli and in the company of two women he put on quite a show. We’d both flown across from Perth to visit Judith on separate flights. Her best friend and her new boyfriend, these meetings had the potential to be awkward. For reason we became friends even though we had nothing in common. Judith already warned me that he could be graceless and difficult.

'How do you mean graceless and difficult?'

'He just is.'

'What's the sex like?' (I had to ask)

'Ummm, let's just say I feel truly blessed.'

'Blessed? What's that supposed to mean?' When Simon entered the picture, Judith became a person I no longer recognised. Smug, secretive. She no longer smiled, she smirked. Smirkative.

Once, after they broke up, I was drinking wine in the airport version of a mosh-pit (midnight flight, plastic glasses, screaming children, other people's luggage) when I saw Simon float up the escalator that led to the First Class lounge. It was like watching the ascension into heaven. When he saw me he descended down the other side. I thought he'd come to invite me to join him in the clouds. Instead, he came down to earth to ask, 'How can you wear a cross like that when you're not even a Christian – really Grace, of all things.' I was used to him. He'd come a long way from the crumpled student who dripped blood in the Kwela Kwela on the day of the riots.

'How can you wear shoes like that and expect to be taken seriously?' Simon said by way of hello on that first day. I would learn over time that Simon never said 'hello' – he simply began with whatever was on his mind and continued from there without interruption. I became his pet project – his personal Eliza Doolittle. For some reason I bring this out in people. It annoys me.

I was scrimping, financing my way through university by working as an evening word processor in a law firm in the city. Outside of Judith, law was

another thing I had in common with Simon.

These days Simon shuttles between his three-bedroomed apartment at Matilda Bay (with water views) and the rest of the world. He took me to see it one day when he was bored, restless and back from one of his trips to London to watch soccer. He spent the entire afternoon describing to me the purple silk pyjamas Thai Airways hand out in First Class.

Simon thinks I'm not doing enough with my life. He appears and disappears, swearing to suffer great anxieties about my fate which he offers to fix with trips to the Burswood. 'You should be raking it in as a best-selling novelist, not squandering your talents doing edits for litigation.' On this I agree with him. 'Do you know how hard it is to get a book published? It's not as if you can simply snap your fingers and whalla! – the next minute you're a member of Oprah's bookclub. Even if you could, the money you'd earn is probably less than the daily rate of a senior partner at your law firm not counting GST and disbursements. No wonder you can afford to jet around the world in purple silk pyjamas.'

Despite this, Simon suffers from guilt and bouts of melancholy. He fills his emptiness by short flings with women he bombards with poetry. Once they feel they are the only woman in the world and begin to hint at something more permanent, he gets bored or scared or both and he abandons them to their fates on their small islands of uniqueness. For absolution he visits his shrink. At least that is the reason he gives for the last fifteen years he's spent seeing the psychiatrist across the road from me. I put it down an over-privileged South African childhood and inflated expectations of the world that can never be

fulfilled. That and the fact his mother was shot and killed in the Rosebank car park.

Whatever the reason, we both float from the same shipwreck - consumed by the need to find the people who've been lost and to piece together the jigsaw of our lives. Simon rambles on about luxury and soccer. I think about Canberra and how it all fits. I have no idea. No idea what I am doing here in this plain motel room wrapped in a towel on a freezing Sunday in July.

'I'm cold. I've got to go. I've just finished my run and I'm off to the mall for lunch. I'll call you when I'm back in Perth.'

∞

The first thing that hits me as the sliding doors open is the smell of plastic coming from a two dollar shop stuffed with trinkets. I wonder about the fact that in some parts of the world people spend half their lives in factories working round the clock to churn out plastic hamburgers and in malls like these other people spend half their lives rummaging in shops to find them. It's as if I'd kicked open a termite mound exposing a teeming world of photosensitive ants, their mandibles industriously consuming goods made in China.

My previous amnesia disappears and my feet lead me to the food hall on the third level. It was here I miserably wiled away most of my time twenty years ago. Wednesdays were set aside for job-hunting and I'd circle in the newspaper, with a distinct sense of futility, the jobs I wasn't qualified for. What, for example, were 'selection criteria'? How were they supposed to be addressed? Question: Demonstrates an understanding of people from different cultural groups. Answer: Does being born in Africa count? And I could hardly make a case for getting along with Africans since we were in the middle of a bloody revolution. So I spent every Wednesday drinking bad coffee and taking advantage of the mall's heating system.

If cities can be described by their food then it becomes clear that Canberra has undergone a transformation. The old stalwarts McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Red Rooster face stiff competition from Ali Baba, Yum Cha and Little Beijing. I'm grateful for this. It's almost as though the global battle for control of the world is being played out here with food. But other things haven't changed. I notice, for instance, that the mall is still pregnant.

The escalators move in a ceaseless production line of prams and overflowing shopping trolleys gliding up and down. Women in ugg boots with huge stomachs stretched across tracksuits jostle their prams and children between the tightly packed tables. Suddenly I feel hot, out of place, in need of air. My throat feels tight. I need to get out of here. That old wet mouth feeling hovers behind me. I've learned to deal with but it's always there.

At one of the tables there is a group of Sudanese men in worn suits. Something about them that moves me with a sense of the familiar but not quite. They're obviously refugees and they call out to each other in an easy display of cultural solidarity; a community of laughter and white teeth. We are not like this. We of the white tribe do not call out to each other. I wish I could go over and join them. I think of M.T and what she said at the Master Class when we discussed the question of truth. What to reveal and what not to reveal. 'Grace you can hide behind your metaphors, or some prettily dressed up allegory, but a reader can recognise the truth and *your* story is a lot more interesting than any fiction you can dream up. You need to be honest.' *My* story. On hearing snatches of it Simon was appalled. He said that I was like some quaint anthropological specimen he'd read about but had never actually met. Reading about my London experience at the master class was a first step but I'm still not quite ready for the truth.

'Don't bother writing about our country,' he said, 'we are comprised by our history. People don't want to know our stories. We are the perpetrators. Nothing you can say will make a difference.'

'But what about voice,' I said 'who gets to tell the stories of our lives? You sound

like Josh, always telling me not to say anything, to maintain a polite front – I feel as if I'm mute!'

What would the Sudanese write about their lives? How would they describe the war, the starvation and refugee camps?

'We are all casualties of this world,' M.T. said 'bruised and broken by its many duplicities, yet there is the expectation that we should present an unblemished front, uncracked, like new plaster on a wall. Well I've got news for you, suffering doesn't clock off at five so write the truth.' An unblemished front – my mind flicked to Josh, to Simon, to Judith and the shiny white walls they live behind. I make a decision to tell the truth. To do this I need to go Calvary, yes, in the morning I'll go to the hospital.

Monday - Rest

I set out early. Since the university is paying for all of this it's only fair that I should at least look the part of a researcher … a writer … a what? To this end I bundle myself in the type of anorak I wished I owned when I lived here. It's brown but warm. The pockets are deep enough to accommodate a pen and a notebook on one side and a dictaphone on the other. Just in case I am so overcome with inspiration I can't write quick enough.

The trip from the motel to the hospital is too far to walk said the receptionist behind the marble counter. So far I am amazed at how friendly people are. She hands me a street map and tells me to turn left, walk three blocks and there I will find the bus terminus. I thank her and turn right. Instinct tells me to follow Belconnen Way and head towards Aranda. A cycle path threads through the bush and I follow it. I used to train along these paths. The body remembers. I estimate that the hospital can't be more than about two and half kilometres away – easy walking distance. Even after twenty years I am still accurate. When I find the hospital my Garmin watch tells me I was out by a couple of metres. It came from years of practice, when there was nothing to do but perfect the assessment of time, pace and distance.

Across Belconnen Way I notice playing fields and an oval. It's the Jamieson Oval and beyond it, the Jamieson Shopping Centre where I first met Dr Muthsamy. The fields and the shopping centre can be reached by a cycle path under the road and I vaguely remember one cold day encountering Carol H. pushing a double pram and carrying her shopping. I hadn't seen her for quite some time and noticed she was pregnant again. I was doing sprints on my own, one minute fast,

one minute slow. I stopped to chat, grateful for the interlude and so, I suspect, was she. She looked tired.

Today was just such a day. Low grey cloud made the eyelids heavy in the glare. How memory deceives us. In my mind this all seemed so spread out and remote; each pocket of my life isolated from the other by a network of concrete freeways and dull identical houses. Everything seemed so distant and new. It is as if I am seeing this landscape for the first time. Today it looks cramped, windswept, overwhelmingly ordinary and surprisingly familiar.

As I stand looking across the road at the playing fields I become aware of the cars sweeping by. There aren't many since rush hour is over and again I'm struck by the space of the place and it's feeling of emptiness. I imagine how our blue Ford Falcon would have looked from the outside, to a researcher standing on this cycle path taking notes one day in July twenty years ago. Here it comes. A man in his early thirties hunched over the steering wheel. You can't see the colour of his eyes. He is wearing glasses. You can't see the woman curled on the back seat clutching a plastic bag as if her life depended on it. It's as if he is alone. It is as if she is absent. In truth they were both alone – and she *was* absent. Neither would have paid any attention to the width of the medium strip. They would not know, could not know, on that particular day that this was only the beginning, that there would be other roads and other hospitals. For a second I watch as my two lives cross and then one is swept away, up the highway.

I turn left on Haydon Drive and see the entrance to Calvary hospital immediately. The sign reads *ANU Medical School and Training Hospital.* Training?

I didn't know that. I think about the tall Japanese doctor who appeared in my small cubicle of pain and the clenched face I gave him. I send out a silent apology. I crunch up the driveway towards the car parks with a brooding sense of purpose. The land is exposed here and the wind tugs at my scarf making my eyes water. I watch husbands, children, wives and families shuttle between the hospital and the car park. These are the people you call in an emergency. We had noone to call. It's not surprising we turned on each other. Abruptly I feel melancholic.

I used to call these patches of melancholy the time of tin. This was because they were triggered mid-morning or mid-afternoon by the way light bounced off the corrugated iron roofs of Old Johannesburg. It seemed to me that between the frenzied activity of the daily two rush-hours, morning and evening, the day hit a heavy listless stretch. It was a waiting time, filled with the sound of radios blaring out stories in both official languages and it smelt, yes, if a memory has an odour, of burnt toast and Sunbeam Furniture Polish.

A memory surfaces of one early afternoon during the time of tin when I walked down Banket Street in Hillbrow. Outside a block of flats a group of people had gathered around and they pointed upwards to an open window. In the distance I could hear sirens. A policeman took statements. Someone said they'd seen a man jump out of the window. People craned their necks to see where he landed, to catch a glimpse of horror or blood. That was the time of tin, when life seemed listless and as empty as this car park.

To distract myself from the mood that settles over me I focus on the natural surroundings. Between Belconnen Way which is hidden by the dense bush

surrounding the hospital there is a small lake. Tomorrow I will make a startling discovery about this dense bush and this lake by looking at a map but today, even from the car park, I can sense its stagnancy. I whip out my Moleskine to justify my trip and write: ***the surrounding trees are wattle and bottle brush. I can hear the strangled cries of water birds (or maybe its just bare branches rubbing against each other). Who knows - the wind is right for it.***

There is a white cross within a blue heart above the main entrance and a sign points to Emergency a short distance away. Emergency is a small hot room with blue plastic chairs bolted to the floor and the type of ticketing system used in banks and at Medicare. The admissions staff with plain faces and hair scraped back into ponytails sit behind a solid glass window enmeshed with a grill. Did we stop for a ticket or is this new? The television is on but the sound is low. The floor is covered by a shiny patchwork of scrubbed linoleum. I don't remember any of this.

I'm writing in my notebook when an elderly nun on her way somewhere notices me and comes over. She probably doesn't mean to be stern but she comes across as brusque.

'Can I help?'

'No, thanks, I'm just taking notes. I'm … um … doing some research.'

'May I ask into what?'

'Into miscarriage.'

What about miscarriage?' I wonder why the words are so hard to get out. They

rattle around like gravel in the throat. The nun is beginning to intimidate me. 'If a woman were brought in here on a stretcher with a suspected miscarriage, what would happen – how would she be processed?' Is 'processed' the right word? I wanted to see how I would have looked to the outside world, to the people sitting on the blue bolted chairs watching television. The nun points towards a set of doors. I remember curtains. 'She would be moved in there and a doctor would be sent for.' I remember the Japanese doctor and my pinched face. 'Depending on the case, she would be dealt with here or moved up to the wards.' Dealt with? I wonder what that means. The nun turns and points to a wide passage leading to a walkway. For a second, the rimless spectacles and short grey hair remind me of someone but I can't think who. An orderly in overalls walks towards the walkway pushing a trolley of towels. In my mind I see a woman curled into a ball on the trolley, she is nearly unconscious. *Where did I go? What happened next?*

The nun stares at me - waits for some answers, or another question. She studies me, poised. She has the eyes of a bird. I think she can see through me. I begin to back away even as I feel I have to explain everything – to fill this awkward silence between us with a deluge of words. Why do I feel guilty? Why do I feel that I've been sent to the bottom of the class in the motherhood department? Why do I feel that what happens here is secret business, business that no longer concerns me? No longer concerns me because I failed. I want to go up to the wards, to try and remember them, but that would mean a lengthy request for permission involving an equally lengthy explanation and I'm afraid I

might cry. I want to cry because I'm frustrated not because I'm sad. I'm frustrated because everything involves lengthy explanations. There is always someone or something blocking access to my past. I imagine I see in her face a look of indifference as if to say, why, after all these years, are you bothering with all this? *Move on. Get over it.* Isn't that what Josh said. *Get over it.* And that's just it. Why *am* I bothering? Why couldn't I be like Josh and start again – not look back? Close the door on the dogs, Thirteenth Street, family and country. He got over it even before the plane cruised over Table Mountain. Make a statement for God's sakes, Grace. *Speak!* I make a hurried exit out the wrong door.

I find myself in a small garden backing on to the emergency car park. A sign says the garden is to be used for quiet contemplation. A sign with the words 'quiet contemplation' usually only means one thing. There are a few trees, a dry water feature and a bench. On the ground around the water feature, there is a tender human touch – clumps of purple ice pansies peep out from between the floppy heads of ornamental cabbages.

Canberra 1991

I arrived home to find an upended bum on my front lawn. Two rolls of freckled pink flesh rose from the tops of elasticised jeans and spilled over under the shade of the Chinese Elm. It was my mother crawling about on her hands and knees, a trowel in her hand trying, by force of will, to bend one thing into the shape of another. Lord knows she'd been at it for long enough. You'd think she would have learned it was impossible. The Apartheid regime, the neighbours, men, miserable flats in down-at-the-mouth suburbs where windows overlooking blank alleys, a moody irritable daughter and now this, the harsh Australian environment. She thought they could all be stared down by her calm, blue eyes and unflinching optimism. In front of her was a rash of raw earth, small plastic tubs of purple ice pansies, the first germination of petunias and ornamental cabbages. 'Something needs to bloom around here,' she said 'I am planting you a garden.'

It had been a long time since I'd seen my mother on her hands and knees. My memories of her are separated into early life and adult life. In the early years I'd wake up to swooshing sounds in the middle of the night and the sight of her painting, as she transformed small worlds on her knees. When I was almost seven she disappeared and spent a lot of time away. I spent about the same amount of time punishing her for this when she returned. By the time I left South Africa things between us had settled and connected. I had the house on Thirteenth Street. My mother visited me there and we spoke often. Every Saturday at 1.00pm I drove down to The Happy Autumn Nursing Home where my

grandmother now lived taking with me a lunch of cold baked beans, fresh herb bread and cold cuts. We ate it out in the garden if it was warm or had a picnic in her room if it was cold. Sometimes my mother came, sometimes she didn't. It depended on her workload I expected. The Happy Autumn Nursing Home was once a grand Victorian mansion. Now it was filled with starched uniforms, pamphlets advertising funeral services and the grey smell of bleach and decay. Along with her body, Gran's room had shrunk to something resembling a cupboard and it was filled to the brim with broken vases, patched up teapots, the knitted and embroidered detritus of a disposable life. Josh hated going down there. I hated it too, hated to see how she had been worn down.

We'd all accepted quite early that my mother was a fly-by-night. She was reminiscent of the glorious flying ants which tunnel out of the ground and cluster around the street lamps at the onset of summer, their silver wings translucent, whirring, beating against air, a fluttering presence. I once watched Blueboy's bull terrier snuffle around his garden like Sherlock Homes, his nose fixed to the ground, sniffling with an ancient instinct the movements of the ants as they tunnelled under the earth towards the surface. It was after a storm when the world was moist. As each ant reached the surface and became airborne the bull terrier snippily snapped his teeth and lunged into the air after them, trying to catch them. He missed. They drove him mad. On the veranda, with a glass of wine in my hand, the dog, the flying ants, the crickets in the undergrowth and the brooding presence of the night produced a sense that the hostilities of life going on all around us were suspended. Time stood still. For one evening life was in its

place. If only every night were like this. Trying to catch the flying ants was like trying to hold on to my mother. The trembling anticipation of her next appearance and the crash to earth when she disappeared again. It drove me mad too.

I recall the nuptial migration of flying ants with fondness perhaps because of this, or because their appearance usually precipitated the great Highveld summer storms that rolled across the Magaliesberg and washed away the layers of winter. We waited for them in the same way we waited to catch a whiff of the sweet scented white waxy Jasmine, which swelled in warm pockets of August air signalling a change in season.

The arrival of the flying ants, like the seasonal migrations of my mother, stir memories of warmth and light but also brought with it the knowledge that this was only temporary. In the morning, after their brilliant ascent to the light, most of the glorious flying ants would be dead and the streets crunchy with their corpses. Or they could be found wriggling wingless across the ground, easy prey for birds and other predators especially small children who liked to feel them pop beneath their sandaled feet. In scientific terms flying ants were simply looking to mate. The queens emerged from the ground on seasonal cue followed by the males. Once the mating was accomplished the queens lost their brilliance and their wings; their short season of flight was over. Magic gone, they dropped to the ground unable to fly and became vulnerable. I'd mourn their loss or rather mourn the reality that their short lives were simply illusions, tricks of seasonal glamour which held us in brief thrall; a flourish of showy insect-ship much like a

cheap magic wand.

My mother brought this seasonal glamour to my life but it was never enough to counter the feeling of loss and emptiness that followed her equally abrupt disappearances. She was not a mother in the real sense. It was as if she could only be a mother in small spurts and, with energy sucked dry, she would retreat wingless to some place out of reach. Sometimes I thought she were almost a figment of my imagination. Because of this I had to fortify myself with ramparts, moats and build thick walls around my small heart. Getting close to her became a test of endurance. I could not afford to let her in because each disappearance destroyed me all over again. I'd have to rebuild my defences and drag myself out of a deep pool of disappointment and loss. I could not allow myself to be swept up on fanciful flights because I knew I could and would, be dropped.

For her first attempt to make me airborne my mother made me a pair of giant butterfly wings. She had spent many nights hand stitching thousands of coloured sequins. It was a surprise she'd conjured up for me. I was to wear the wings to a school fancy dress in Grade One. On the day I wore them it rained and I had a tantrum because along with the wings came a mask which I refused to wear. It was covered in glitter and looked too sparkly, made me too noticeable, I felt uncomfortable. I didn't want to stand out and refused to leave the toilet block if she affixed it to my face. I had my way. Instead of a photograph of a butterfly billowing with light my mother ended up with a child with a trembling lip. Her wet wings dragged behind her. In this way we struggled on; in love with but always a disappointment to each other. Try as I might I could not take flight and

she, it seems, was unable to come down to earth for any extended period.

In her book *Blue Nights* Joan Didion speaks of two things. The first is her sense of betrayal when she changed her driver's licence from California to New York (imagine what a change of passport would do), the second was being captivated by the beauty of blue nights, of being so entranced by the gloaming, the slow change to the sky, the expectation of summer ahead that she failed to see what they signalled. In this state of transformation she writes, the mesmerisation of the blue light causes us to miss the small clues that point to its opposite – to its inevitable wane, its slow fade into darkness. There is no way to change this. We grow or we wither on the vine; either way petals are dropped. Old enemies and old friends merge into a single face, the past. They are the ether we conjure in our minds, the people who return to haunt us. While we are bedazzled by the flying ants or the blue nights they are already leaving us. There is no bottle big enough to hold on to any of it. Would we really want to? What the blue nights give us, if we are alert to the fact that we have been put on notice, is a chance to say goodbye, to lay to rest old scores and say the things left unsaid.

That's why I remember the ornamental cabbages. It was so unlike my mother to do something this suburban, this mundane, or even, for that matter, to share the same roof as me for one entire month. We had spent so much of our lives apart. But perhaps it was *just* like her. After all, wasn't my mother my own personal fantasy? Perhaps it was typical of *me* not to notice the real person she was because I only noticed things superficially or built fantasies around my memories. Memories which smelt of the paint she used to slap on the walls of the

flats we rented or the tins of turpentine she left her brushes to stand in. These were the smells of new beginnings, optimistic in a sense but always underpinned by some sort of loss. They made me vomit because they always signalled change and I'd find myself like Blueboy's dog, growling and snapping at air. On the day of the ornamental cabbages, there was no smell of paint to warn me of change. Perhaps that's why I missed the clues that lie in transitions of light.

'When are you going to have children?' my mother puffed at my knees. Her florid face blossomed among the cabbages. That came from left field. 'I'm not!' I was emphatic, terse, resenting the forced intimacy. I didn't do mother and daughter chats very well. I didn't do any form of intimacy very well. I felt betrayed that *she* should ask this question of me, of all people. I had absorbed an understanding that were it not for the mores of her particular era and the limits of her education, which at best produced an average matriculation and catapulted her into the life of typist in a paint factory (it only strikes me now she was always painting because she got discounted paint), she would have chosen to do something more interesting and adventurous with her life. This was obviously what she chose to do in those missing years. Children were forced upon her, as was marriage. That was what women did in her day. At the time, her apparent lack of interest in us, her children, didn't seem to be the glaring fault it grew to be. I didn't know any better. The blame came later. When I was older, when everyone else began filling my ears with their opinions of her, I began to feel short-changed and wished my mother had been someone else. That's when my real treachery began, when the weight of those missing years became first a chip

and then a block.

'Who are you going to visit when you're old?' she dug furiously.

'Noone – I don't need to visit anyone,' I picked at the ground with my toe. 'I've got my running'.

In those days I still had knees.

On the day my mother planted the ice pansies and ornamental cabbages I hadn't yet shifted within myself. I was entirely involved in my unhappiness, wrapped up in feelings of guilt and betrayal at what I saw as the forced leaving of my country of birth. I missed the message she was trying to give me. In the same way I missed her message in the giant sequined butterfly wings and the glittery mask. I missed the magic of illusion, transformation and the opportunities for flight. I missed a lot of things.

Perhaps she had already sensed the deepening of the blue nights and, unlike me, understood the signs. Perhaps that day she knew that something else was taking root besides the ornamental cabbages. It was just like her not to mention it. I didn't know, as I watched her circumnavigate her way around the house with a trowel, that this small domestic ritual for a house I hated, and which would haunt me for reasons unknown and which would bring me back twenty years later, would be her last maternal performance; her final genuflection for past sins. The ones that were real and the ones I imagined. I would remember her that day, elbow deep in cabbages. After that, by degrees her light slipped away. The blue lights, the time of tin, the nuptial migration of flying ants.

As I stood in the garden for quiet contemplation at the side of Calvary

hospital, I thought about the story Walter told me on one of those sultry nights down at the beach when he sat on the low stairs and smoked hand rolled tobacco while I watered my plants. We'd been sharing life stories. 'A caterpiller, Grace is crawling along.' He inched his chubby fingers along an imaginary branch to make his point. 'A bright green caterpiller moving along minding hees own buseenees. Suddenly, he is stung by a wasp. The caterpiller, he is now paralysed. *Thet* is the *best* thing thet will happen to him *all* day. Now, after this, his day will get a lot worse. You see, Grace, the wasp has also injected hees lava into the caterpiller. The lava wheel begeen to eat the caterpiller alive. They will take care not to disturb the nervous system. Why is thet? Thet is because they *want* him to be fresh. He paused to take a puff. They *want* him alive. They want him to feel the pain. Tell me Grace, why is eat, why is eat with you white people, thet you all think you are above suffering? Suffering, it is important for all of us. How do you think we will transform ourselves if we do not suffer?'

Maybe the loss of one child wasn't enough, a friend once said to me, maybe it took three deaths to propel you out of your small world and help you see into another dimension. (She was kind enough to leave out the words 'self-obsession.') Maybe. But I had always been able to see the blue nights but I missed them with my mother. I always thought she would be there for me, coming and going, maddeningly addictive. This is why I never told her, when I had the chance, that I would remember the butterfly wings.

The cyclical nature of seasons first appears in the sky. In New York the nights might be long and blue but in Johannesburg the sky comes in clichés of

orange and salmon pink. It is a sky that is ancient and deceptive. It promises a centre and that tomorrow and the day after that the world will turn around it and leave everything in its place. Between the sun's departure in Africa and it's arrival in New York we are held in a collective spell of changing light when time stands still and we wait.

I watched the long leaving pink sky from under the fig tree in the back garden of our house on Thirteenth Street. It had been a particularly violent year in the townships and news about our situation was bleak. My washing flapped on the line behind me. I stood with the orange basket resting against my hip bewitched by the pink hue to the sky and admiring, at the same time, the back door of my house. I admired the back door not because there was anything unusual or special about it, there wasn't, but because it was *my* house, my *first* house. Or so I thought.

In the gathering dusk it felt as if the disruptions of the early years, the bad memories from London, the ongoing revolution, the wet tongue choking feeling, the gaping mouth at the back of my head, were things of the past. Life paused. In the pause came quiet and a sense of peace and belonging that I hadn't felt since the evening I painted my clawfoot bath yellow and toasted the city from my flat at Elisabeth Mansions. Finally it had all stopped. Whichever way the revolution played out it didn't matter to me. I was home.

I could feel the cold grass underneath my bare feet and vaguely wondered if the clothes would be dry in the morning or if the dew would leave them damp. Already, my mind was processing change but I had not consciously understood

summer to be at an end. There was nothing I wanted that I didn't already have. With a feeling of *completeness* I admired the sky, the backdoor. Life was good. Almost, I thought, too good.

I use the term garden loosely since there was no garden to speak of. The backyard had been laid waste by a combination of dogs and our own neglect. The overgrown, patchy lawn was covered with rotting black figs which fell heavily from the branches of the tree and crawled with termites. The dogs rolled about in them. I neither ate figs nor bottled them but I did admire the gnarled tree trunk and the dense green foliage which cast a good shade. We were always too busy running to bother about gardens; or too tired recovering from running to bother about gardens. The fig tree was the only living feature in the yard along with an old garage built for cars made in the 1930s (and therefore too small for a Toyota Cressida) and overhung with creepers, which produced an abundance of pink trumpet flowers. I liked it for the unruly cottagey-feel it lent to the place. Josh threatened to cut it down every morning he walked out and laid eyes on it.

We'd bought the place sight unseen or rather, after I saw the way the fuchsia pink bougainvillea tumbled like a Spanish petticoat over the front wall and the rubber plants behind it seemed to hold up the sky. Between the rubber plants I'd made out the glimmer of a faded green corrugated iron roof, a feature of old Johannesburg. That was enough for me. I knew inside we would find Oregon pine floor boards and pressed tin ceilings. Everything else could be fixed. Josh contacted the estate agent.

The house was bought on a whim, or rather with a lot of pleading from me

using the dogs as a form of emotional blackmail. How could Josh walk away from his dogs? Pets were like children, you couldn't simply abandon them. That was the first time I talked Josh out of immigrating to Australia. Later I would learn that acquiescence from Josh was simply a lull in tactics. You couldn't talk Josh out of anything he had his heart set on. 'You can't,' I said 'abandon your dogs.'

Josh was tired of being called up for three monthly army camps which was a feature of the state of emergency. I was tired of hearing him complain about wasting his time guarding car parks and petrol depots in the middle of nowhere and saluting a never-ending series line of petty officials. He wanted to run internationally and there was no chance of doing that under sporting sanctions. He was frustrated. He wanted to get out. I didn't. I'd been out and couldn't wait to get back in. Whenever the subject of Australia was raised, and it was raised more and more frequently, I managed to talk him out of it. When we bought the house on Thirteenth Street, I thought the matter settled.

We'd been living in a cottage attached to Josh's parent's house in the northern suburbs for about a year. Things weren't going well. There was a lot I didn't understand. Their house was a typical South African bungalow in shades of orange and avocado. It came with a bar, shelves of small glass ornaments and a giant television set around which the family was focused. It was comfortable apart from the mystifying rituals and awkward silences. It didn't feel that this was a family who even liked each other. Even by tense South African standards, the house, for its time, was a fortress. I always thought it was ironic that I, who had been attacked, not once but twice, wasn't too concerned about my physical

safety. I didn't feel in danger in South Africa even though I had come face to face with real danger in that small room in London. My fears came from within. The Little's fears scaled walls.

From the two sets of walls, outer and inner, to the two sets of keys and the remote control (not counting dogs and the razor wire strung across the top of the walls), nobody would be able to get in or out of the Little's house in a hurry. This was proved the day a loose streak of lightning hit the security system during a summer storm and rendered it useless for six weeks. The Littles had to send to Australia for spare parts. During this time access into and out of the property had to be achieved manually. An ironic situation given, that according to the Little's a person was more vulnerable out on the streets. I was not used to that kind of security and I was surprised by it. In Hillbrow security comprised of Old Simon with a mop, Mrs Agnew and her blind son, open corridors and glass panelled front doors. I did have a cat but as protection it was useless.

Hillbrow was not a family suburb. Not family in the normal sense of the word but then again, when I lived in Hillbrow I *did* think I was normal. It was after I moved to the northern suburbs that I realised that perhaps I wasn't, if normality is accepted to be the middle-class northern suburbs life. There were other rituals, family rituals, small battles fought in a middle class war zones that I didn't understand.

Why for instance did Josh's sister take me into her bathroom one day shortly after I arrived and show me, using several buckets of hot water, hand signals and a bottle of Nappisan, how to wash her baby's nappies? Did she expect

me to wash them for her? Did she not know that we washed clothes in Hillbrow all the time using a washing machine? Up in Hillbrow we even had tumble dryers. We *had* to have tumble dryers because we didn't have gardens. I was perplexed. Another mystery was the way Mr Little opened the newspaper and stretched out on his Lazy-boy at the exact moment Mrs Little appeared wearing lipstick and carrying her handbag ready to go shopping.

It happened every Saturday. He knew they were going shopping. He knew the shops closed at 1.00pm sharp. He watched Mrs Little prepare herself, put on her lipstick, the going out clothes, prepare a shopping list, spray on some perfume, and reach for her handbag. Even the dogs could feel in the energy of the house that it was Saturday shopping time. But at the exact moment Mrs Little walked into the lounge wearing her beige slacks with a blue scarf wrapped around her throat, Mr Little swung up on the lazy-boy and opened the Saturday newspapers. It puzzled me. It seemed bizarre and cruel. An odd domestic game played out with silences the rules to which I did not understand. Nor did I want to understand them. I didn't see the point.

It was clear from the ritual of the lazy-boy to the ritual of the lemon pudding she served up every Sunday (Mr Little hated lemon pudding) that they despised each other. Yet neither would they leave each other. It was if they would rather poison each other with unspoken hatred until one of them dropped dead through sheer exhaustion. Or was it the assets? Did their couches, their Persian rugs, their Khoi fish and their wine collection mean more to them than happiness? Who knows. But then the pristine white world demanded that we hide behind an

unblemished facade and pretend to be perfect.

This was not the way I thought my life would be. I come with a mother with a strong need for freedom which she had tried, by example, to instil in me. She would never have clung to a couch or a fridge much less a Khoi fish as her relationship headed downstream. I would never capitulate like that, I thought. I would never sit with my hands in my lap and wait. In the meantime, the house on Thirteenth Street came as a great relief.

We'd lived in the house for only a few months, six at the most, on the evening I watched the seasons transition in the sky. My mood of completeness gave way to a chill. I couldn't shake it. A few days later I came down with flu and was bed-ridden for nearly a week. I put my queer feeling of loss down to a virus and standing on the grass with bare feet.

There was a knock at the door. I was deep into a box of tissues and Stephen King's *Misery.* Blueboy had lent it to me. 'I defy you not to be freaked out,' he'd said. I was at the part where Annie Wilkes amputates Paul Sheldon's legs and cauterises his stumps with a blowtorch. The loud bang on the door in the middle of the day caused me to jump. With my heart in my throat I opened the door. It was the estate agent who'd sold us the house. Standing next to him was a woman with a bookish look. 'Congratulations,' he said thrusting a sheaf of papers into my hand. 'I've brought the new owner to have a look at the place if that's alright?' New owner? Sold? Was I asleep? Was this a bad dream brought on by too much Stephen King, Lemsip and Antihistamine?

The same friend who commented that perhaps three children had to die before I could move into another dimension also commented that what she remembered most about me at twenty one, just before the riots began, when we first knew each other, was the easy way I could give away my things and walk into the future. 'You just packed up and left and went to London,' she said via Skype from Louisiana, 'your books, your records, your clothes all given away without a backward look. But the one thing you have never been able to do well Grace, is throw away people. Even old boyfriends, you hung on long after their use by date.' She remembered my hands. 'You had old woman's hands,' she said 'thousands of lines criss - crossing as if you'd lived several lifetimes.'

There it is. A clinger with old woman hands. I put on a good front but I'm one of those Scottish terrier types who stand guard over the graves of their long-dead masters. The people they give their hearts to. The film *Greyfrairs Bobby* was about this. Blueboy wept for weeks. While loyalty might be appealing in animals, somehow this trait is not considered endearing in humans. It might even be thought of as a fault. Books and records don't haunt. People and places do. Perhaps that's why Josh sold the house on Thirteenth Street without asking or telling me. He knew I would never let go of it.

He'd been called up for a three-month army camp and Australia had raised its head again. When the house was gone I realised that arguments would be fruitless. Secretly I didn't think that Josh would last long in the outside world. Secretly *he* thought I would *get over it.* But then he didn't know me at twenty one. He didn't know my friend in Louisiana who would have told him that Grace is

really bad at letting go of people. What filled the gap of my first house was not another house, or even another country. It was a quietly devouring, suffocating, rage.

We moved back to the Littles. Back to the war behind the double walls, the electronic gate, the barbed wire and meals served on trays in front of the television. Back to watching Mr Little read the newspapers on the green lazy-boy with his toes splayed out like sausages; back to lemon pudding Sundays and Annie Wilkes searing the stumps with blowtorches.

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Tuesday - 8km speed session

I decide not to run today. Traditionally Tuesdays were hard sessions, speedwork or time-trials, but not anymore. My knees, my Achilles, my mind can't cope with the pounding and focus that speedwork demands. Besides my legs are still tired from Sunday's long run. In three days I've covered around 40kms. The last thing I want is an injury so close to a marathon. I could have hired a car, or walked down to the bus terminus and taken busses to where I wanted to go but I prefer to walk. I've never been comfortable driving, particularly in places where I don't know where I am going. There might be a bridge I am not expecting and the mouth, the choking feeling, the symptoms from London which I know now were anxiety attacks brought on by trauma, will be back. I'd freeze at the wheel and be a danger to everyone. Gephyrophobia, that's what they call a phobia of bridges.

Learning to drive, like learning to walk, is so fundamental to modern life that few people stop to consider the logistics. First you need a car. Second you need a willing teacher. Third you need money to pay a driving school if you don't have a car or a willing teacher. Fourth, when you are scrimping to pay the rent it's unlikely you will be able to afford either driving lessons or a car in the foreseeable future so why bother? For a long time those excuses suited me but in truth I didn't *want* to learn to drive. I was afraid of driving – it was that simple. I couldn't explain it and it perplexed everyone. It terrified me. That is why I was married before I could drive. It was also how I met Barbara.

In the early stages of my driving lessons, Josh drove me to work. I worked in an office with four other women. There was Sally, the team leader. She was thin, blonde and cross-eyed. She spoke about her boyfriend Sylvio and their townhouse incessantly. It was difficult to know which eye to look at when she did

this so I covered my bases by looking in the general direction of both of them.

There was Lynette, a big brunette with an armload of bangles who drove a Golf GTI, Angie was a small dark Portuguese girl with sweet features and in the corner, an African woman about my age with long red fingernails which she said were completely natural. 'Don't worry about her,' Sally took me aside and gave me the lowdown, 'she's forever bursting into tears about something. You can't say anything to her.' It was unusual to find a black woman holding down a white collar job in an office. Usually they were tea ladies. I didn't particularly worry about Barbara. I skirted around her trying not to make her cry but she captured my attention.

When I could drive on my own Josh let me drive his Cressida. He had been given a company car and the Cressida, which he'd inherited from his father, was cumbersome. To avoid traffic I left home at 6.00 am to drive to work. I ate breakfast in the office while I waited for everyone else to arrive. One typical winter's morning, clear, cold and frosty, I arrived at work in time to witness Barbara step out of a gold Mercedes Benz which was driven by a black man. *A gold Mercedes*. Normally Barbara was at work before me, no matter how early I arrived. I'd never thought about how she got there. Two things surprised me in my already surprised knowledge of Barbara. The first was that the gold Mercedes was driven by a black man. A black man in a Mercedes. Was he her husband? What did he do? I had never thought of her as being married even though I knew she had a daughter. The second surprise was her early appearance at the office every day, without fail, regardless of what was going on in the townships. The

turbulence often made it difficult and dangerous for people to get to work. When I say dangerous, I mean the simple act of going to work could result in death. Even Elsie the tea lady had become erratic in her appearances, succumbing to the demands of the comrades to stay away or simply being unable to find a train or a bus to get here there. Ordinary people had their lives and livelihoods miserably crushed between competing versions of nationalism. Yet Barbara never missed a single day. Later she would reveal to me that she rose at 3.00am and cleaned her house before coming to work. I thought of my own house which could be loosely described as a being in state of perpetual slovenliness.

Our view of township life was skewed by what we read in the newspapers; soldiers rampaging through shacks setting off clouds of teargas; youths throwing stones back. In truth I had no idea what people did or how they lived on a daily basis. It was another world. A dusty place of smoke, stones and stray chickens who wandered into the streets looking to start riots. But that was in the sixties when we skirted Soweto in my grandmother's mini on the road to Uncle David's. This was the eighties. There was a full-blown war going on. There were tanks, soldiers, live bullets and people bound at the wrists, set alight, and burnt to death with petrol soaked tyres hanging from their necks.

The first few mornings Barbara and I sat in awkward silence sizing each other up. What were we to say to each other? It never occurred to me that I might be a mystery to her too. Why, for example, was I at the office at 6:00am with two hard boiled eggs and cling wrapped toast when I could be sleeping in a warm bed in one of the lush suburbs? Why didn't I have my own car? Didn't *all*

white people arrive out of the womb along with a car and house? One morning, as I unpeeled my hard boiled eggs Barbara looked up from her end of the office and said 'hoo my lovey, I like your style.' I confessed that I had secretly been admiring the length of her finger nails for quite some time since my own were bitten to the quick. She beamed with great pride. 'They are natural,' she said unfurling her fingers as if rolling out a red carpet. In fact Barbara's fingernails determined her tremulous position in the office social hierarchy. She clung to the bottom of the ladder with them. I was not the only one who admired them and she kept them well polished and stroked them like pets.

My own position in the office social system was tremulous too. I was not one of the girls. My running gave me a thin edge particularly around the time of the corporate relays but that was about it. I was not popular. Barbara was less popular. In the time we worked together we were able to give each other a form of freedom, the gift of motion that made us friends

Over the next few months of inching to work on a learner's licence along the Johannesburg freeways at dawn with a bag of cold boiled eggs on the seat beside me, I managed to fail my driver's licence three times. Things reached a head. On my third attempt I was so nervous I froze at the wheel and couldn't drive out of the car park. The traffic examiner, who came equipped with a clipboard and neat Hitler moustache, ordered me out of the car. 'Come back when you're calm,' he said. On the morning of the fourth test Josh dropped me off at work and, impatient at what was turning into a saga, yelled, 'This is your last chance Grace. If you fail this test, we're *through*.' He drove off in the car I was supposed to use

for the test. This was just one of the logistics.

A feature of the driving test was that a learner had to be accompanied to the testing grounds by a licensed driver. No driver, no test. Josh had just driven off in a huff. This left me without a driver too. Another logistic. The test was booked for my lunch hour. I relayed this information to Barbara through tears and cold eggs. 'Hai, my lovey but you are such a cry baby – I will take you to your test.' I was in shock. *She* could drive*?* Angie offered up her new second-hand red Charade which she'd been given that morning for her twenty-first birthday. I had a driver. I had a vehicle. It was a team effort. I'd made a plan no thanks to Josh. Now all I had to do was get through the test.

Lunch time came all too soon. I was sick with apprehension. Barbara drove me up to the Sandton Traffic Department in Angie's Charade. We entered the squat brown government building which resembles squat brown government buildings the world over. We sat side by side alone with our thoughts waiting for my examiner to arrive. Barbara stroked her long red nails and stared into space. I took advantage of this changed situation, of being out of the office, to ask about the gold Mercedes and the man who drove it. No, he was not her husband she said. He was her boyfriend. The fact that Jomo had a wife didn't seem to bother her.

'Hai!' she shrugged, 'blek men they are all the same, we are used to it.'

'What do you do,' I asked 'with the soldiers in the townships?' 'Are you afraid?' 'Do they knock on your door?' I had images of members of the South African defence force with dogs kicking their way into her room in the middle of the

night. They could have been Blueboy or Josh under conscription.

'I offer them tea,' she said 'if they pass my house.' She shrugged. 'They are just doing their jobs.'

I felt relieved to think that if Blueboy should pass her house he might be offered something to drink. She didn't tell me that day she was widow. Or that her husband, a teacher, had been murdered in the townships. 'By bleks,' she wrote several years later when I was living at the villa near the showgrounds. 'It was the comrades.'

'You can't say anything to Barbara, she's always in tears.'

I passed my driving test.

If Barbara's gift to me arrived in a red Charade, my gift to Barbara was the pair of old red Addidas running shorts Blueboy gave me when I returned from London. All it had taken was one look for him to take me shopping.

'There's noone poorer than a soldier on army pay but I'm buying you these shorts because you need to do something. Take them and run.'

When the shorts became too big for me, I offered them to Barbara.

It was the time of the Corporate Relays. Sally was picking the team. The previous year I'd been overlooked because I was 'too slow.' Now I was the fastest runner in the group and they had to choose me. After the team had been chosen the maps of the course were handed out.

'What about Barbara?' Even Barbara looked shocked.

Barbara?

'Yes Barbara. What leg is she on?'

Sensing a situation Barbara said she couldn't, she wouldn't, she didn't want to.

'You don't have to run, you can walk.'

She backed into her corner, fiddled with some papers, shook her head.

Next day I gave her the red running shorts. 'In case you change your mind. We can go up to the club in our lunch-hour and I will train with you.'

When I gave her the shorts I hadn't thought it through. I hadn't thought about the logistics involved. Where would she train in the middle of a war zone? How would she dodge the comrades who terrorised the townships? How would she dodge the army who terrorised the townships? The bullets, lead and rubber, the tear gas, the dogs, still clean her house and get to work by 6.30am. I hadn't thought it through. But then people rarely do.

I think I will head back up to Belconnen Way in the direction I went yesterday. Last night, when I studied the map, I was surprised to discover that the Jamieson Medical Centre is less than 3kms away. The small complex, presumably built in the seventies mimics all the other suburban shopping centres. Everything is dark brown face brick and ugly. Ugliness seems to have been a feature of the seventies. There is a Liquorland, a TAB, a large Salvation Army depot, a video store and Coles. The human traffic into all four is steady. Dr Muthsamy's rooms are tucked away in Wiserne Street next to the Dumpling Duck Inn and to reach them I need to walk behind the Salvos past walls covered in graffiti. I notice barbed wire on the walls around the back of these buildings for the first time.

I had telephoned ahead and asked if my medical records could be made

available. The receptionist informed that they must have been destroyed in a batch last year. 'After all these years it's a wonder we kept them that long, as you can imagine, we don't have enough room to store medical records indefinitely,' she said. Oddly, on hearing this I'd felt as if some important part of me had been erased from this place even though this place and what happened here, despite my best efforts, has never been erased from me. I've come with the intention of re-acquainting myself with the area and introducing myself at the medical centre. Perhaps have a moment with Dr Muthsamy. I want to ask the type of questions I didn't know to ask at the time, when I was too stunned. I want to know what happened to the body. What happened to the ashes?

I don't give a thought to the fact that while Dr Muthsamy has lived in my mind for twenty years chances are he will have no memory of me. I walk up the lane towards the Dumpling Duck Inn where the glazed ducks still hang upside down in the window. The windows of the medical centre are painted white blocking the view inside. I falter. Why do I expect to be received like a long lost relative? I was just a number on a yellow card, stashed away in a filing cabinet. A number, that's all. I can't bring myself to go in. This is stupid. I turn around and head back in the direction of the motel.

Yesterday after the trip to the hospital I arrived back at the motel too early. The cleaners were still in my room and to kill time I had to walk to the Mall for coffee and maybe take some notes. I realise the cleaners might still be busy and instead decide to walk over to Nettlefold Street to see if I can find the Asian grocery store where I bought my lemon grass. It was Asian cookery classes I took with Mrs Li at the TAFE in Hawker during a phase of good intentions when I did

not know that a stuffed chilli chicken wing would lead me to Dr Muthsamy. I think about Mrs Li and wonder if she still lives in Canberra or if her husband went back to Vietnam as he threatened. 'He no like,' she said, 'too cole, too unfrienly.'

I'd met Mrs Li in a car park. I'd gone down to the local shops to buy bread and milk. As I turned my head to reverse the car out of the parking lot I saw a tiny Vietnamese woman gesturing to me. I rolled down the window. 'Are you okay?' She smiled that she was. I smiled back. I rolled up the window. I turned to back out again but something stopped me. I rolled down the window again 'Are you sure you're okay?' She looked hesitant and then she pointed to the dog.

An Alsatian's head appeared at the open window of a nearby Ute. It was standing on the seat, huge, like a lion. The window was rolled down and a sticky pink tongue lolled out and dripped onto the street. I understood. I could see that each time Mrs Li made a move to her car, which was parked next to the Ute, the dog lunged at the window. It's massive furry head terrified her. Me too. I wondered how long she would have to stand there before the owner returned. I climbed out, walked over to the dog and patted it while she darted into her car and locked the door behind her. She nodded and smiled as she drove off.

I met her again a few days later in cookery class. I'd decided to throw myself into different projects in the hope of feeling some kind of connection to the city, the community and even the world. Josh couldn't be happier. From his perspective I was a lousy cook. On this I had to agree with him.

I made the decision that in Canberra life couldn't be the same as it was before. It was I who needed to change. I needed to shake the dust or the thick

mud of Africa from my shoes and *move on*. I would turn over a new leaf. A good start would be learning how to cook. Josh had become particularly partial to Asian cooking since arriving in Australia. To be a good wife I would start with chopped chilli and noodles. I would start with Laksa.

Mrs Li arrived in an apron. It was one of those old fashioned full aprons that looped around the neck and tied at the waist with frills around it. She recognised me instantly and I, in turn, was delighted to bump into someone I had met before. In the kitchen Mrs Li was a different person to the timid lady I'd met in the car park. It was I who was out of my element. On the first night she taught us how to turn a radish into a rose; how to cut carrots in the shape of daisies and how to make celery curls. 'You see Gwace,' she said carefully cutting the radish diagonally and dipping it into a bowl of ice cold water, 'now you have frower.' There seemed to be a life lesson in this but I couldn't quite think of it.

Over the coming weeks we learnt to julienne wedgies and make cold Vietnamese sarad. One night, when we were seated at the large kitchen table from where we sampled our dishes, someone held up a carrot and some beans and said, 'Excuse me Mrs Li, what do you call these? ' And she said 'hey you naughty boy.'

Each week Mrs Li handed out a typed misspelt list of ingredients for the next Thursday's class. We were expected to shop for the ingredients independently and arrive for class prepared. This was how I found the Capital Asian Grocery store on Purdie Street, just off Nettlefold. Today I find it along with a new store, the Apna India Bazaar, which sells home made curries and a good selection of

videos from Bollywood. In a sense, finding the Capital Asian Grocery store, Calvary hospital, Lake Ginninderra and the mall is a return of sorts. A reclamation of my own history which in some way connects me by blood to the continent and this is comforting.

One evening after cooking class we sat down at the long stainless steel table to sample our cooking. Peter, my cooking partner, opened another bottle. We'd started on one bottle for the meal, but soon had progressed to one for the cooking and two for the meal. In this way we drank our way through South East Asia. That night I blanched when the stuffed chilli chicken wing was placed in front of me. The chicken wing had troubled me all evening. The flesh felt like a flaccid arm to the touch, loose and cold. I could see its goosebumps. I felt as if it were my own skin but numbed. I became fixated with pulling at its soft flabby flesh, drawn in by a horrible sense of voyeurism, a fixation that this could be my arm, if I were a corpse. I began to feel quite emotional about stuffing breadcrumbs, coriander and chillies into it. I wanted to be sick. Later when the wing, basted, roasted and sewn together with big black tacking stitches appeared on a plate in front of me, I felt my stomach rise. Mrs Li looked at me quizzically. Later she nudged me and whispered, 'You go see to -Doctor, you pwegnant.'

Hospitals. Strange to think I would spend so much time passing through them. I was an athlete. Ill health never entered my mind. What had happened in London was pushed down and naively written off as an aberration brought about by too much wine, too many cigarettes and a diet which consisted of Wonder White cheese sandwiches. The unfettered life of a twenty one year old taken to its

edge. Things were different now. I took care of myself. Things changed again when I met Dr Muthsamy a petite man of Indian descent who loved to talk cricket. He'd come recommended by my boss at the telephone company where I worked as a temporary secretary.

Dr Muthsamy was a great believer in natural therapies and further endeared himself to me with his stellar appreciation of my fitness and my marathon running abilities. I was at my peak, slim and fast – with a resting pulse a few beats under 40. When he confirmed the pregnancy he snapped the blood pressure band from my arm and said, 'We are going to have no problems with you Grace, you're so fit and healthy it's sickening!' He was right. I did not experience morning sickness. There was nothing except a thickening waist to suggest I was pregnant. I ran every morning through the cold empty streets. Winter had set in and getting up was a chore but I forced myself.. At 5.00am I would step outside and disappear down an icy black tunnel penetrated by the small orbs of street light and the dull thud of my feet.

In the fifth month of my pregnancy Canberra experienced its fifty fifth consecutive morning of frost. It was announced on the radio. I heard it as I drove to an unscheduled appointment with Dr Muthsamy. I was to tell Dr Muthsamy that something was out of the ordinary. I had started to bleed. He looked at me intently, took my blood pressure, asked if I was in pain.

'No, none.'

'Is the bleeding heavy?'

'No, just a few spots.'

He said I shouldn't worry needlessly. Thirty percent of pregnancies, he said, exhibit mild spotting and go on a happy conclusion. He suggested I take time off for bed rest. Since I was not in any pain, I took a degree of comfort in this explanation and looked forward to a week of staying indoors with books. I stopped running. I followed medical instruction.

Four days later things were worse. Dr Muthsamy scheduled the first of two ultrasounds, neither of which found any abnormalities. But by the time I arrived at the second I knew something was wrong. I was feeling perfectly fine that morning and intended driving myself to the radiologist after I dropped Josh off at work. I returned home to change out of my tracksuit, make myself some porridge and consume the two litres of water required for the ultrasound reading. The water was supposed to help the radiologist obtain a clear reading of the foetus and to detect any potential problems but having it slosh around for hours was uncomfortable. I pottered about the house and made my way to the bedroom to put on my shoes and pick up the car keys.

Pain hit without warning. One minute I walked; the next I crawled. I inched my way across the floor towards the telephone sitting on the nightstand. My legs were numb. I was aware of intense pressure. My stomach felt like an overstuffed drum groaning with live eels that slithered painfully over each other and threatened to burst out at any minute. Before this, if someone were to tell me that they *writhed in pain*, I wouldn't have believed them. We are immune to the pain of others because we can't feel it ourselves. When women gasp and grab their abdomens in Hollywood movies before falling to the ground in agonised fits,

I would roll my eyes. On the carpet, one frosty morning in Canberra, I discovered that rolling one's eyes doesn't come close to describing it.

I remember a trolley, a thin blanket and freezing feet. I had, after all, just got out of bed and the temperature that day was 4.8 at its maximum. I remember a cubicle of white curtains. I don't recall a ticketing system, blue chairs bolted to the floor or a television. I remember a tall Japanese doctor with a smooth face and a white coat. Mine was clenched. I turned to the wall. Voices buzzed over my body. There was a pair of warm hands holding a syringe and a voice that said 'this might hurt a bit.' I almost laughed. My buttock was swabbed with something cold, there was a prick and nothing else mattered anymore. Somebody tucked a blanket around my feet. The rest of me was borne off the table and out of the room on the soft blurred wings of Pethidine.

Someone once asked me what Josh was doing through all this. What was he feeling? What was he thinking? It was after all, his child too. Surely he would have felt helpless? He appears, said my friend, as if he were a cardboard cut-out in your life. Perhaps he was, I can't recall. All I remember is the drive up Belconnen Way to Calvary hospital curled up on the back seat, clutching a plastic bag in case I vomited.

'What did you think?' I asked him some time later. 'What did you imagine was going on?'

'I thought you wanted attention,' he said. 'I thought you were bluffing.'

Next morning the room was filled with a soft shell pink glow. An almost optimistic light filtered through the curtains in the way sunshine streams through

a window after a storm. A tea trolley clattered along the corridors. Buoyant voices floated from the nurses' station signalling a change of shift. Still under the influence of a cocktail of drugs I felt scooped out and clean, as if cobwebs, dust and all the dark matter which seemed to inhabit my body had been hosed away. A cleaner came into the room and flung back the curtains. 'Boy or girl?' She was cheerful. 'Neither.' I was non-committal. She quickly dusted herself away.

Josh arrived at the hospital after breakfast. I was wheeled to the car although I could walk. We didn't pass through the garden of quiet contemplation nor did I see any ornamental cabbages. He placed my bag on the back seat and I climbed in the front. I stared out of the window at a clear blue sky. 'We can always try again,' he said finally. I didn't answer.

Logistics: There are always logistics: learning how to drive, training in the townships during a revolution, turning a radish into a frower, running at speed, having a baby at the other end of the world.

The last time I saw Dr Muthsamy was to collect results of the post mortem. I barely remember what he said to me. I do remember *Placenta Abruptio*.

'It's the separation of the placenta from the uterus wall.' His face appeared corrugated under the lights. 'Blood drips unnoticed behind the uterus tearing the membrane by degrees. That's why the ultra-sound didn't pick it up,' he said or something to that effect. The logistics were out of alignment.

Funny the co-ordinates you can find for a city. The sort of scientific details we have at our fingertips. For example Canberra sits at 35^0 17; 0' South and 149^0 13' 0 East. I didn't know that. The mean sea level pressure for the 10 July 1993

was 1023.9. The maximum standard speed was 11.1. The minimum temperature was 2.4. Visibility zero. I never did learn how to make Laksa.

Look! Over there ... see how the light pools through the ghost gums? Wisps of memory curl through the trunks. It's Josh. He disappears into the bush with Bronwyn by his side. Cool, fast, thin, blonde Bronwyn, his new protégée. Plan B. Coaching. They skim through the trees like butterflies. Their blonde heads are halos in the light. So taut, so perfectly formed, they barely break a sweat. There is hardly any dust. Josh shouts to someone over his shoulder. 'Hurry up Grace! What's the matter with you, stop slacking off. Stay with the pace.' Grace has fallen behind. She is out of breath; struggling with extra weight. Struggling with something. Bronwyn keeps running, skimming, flying, weaving through the trees like smoke. She never looks back.

Wednesday -mid week long run - 15-

18kms

'Where are you?'

'I told you. I'm in Canberra.' (Is this what Judith meant by 'graceless and difficult?')

'When are you coming back?'

'Friday.'

Simon calls to tell me about a sweet deal. Malaysian Airways are offering Business Class flights to anywhere in the world for a mere $4,000. I smile to myself. It's as if he has taken it upon himself to pop into my life at unexpected moments as a form of comic relief and say something completely innocuous. Then he disappears again. For days, weeks, months. I don't know how Judith had the energy for him.

'$4,000! Can you believe it! You can't even get to Sydney first class for that. It's incredible!'

'Well it cost me $253 one way to get to Canberra plus a booking fee.'

'We live in different worlds, Grace.'

'Clearly.'

'The only catch with Malaysian is that you have to pay the full amount upfront.'

'Well you can afford it but what if they go under? They're not offering a sweet deal because they like you.'

'I *know* I can *afford* it, I just I can't decide *where* I want to go. Or even *if* I want to go, but it seems like such a good deal I *have* to go. I've been invited to stay with an

old friend in Brazil. Remember L.S.? Well now he's the leader for the opposition party in Johannesburg. He's doing quite well I believe. We went to Woodmead together you know, the private...'

'school, I know.'

'I think I *will* go to Brazil. Why not? Take in some soccer. I've not been well.'

He's not been well. Not being well for Simon means only one thing. Someone is nursing a broken heart at the Burswood. Now he's in search of afterglow soccer and a new pair of pyjamas. I vaguely wonder what L.S., the leader of the opposition party in Johannesburg, is doing entertaining ex-pats in Brazil when his country is going down the tubes. When there is no money to educate school children and everyone is berating themselves about the level of corruption, crime and unemployment. Surely he has better things to do than wear Havaianas in Brazil.

I vaguely wonder if Malaysian Airlines offers a line in silk pyjamas.

When he comes back from Brazil, Simon will visit his psychiatrist over the road from my house on Walcott Street. Together they will search to find an explanation for his behaviour. After all he's paying good money for answers. Between them they will try to deconstruct his over-privileged upper class South African childhood for the fifteenth year in succession to find the root cause of his depression.

I vaguely wonder if they ever discuss the day his mother was shot in a car park.

Bruce Stadium sits adjacent to the Australian Institute of Sport at the end of Battye Street. Behind the stadium, in the bush known as Bruce Ridge Nature Reserve, there is a web of nature trails stretching for miles. It's entirely possible to run one trail for years and not know that others exist. It's entirely possible to know that the ridge, which ends at O'Connor, is buttressed on the other side by Belconnen Way and Haydon Drive, and still not get a clear idea of what the reserve looks like on a map. How close things really are. To not know that one bush away could lie a different path entirely. I know this because last night at the motel I had the idea to ask the receptionist behind the white marble counter to download a map from the Internet. For the first time the topography of the nature trail I ran for years was revealed to me. Seen in this way, I realise that the bush and the fetid lake I found the day I visited the hospital is actually the lip of the reserve I used to run through almost on a daily basis. I realise, with shock, that the stadium and Calvary hospital are only a couple of hundred metres from the other. How did I not know this?

In my mind the two were separated by vast distances. I'm stunned to think that the two worlds so entirely different almost backed onto each other and in all the time I stumbled about in the bush I never made the connection. What does it mean? Was my mind so raw from immigration that I never saw what was right in front of me? The topography of the map breaks things down into contour lines offering an unemotional view of the area. From this perspective, something missing seems to slide into place but I am not sure what. I feel a vague unease and wish I could read tea leaves because this might help me get a better sense of the patterns to the area. The topography, in a way, looks like the palm of a hand, an old woman's hand criss-crossed by heart lines, love lines, life lines, children.....

When I was at school, boys used to recoil at the sight of my hands. 'Ewe Grace, what's wrong with your hands! They look like an old lady's.' I became self-conscious about them and always tried to hide them. I have grown into my hands. Like a Shar Pei the wrinkles seem to fit but I still haven't learnt how to decipher their topography.

What disturbs me about the three years I spent in Canberra, the three years which sank like stone into my sub-conscious almost vanishing entirely hence this trip, is that it was played out in A4 size to the north of Black Mountain. Somehow I always thought my life was more momentous than that.

During this time, the time of running through the bush and shuttling between the stadium and the hospital and the *Pravia Abruptio*, my grandmother died. Her degeneration with Alzheimers took years. Before we left South Africa I would visit her at The Happy Autumn Nursing Home on a Sunday after my long run and take with me a few bunches of flowers purchased from the Indian flower seller outside the Westdene cemetery. The Happy Autumn Nursing Home was probably the most ill-named aged care centre I have ever come across. Apart from the smell of bleach and decay it was filled with the stench of creeping poverty. There was nothing crisp or golden about my grandmother's autumn. The one consolation was that her illness prevented her from truly understanding her miserable circumstances. She'd been forced to move out of Hillbrow when her pension failed to keep up with the sharp rise in rents. Salivating white slumlords from the northern suburbs who owned the apartment blocks in the new world of grey pluralism, fleeced new black tenants who poured into the city desperate for accommodation at the expense of old white ones. Like Mrs Agnew and her son, people like my grandmother were forced to downsize from one-bedroom flats

into cupboards when they could find one. After the cupboard there was a shared room with another old lady forced to downsize and neither of them enjoyed the experience. After that, a small single room at The Happy Autumn Nursing Home where I cut pictures out of *Home and Garden* magazines to paste on the walls to brighten the place up. Her cracked tea pots and treasured Royal Dalton ornaments of languid little boys casting their fishing rods from porcelain rocks were set out where there was available space. All the while my grandmother looked on in stupefied silence and played with the small silver ring inlaid with a green stone I'd once given her. Both had almost worn through to the bones. This was the place Josh hated to come because it depressed him. It also depressed my grandmother. Finally it was over but not before, Blueboy wrote, my grandmother, in a fleeting moment of lucidity picked up a heavy green cut vase from the reception area and hurled it through the lead-light front window.

I went home for the funeral. After thirty six hours circumnavigating sanctions and Asia I walked out into my familiar world of trouble, loudspeakers blaring a multiplicity of languages and black baggage handlers dressed in familiar brown overalls. Here at least, time stood still.

Johannesburg people think themselves superior to the rest of South Africa. We have the gold; the Jacaranda trees; the rare thin air, the noisy afternoon thunderstorms that sweep in from behind the Magaliesburg. I could go on and on. Collectively, Cape Town and Durban have mountains, a Rhodes statue and a few ports in need of repair – why bother? We Joburgers point to our cockroaches as evidence that in Johannesburg, everything is bigger, faster and ten times more terrifying than anywhere else in the country. We call our cockroaches Parktown prawns. Parktown is the suburb close to the Zoo and known for its Victorian and

Edwardian architecture. It emerged lush and aloof when Johannesburg was dusty mining town.

Noone knows what the cockroaches are named after the suburb. It's been assumed that it's because that's where they were first sighted during the 1960s. Perhaps like the rest of us, the cockroach prefers to live in the cool, well-tended gardens of the opulent. In truth, Parktown prawns can also be found further afield, Orange Grove for instance, and even more recently there have been occasional sightings in Soweto. I have never seen one in Hillbrow.

The 'prawn' part of the name comes from what they look like. They're brownish orange with ten foot long flaying feelers and eyes on stalks. You never want to find one in your salad or open your eyes to it standing on your pillow. Parktown prawns have a Latin name too: *Libanasidus vittatus.* Their natural predators are listed as Hadeda Ibis, Fiscal Shrike and the Helmeted Guinea Fowl. Hadeda Ibis sound as if they know the joke's on us. When they feed, usually in the early morning or late afternoon, their 'ha ha ha ha's ring out across the treetops of old Johannesburg. It is the sound that lets me know I am home.

'It was weird,' Blueboy said. 'When I took Gran out for drives to Emmerentia she would keep talking to you as if you were sitting on the back seat with us. It was something, I suppose, her belief that you were here with her. That she actually *saw* you, she'd completely forgotten or blocked out of her mind the fact that you'd left. You know what Gran was like. She was always *seeing* things from the corners of her eyes or smelling blood in other people's pantries.' He paused. 'On those afternoons,' he said 'we sipped our grapetisers and I'd hold her hand as we sat and watched the lake.' I pictured them sitting with their juices staring at

the water and I would be filled with rage all over again, that I had missed her last days. And for what? To provide a future for children we didn't yet have.

I stared out of the window as we headed towards the city. I was eager to catch a first glimpse of the skyline of my birth. Egoli. The city of gold.

The city was dirty and felt tense. Post-revolution Johannesburg looked like a giant after-party with the guests all walking around with hangovers. There was litter everywhere. It scuttled across freeways and choked chicken wire fences all the way to the airport. Pick n Pay and Ok Bazaars shopping bags floated about like balloons. I was shocked. Was this an expression of freedom or had it always looked like this? After the pristine, almost sterile world of Canberra, Johannesburg appeared as the living embodiment of chaos.

'What a mess, it looks like a Third World country.'

Blueboy was irritated, 'It always WAS a Third World country, or have you forgotten?'

Along with my luggage, is the added burden of the past, a post colonial narrative worn like a suicide vest. I know its exact weight, its capacity for self harm which kicks in around about the time we drive past the cartoonish picture of a lion; the Simba Chip sign which has served as a lighthouse for travellers returning home, tired of the gloss of the First World, for decades. One roar from Simba is all you need to be fully satisfied. Salt and Vinegar?

Then there are the great moss covered stone walls of lower Houghton and the arboreal Jacaranda trees of the northern suburbs. Here, memories like sediment settle into a thick mud of emotions. At these times I know with a sinking feeling

that I will never truly be able to leave behind the great stone walls that prop up old Johannesburg. Nor will I ever be able to eradicate from my nostrils the cool damp smell of dust settled over centuries and kept moist by the ancient trees growing into the stonework. The trees at least have adapted to intrusion and woven their way in my memories. Each new trip opens old wounds but I would not have it any other way. A magnet draws me back to this place of storms and ashes.

Blueboy tells me he's haunted by dreams. In these dreams my grandmother walks into his bedroom and stands over him. She hisses 'you murdered me.' Her eyes are empty sockets. He jerks awake drenched. He hasn't slept for days.

In a way Blueboy did kill my grandmother. It was he who gave the instruction to turn off the life support after she fell down the stairs and cracked her skull. Her pension didn't cover supervision. Noone knew for how long she had lain there with blood oozing out of a skull smashed like fine bone china. The prognosis was grim. He had to choose between operating to save the life of an eighty-four year old with Alzheimer's who would, if the surgery was successful, remain, at best, a vegetable or keep alive the person he had always considered a mother. He didn't want my grandmother to spend anymore time staring at the wall of The Happy Autumn Nursing Home dining room. He reclaimed her dignity.

The funeral was held at the Braamfontein crematorium. The same place I'd met Petrus years before. The same place Aunt Cathy sailed into the chapel searching for fresh flowers. In this at least, there was continuity; the continual returning to the Braamfontein crematorium to witness the last of my family's history. Like a tired family album we cracked and flaked over time. My

grandmother's funeral was sparser than her life. If there was anything emptier than her bare room at the nursing home, it was the chapel where a life is supposed to be celebrated with stories. There were two paid mourners supplied by the funeral home, myself, Blueboy and Johanna. In front of us there was a small, simple wooden coffin the size of a child or large doll covered with a mound of yellow chrysanthemums.

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;

Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;

Change and decay in all around I see;

O Thou who changest not, abide with me

There were no friends. No heavy- footed organist. The music was piped.

Afterwards we drove back to Johanna's house in Hurst Hill. It was a shabby little place in a suburb populated by students. It had Oregon pine floorboards, two tiny rooms and a lounge which Johanna, in an uncharacteristic noir moment, had painted black. The wall, over time, was pockmarked with white chips where posters had been stuck on and then pulled off. I always itched to paint over it and re-order the disorderly room. Even so, we'd all spent so much time hunched over wine and a small black and white television watching sport that the room became an ugly family monument of sorts. On the day of the funeral we'd sat in silence eating scones and cream and drinking coffee. We'd decided on scones and cream as a nice touch; a tribute to my grandmother who believed the problems of the world could be solved with a pot of Rooibos tea and scones fresh from the oven. There didn't seem much to say. It was as if the core piece of family furniture had

been removed from the room. The outline marked by dust and furballs that would soon be swept away.

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Blueboy had gathered my grandmother's possessions from The Happy Autumn Nursing Home and stuffed them into a black garbage bag. She'd had no suitcase. The black garbage bag was placed on her old rocking chair in a corner of the lounge. The seat, re-covered many times when she could still see clearly enough to thread the needle of her sewing machine, was now thread-bare vomit coloured corduroy. It had become the scratching post for her moth-eaten Siamese cat Ziggy whose death, several years before, signalled the beginning of Gran's own decline. Blueboy went over to the bag and began fishing around inside of it, pulling out her collection of nighties with safety pins attached to the collars and grey home-made trousers. I noted she still had the blue polka dot dressing gown.

He wanted to give me something; a momento. There'd been no will since she'd had nothing to leave. 'Where did she get this?' he said pulling a small dirty white teddy bear from the bag. It was the kind of teddy bear you see in florist shops on Valentine's Day with white fake fur holding a heart of red satin.

'She went everywhere with that bear,' he said. 'She even propped it up in the dining-room when she ate.'

'I gave it to her.'

He looked surprised. 'You!' 'When?'

'The day I left for Australia. We drove up for a visit to say goodbye. I couldn't say goodbye. I left her standing outside at the fountain. I said I was going to Durban for two weeks. After that I would be back to visit. I was hoping with her Alzheimer's she'd forget. She seemed pleased when I said I would see her soon. I remember because she looked up at me and the sun pooled into her eyes. I gave it to her and lied.'

Logistics: Being caught between old family and new family. There were competing loyalties. Who to choose? Why do we have to choose?

We were sitting at a small Italian restaurant in Yeoville. It was my last night in South Africa and Blueboy and Johanna took me to dinner. What was new was that instead of giving loose change to strange men who loomed out of the night offering to look after your car, guards were now required to be registered and wear instantly recognisable fluorescent orange vests. It was, and still is, the beggar's version of self-employment which always made the meal about to be enjoyed turn in my stomach before I could eat it. Guilt. I felt like a member of the court of Versailles sailing off to dine while throwing scraps over my shoulder to whoever fought hard enough to catch them.

I couldn't bear the weight of the knowledge of what this beaming enthusiasm for self-employment *really* meant. The logistics of standing in the dark night after night, as frightening for them as it was for us, in all weathers, waiting for the loose change from diners who'd finished their dinners. That's what I mean about cauterisation of the human heart. Everywhere you look there is something to break it and also, everywhere you look there will be something to inspire it.

Perhaps, in a sense there *is* a kind of bravery required to live in Johannesburg, the bravery to look away and continue with the day.

What was significant about the orange vests was that a change had occurred, a re-ordering of the familiar and I hadn't been there to witness it. There would be more changes and soon there would be nothing I would recognise. I sensed the blue lights fading and slipping away. The place that I knew was turning into something I didn't know; a new generation was emerging who would always see me as a visitor. This was unbearable.

Johanna had just finished her story about an armed robbery at a nearby restaurant where the manager and staff were all locked in the fridge after the diners had been fleeced at gunpoint. It was an everyday story for Johannesburg. Nothing special.

'I'm not going back.'

'What do you mean you're not going back?'

Blueboy sat poised with a fork close to his lips and squinted across the table. 'You can't leave Josh by fax. That's cowardly. You have to go back. You have to face him and tell him the truth. That you don't want to live there, that things are not working out. Besides noone knows which way it's going to go here. There could still be big shit. Better to stay there until after the election, see if things settle down.'

All I wanted was for someone to say 'come home Grace, be at peace.' No one did . They were all just focussed on staying alive. I came back to Australia to be brave; to be safe, to wait and see if things settled down. Back to Canberra for my

last summer of track; back to the summer of Bronwyn. I was filled with drunken enthusiasm.

Most of the elite runners who trained at the Australian Insitute of Sport and average runners like me ran the trails at Bruce Ridge. It offered a good cross country run or a convenient location to warm up before a speedwork session on the track. The stadium lights were so bright that in the summer, if they were on, some of the trails behind the stadium were clearly lit.

During the winter months I met Jo, a friend I trained with, in the car park at the Stadium at 5.00am for the mid-week long run. We'd run our familiar trail or the cycle paths in the dark carrying torches or wearing lights on our heads like miners going down into the pit. These mornings were sheer dread. I would not have run them on my own, particularly through the bush, without the commitment to meet somebody. It made the task easier. I would sit in the empty car park on a winter's morning with a hot water bottle on my lap in complete darkness with the windows fogged up.

Outside the city slept. The only sound was the eerie swish of the trees in the wind. I had to steel myself. I used to marvel, as Jo pulled up in her battered old Tarano wearing a pink woollen dressing gown, at her toughness. Her face pressed into hard lines by a working life appeared sharper as a result of the black dye she used on her hair. It seemed an odd vanity from someone who gave no quarter anywhere else.

On bad hair days I could see white wisps appear at the roots. Try as I might, I could never beat Jo and to be honest, after the first few futile attempts I stopped bothering. She had a mental toughness that I couldn't match. I would suspect,

even as the ugly brown Tarano came into view, that Jo was meeting me for my sake. I was sure she was perfectly capable of training in the elements on her own. She would step out of the car loosening her dressing gown as I grudgingly removed the hot water bottle I held in my lap and we'd be off. During the pregnancy I didn't train as hard or as much and I'd lost touch with Jo. She must have heard what happened through other means and came to visit me when I returned from hospital and was ordered to rest. I was immensely grateful that someone had come to see me.

On those bitter mornings, Josh trained with the runners at the Institute. His running was the primary reason for us being in Canberra. We'd originally settled in Sydney, which I loved, but this ended when Josh won a marathon in the Snowy Mountains. With the benefit of years of high altitude training on Johannesburg hills still working for him, he smashed the opposition that day. A front runner by inclination with a preference for hills and cross-country, I knew he would win and he did. Neither of us predicted the consequences.

A coach from the Institute also watched the race and was impressed with the decisiveness of Josh's win. He came over and introduced himself as Bob. He said he saw Olympic potential in Josh to represent Australia in a few years and asked for his phone number. We explained we didn't have permanent residency and had to wait two years before we could apply. At the time, during the days of international sporting sanctions, the Olympics represented a pipe dream to most South African athletes except the few who could marry their way into a new citizenship. The media had recently sensationalised the case of Gary Brinkman, the South African swimmer who married an Australian to fast track citizenship.

South Africans who did that, or who were perceived to be doing that, whether they were or not, weren't welcomed or liked.

When Bob called, we were both surprised since neither of us expected anything from the conversation in the mountains. Nevertheless Josh was invited to train with Bob's squad at the AIS. Through Bob's contacts Josh managed to secure a job with a company prepared to support his application for residency. Since my visa was dependant on Josh's employment I was not independent and because of this, job hunting was made longer and harder. Few companies in the midst of a recession could be bothered with the headache of immigrants when Australians were out of work. It had taken months of trudging around employment agencies with an unpopular accent and threadbare credentials before I finally found a job. When the opportunity from Canberra fell into Josh's lap my flimsy hold on the world had to re-negotiated and grasped all over again.

Spring. Post Pravia. Being brave in Canberra. Days slid into each other. I saw the blue irises on the Aranda cycle path as I ran down from Bruce Ridge Nature Reserve on an early morning run. I'd grown used to not looking at anything and they caught my eye, a splash of unexpected beauty in a drab suburb. They stood within the perimeter of a pine lap fence like mourners or Quakers with just the right amount of frill about the crown to suggest an unfolding at some point and enough softness on view to see that when they opened the colour would be ink. I was bewitched. Blue irises. *Here?* A small window opened in my mind to allow in a gust of warmth much like the unexpected scent of jasmine in August. These pockets of colour arrived with more frequency and as the summer of Bronwyn began to expand and take shape there were moments when, running around the track in the twilight with Carol H. behind me, I almost felt I could live here and

settle down. That the restlessness I continually felt would eventually abate. When I was running well things seemed to fit. When I was not, everything seemed discordant. At those moments of distraction I would catch myself the way a driver jerks awake after falling asleep at the wheel. *Careful Grace! You will forget! Wake up! Don't drift. Stay alert!* Each time I snapped out of one of these spells I would be tormented all over again that by adopting a new country I would betray and old one.

Thinking back, it was as if my relationship with the past had turned into a bloated, blood sucking creature. It siphoned off all the emotional nourishment at my disposal until I had nothing left to give. It left me drained with its burden of guilt and accumulation of cowardices. Who was I hanging on for? Who was I staying awake for? Certainly apart from the dwindling supply of letters from Blueboy there was nothing left to feed the tumour of homesickness that pressed upon me relentlessly. I felt if I relaxed my grip on memory for even a second, all would be lost. I stayed awake despite the blue irises. I would not abandon the past. I kept watch.

Let's be clear. I liked Bronwyn. She was perfect. At least that's what Josh thought which meant that if I didn't like her that would make me imperfect. There was nothing about her *not* to like. She was friendly and even funny in her way. I have no memory of how she arrived. Only that she did and once she did, she was always there. Josh realised around this time that he wasn't going to make the cut for the Olympics. It was something he had to decide on his own and he came to that decision after he met Bronwyn. He would shift to coaching. Bronwyn was his protégée. He didn't have an affair. It was worse than that. An affair at least would have set things out in the open, establish a clear breach of

trust, present a defining instance of betrayal. An affair would stand up in court. A fantasy confuses everyone involved. It billows between people. There is no transference of bodily fluids but transference takes place regardless.

Perhaps I even felt I owed Josh a fantasy since I clearly lived in my own world of physical punishment. I threw myself into training routines that allowed me no time to think. Nor, to be completely honest, would I have cared about the transference of body fluids at that point but what I did care about, a lot, was the billowing nebulousness of our positions. It did not allow for clear cut decisions and caused us instead to hover unsteadily between points. These points converged at Bruce Stadium one hot Saturday afternoon on the last track meet of the season. I ran the 5km. Bronwyn ran the 10.

Josh wasn't present to see me run the 5km. He was picking up Bronwyn. Had he been at the track he would have seen Carol H's doggedness that season finally pay off when she moved out into the lane after sitting on my heels for most of the race and surged with 3 laps to go. I couldn't respond. My legs were finished. So too, was our time in Canberra but as I ran on I didn't know that yet.

Josh arrived with Bronwyn. She looked every inch the athlete with the exception of her running shoes. It was these shoes that were to settle the situation and point us in a new direction. Josh had been encouraging her for awhile to adopt more specialist shoes but, whatever her reasons, she hadn't. The three of us sat up in the stands as Bronwyn prepared for her race. Since I'd finished my race and as Bronwyn and I were the same size, Josh volunteered my racing shoes to Bronwyn for her race. 'You don't mind do you Grace?' I didn't

mind then, but I did mind later, when I went down to the 200 mark near the gate where Josh was standing with a stop watch and calling out her times.

'Stop following me around like a puppy dog Grace, you're always following me around.' I minded a lot. The statement sounded distinctly clear-cut to me: country, family, friends all gone in the project of following Josh around. The ends of marriages are frayed, not blunt cut. In the heat of the moment and in mutual fear of an unknown future, parties cling to sinking ships in the hope of salvage or rescue. In a foreign country there is no safety net to break the fall. Hoping a change of climate would help we set out across the Nullarbor but all we did was drag the past behind us.

'Can you *please* shut the window, the flies are coming in.'

'You might at least offer to drive once in awhile, you know.'

'I can't, I feel claustrophobic.'

'Claustrophobic! You feel CLAUSTROPHIC! OUT HERE!! FOR CHRIST SAKE'S GRACE!!!!'

Arms wave at 3,723 kilometres of nothingness.

'I'm not deaf. Yes, I feel claustrophobic. I feel as if I can't breathe. I feel as if I'm going to fall off the edge of the world.'

'The world is flat Grace, for the next seven days at least. You're not going fall off the fucking edge of it.' I couldn't explain it. I just did. Out on the open road tacked like a ribbon to each end of Australia with buildings on wheels bearing down on us at 160km, I felt claustrophobic. I tried to drive but it didn't work. My legs

were numb; my hands clamped to the wheel with an overwhelming sense that something stronger than me was forcing me to veer off the road. 'I can't.' Josh drove across the Nullarbor. I opened sandwiches. We both listened to cricket on the radio. The country went on and on. Sometimes we stopped to take a photograph.

Twenty years later in late January, the January before my research trip to Canberra, I ran through Kings Park listening to my IPod. It had been hot. The usual relentless Perth January heats that moves in and clamps down hard round about Australia Day. It comes every year and every year people act surprised, as if this has suddenly been *sprung* upon them without warning. Radio announcers are verbose about new heat records and the dialogue shifts to climate change. This is the second hottest day of the third longest month in living memory ever since 1965, they say. As if to underscore how hot it is Television crews prove this by showing wavy pictures of people floating on giant yellow mats in the sea off Cottesloe Beach or eating melting ice-creams. It feels as everyone moves under water.

I was thinking, as I ran the roller-coaster, the trail of undulating hills hugging the park with a panoramic view of the bay, that for me the January heat is imbued with a sense of anniversary. It was the anniversary of the funeral, a when a procession of sad doe-eyed people in comforting clumps dressed in black gathered with balloons and pink and blue teddy bears in the rose garden of the hospital one blistering January afternoon.

Judith had flown in from Sydney on the day of the funeral and first she, then Josh, then me, scooped a small shovel of ashes out of an urn held by a priest and

knelt to dig them into the roots of an old rose bush. A few years later, when I arrived to visit the rose garden on the anniversary of the deaths, I discovered it had been re-landscaped into a series of hot limestone boxes surrounded by wrought iron fencing. The hedge had been removed along with the small covered pavilion where parents could sit and contemplate. The rose bush under which the twins were interred had not been included within the designated limestone boxes reserved for grieving. As if grief can be corralled. Instead, a few rose bushes had escaped the tight landscaped noose and grew close to the road. I noticed, judging by the deflated balloons and dried out flower arrangements slowly bleaching in the heat between them, that I wasn't the only person who searched for my ashes.

Death does not observe Christmas but those who attend to the process of death and funerals do. Because the hospital incinerates all the babies together, somewhere in the woman's hospital, babies are stored in a fridge until after the festive season. Dr Ong had said on that last visit that women never get over the loss of their children. He was right. They don't. Nor is it the type of loss that can easily be explained. It's like the loss of countries, intangible, difficult to package.

I ran and thought about Josh that day in the Rose Garden. How he'd vomited after lunch at the Subiaco Hotel. I'd put it down to the sardines in the penne Arabiatta. At the Rose Garden, he'd been in a rage at the people from my office who had come to support us. They were too jolly and too loud, he'd hissed. What did they think this was? A picnic? What was I supposed to do, I'd hissed back, couldn't he see they were nervous? Up in the room that passed for a chapel we were shown two identical pink babies in miniature blue jumpsuits. Josh stood next to me and sobbed. I was dry-eyed. Life began to change with the baptism. I

stood at the crib with plans already forming but I could not image the scale of a loss or like interest, it would accrue incrementally over time.

I ran the roller-coaster in Kings Park thinking these thoughts. It had all been so long ago, those desperate early days in Perth and Canberra. A runner floated out of the haze. He was coming in my direction. I could see he was a professional. Lithe frame, both feet off the ground, high leg action. 'He should go to the Olympics,' I thought as we crossed on the long drop. He went up, I went down. Two steps separated us before I realised that I knew him. It was Josh.

Poised mid-air, he was uncertain. Who was this? 'It's me.' Sheepishly, 'It's me.' Was 'me' enough?

He stopped, came down the hill, smiled. Now I remembered. Eyes like smoke. 'It's been a while,' he wiped his face with his vest (red always suited him) 'what – twelve years?'

'About that.'

There was the lisp, I'd forgotten about that. Not pronounced but in the way of people who have their tongues pierced and their words roll about.

'Married, kids?' I shook my head. Did he not remember? Did the whole event go so far over his head he didn't realise what it all ... meant ... Logistically speaking. That it had consequences?

'I'm running to the start of the triathlon,' he nodded towards the bay where competitors scuttled like ants across the foreshore, 'I did the Ironman in

December.' 'Sneaked out early today to avoid the kids, the wife, the cat – you know.'

I didn't know.

'I see you're still wearing Asics.' He nodded at my feet. I stuck out my foot so we could admire my 2160s. 'You should wear Newtons, that's what we're all in now. Forefoot running, that's the go. You'll get dicky knees running like that. Come up to my shop and I'll fit you sometime. What are you training for?'

'City to Surf. You?'

'Nah, coaching now and the occasional triathlon.' I thought of Bronwyn.

'Hear much from Judith?'

'Not since she met an Israeli on the internet.'

'She advertised?'

'Yep'

'One of those?'

'One of those.'

'Well,' I said, 'I'd better get going.' He grinned. 'Rightio,' he called over his shoulder. 'You on Facebook'? I nodded. 'I'll check you out.'

'Send me a friend request.' (I knew he wouldn't).

'Err, what'll that be? Close friends?' he laughed.

‘Acquaintances.’

We left the shadows of things unsaid pooled on the pathway were we’d stood. If words were drips that might have served as bridges they were left to trickle off our shoes. We turned and ran in opposite directions. The hot sun absorbed our moisture. There was nothing left to suggest that we’d ever met.

Perth 1994

FIRST

First there was the house on Rochdale Road. We drove up the driveway to view the house in June as the rain swept through. We were two months in from the Nullarbor. I didn't yet feel possessed by a house unless you count the rage I still carried for the loss of Thirteenth Street. *How could he sell the house without mentioning it? How could he watch me paint it and love it and know he was going to get rid of it?*

I joked with the real estate agent, a woman wearing the inscrutable face of all real agents, that at least by viewing a house on a rainy day, you could tell if there were leaks. She barely fluttered a smile. There were no leaks. The house smelt damp and felt dark and oppressive - unpainted Jarrah everywhere. I didn't like it. Josh didn't like it. We bought the house because we couldn't agree on alternatives.

Me: rent a house in the city close to work and take our time to check out the areas. Besides we still owned the house in Canberra and we couldn't afford it.

Josh: Think of retirement. Joondalup - buy now. Why pay off someone else's mortgage when you can pay off your own? There were lots of South Africans up there we wouldn't feel so isolated and strange.

Everybody said Rochdale Road was in a good area. There was loose beach sand out front, a sad rose bush with crisp brown leaves near the driveway and a frangipani on the verge which hadn't, in nearly twenty years, grown an inch. Josh planted a Liquid Amber in the middle of front lawn when he heard about the

pregnancy as a romantic gesture to roots and longevity. It remained stunted too. Out the back, there was an unfinished room painted blue. It doubled as a shed, a toilet and laundry. The smell of this room would be in my nostrils forever. The sweet smell of apricot scented toilet paper; the acidic smell of amniotic fluid and the stench of my own fear.

SECOND

There was Dr Ong's wood panelled office and the leather bound waiting room. It was a far cry from Dr Muthsamy's child friendly rooms in the Jamieson Centre but my reason for being there was the same. I was pregnant again and I had come to have this confirmed. The rooms were in a gracious old Federation House on a leafy street in Subiaco. Everything about the place was still, serene and expensive. I waited alongside well-heeled women with neat bobs who flicked quietly through *Country Style* magazines. On the walls, in discreet frames, babies smiled in their multitudes. A door swished open. Dr Ong shook my hand. He led me into his office and gently closed the door. He was an elegant man, unusually tall and stylishly dressed with a flair for polka dot cravats. It was as if he and his rooms had been styled as a package. He was polite but aloof. I liked him immediately. He confirmed my pregnancy. I explained about the Pravio Abruptio in Canberra and asked, given the circumstances, if I could still run the City to Surf at the weekend. He said, given the circumstances, I'd better not. But I could walk if I liked. I did. I still have a photograph of me carrying a banana.

THIRD

There was the unscheduled visit to his office one evening after work three months later. I was to report the fact that I was bleeding.

'Grace, I can't detect a heart-beat. You need to go for an ultra-sound first thing in the morning.' He wrote out a referral. The next morning I presented myself to the radiologist whose face was professional and impenetrable. After a few tests she said she would be in touch with Dr Ong and he would be in touch with me. I wondered why nobody could just be straight with me. I went home not knowing if the baby was dead or alive. That evening when Dr Ong phoned to say 'pour yourself a stiff gin it's monochorionic twins,' Irony would come later when my body mimicked the emotional struggle between two countries. One inflated by memories; the other unable to get off the ground.

Months passes. It was spring. Unpredictable weather patterns marked by brief warm spells but with the twins I had begun to settle into the rhythm of life and map out a future. An Australian future. The twins would belong to Australia. Through them I might belong here and this thought brought both pain and redemption. I met Josh at Miss Maude's on Hay Street for a chicken sandwich and coffee. We watched motorists and people with umbrellas negotiate each other as the fronts rolled in. It was to be another routine ultra-sound check, nothing more. Because of the miscarriage in Canberra Dr Ong was taking extra precautions.

When we finished our sandwiches we went to the lab to keep the appointment. With the changing seasons the air-conditioning was always set on too hot or too cold. I made a few light-hearted exchanges about the weather to the radiologist as she squeezed the freezing jelly onto my bare stomach and began moving the ultra-sound wand. On the screen in front of me I saw two boys curled up in a miniature diving bell. It was as if one large balloon was bouncing on another, much smaller one. It almost covered it. I laughed. 'Look at that' I shouted, 'the one is kicking the shit out of the other one.' And then, 'he must be

the quiet one'. The radiologist turned her back to me. I sensed she was annoyed with me and regretted my flippancy.

'When are you booked to see Dr Ong?'

'In about a week.'

'You need to see him sooner. You need to see him *today*.' I froze with the way she said *today.* 'You need to go down there straight after this visit. Wait in the reception area and I will make you an appointment.' When a doctor says she will make you an appointment there is reason to be nervous in the hot waiting room. Something was going on over our heads. We spoke with our eyebrows. Josh looked to me for answers. I shrugged. Even the receptionist seemed in on it. There were furtive calls between the front desk and the ultra-sound lab and she spoke in a soothing voice like a air-hostesses who tells you not to panic when the plane hits turbulence.

If the trip across the Nullarbor had seemed to take a thousand years, the less than two kilometre trip to Dr Ong's rooms seemed to take longer. Usually I loved to drive through the suburbs of Subiaco and admire the old character homes and the quaint workers cottages. That day the suburb seemed clouded by fear.

If I looked for reassurance none was forthcoming. As soon as we arrived Dr Ong said he needed to call someone who would come down and explain the results of the ultra-sound. Here was another doctor calling on a doctor and professor to boot. A small untidy man arrived. He was introduced as Dr Frankel, an expert in my condition. I still didn't know what my condition was. Dr Frankel did all the talking. Dr Ong's long tapered fingers fluttered about his desk. He straightened his notepad. He arranged his gold fountain pen at right angles above it. He polished his glasses. He avoided eye contact.

'Grace, have you ever heard of Twin to Twin Transfusion Syndrome?' I told Dr Frankel I hadn't.

'It's a rare disease of the placenta affecting monochorionic twins. The twins are each in their own amniotic sac.' That explained the balloons I'd seen. 'They share a single placenta. Blood is passed from one twin, known as the donor, to the other, the recipient. Sometimes, and unfortunately in your case, the blood supply between the twins is interrupted. We don't know why. We only know that one twin receives too much blood and the other too little. This results in an imbalance which could lead to the death of one or both twins.'

I thought of the two small divers in their bell. Now I understood. 'So the smaller twin is in danger?'

'No Grace,' Dr Frankel said, 'the larger one is at risk of heart failure.' We need to intervene; you could lose both of them.'

'What are the odds of this condition?'

'About one in a million.'

'What will you do?'

'We need to try and stabilise the pregnancy. We need to pump out the extra fluid in the hope that once the excess is removed, the other sac will realign itself and the balance and blood supply will be corrected.' It sounded like German engineering.

'There's just one thing,' and here Dr Ong added to the conversation, 'the procedure is very dangerous. There is a risk of rupture and premature labour.' *Rupture? Pump?* How? 'We do it with a needle Grace, an amniocentesis needle. It called an amnioreduction. We send the needle down with a cord and a camera and once it's in position we pump out the excess fluid and hope for the best.'

'Will I be under anaesthetic?'

'No. Grace you have to be awake to tell us how we're doing but we will give you pethidine to calm your nerves.'

Nerves. I'll give them this; Drs Frankel and Ong were masters of understatement.

A few blocks from Dr Ong's rooms the women's hospital sits on a leafy street. It's a squat art deco monument to interwar functionalism. Pepper trees, Bottlebrush and White gum trees line the street in front of it. Their leaves create

a mottled pool of shadow in shades of charcoal and grey. There are always women wearing slippers and pink flannel gowns smoking outside on the red benches near the bus stop or sitting on the low stone wall. Above the sage green sliding doors a white ceramic dove flies into a mosaic sun.

Inside the lobby is cool and cream. The clean lines of the art deco cornices and the high ceilings generate a sense of light and space. To the left, heavy lift doors in dull green are inlaid with rectangles of leadlight glass. The floor at the entrance is marbled. The long passage leading down towards B Block changes from marble to functional blue carpet tiles and low ceilings. To the right there is a coffee shop with a display window stuffed with animals set out in straw as if in a manager. Families sit together, read newspapers, drink coffee and murmur to each other. Further down to the right there is a women's toilet with two cubicles. The walls of the cubicles are speckled marbled. I know this because it is against the speckled marbled walls of the women's cubicles I would press my face hoping the cold feel of the marble would contain the raw fear that gripped me each time I walked down that passage for another amnioreduction.

I would rest my head on the toilet roll holder as best as I could given the size of my bloated stomach and pray *please don't let me die today.* Despite the advanced pregnancy, I had not yet felt the babies kick. The build-up of fluid cushioned all movement. It was also here, towards the end when hunched over and face pressed against the cool cubicle wall, I felt first one kick, and then another. It was as if the divers in their bell were reminding me that I wasn't the only one involved, that they were down there too, and they were saying: *stay with us, we need you, we're trapped too.* The two kicks made a difference. I no longer

felt alone. I was needed. *Family* needed me and I walked out of the women's toilet with a new sense of purpose.

Next door to the women's toilet there is a Women's Health Library and a set of pastel lithographs. At the end of the corridor two naked women in bronze face each other and pull on a rope. I've always wondered about the symbolism. Beyond the bronze women the blue carpet changes to linoleum and opens to another set of lifts. They are not ornate like the lifts in the Art Deco foyer; those pleasantries are left far behind. Ornamentation for its own sake has no place around medicine and these lifts take you to places you don't want to go.

A sign points to the right and reads *Imaging Department, Ultra Sound and X-Ray*. When the doors slide open they would reveal women reading magazines waiting in rows. At the end of the corridors there are a set of glass opaque sliding doors and the sign *The Neonatal Care Unit – Restricted Entry*. I came to know those doors better than anyone should. Once I passed through them I would meet Annie, my nurse. She came from Geraldton and had freckles and soft brown eyes. She was a warm relief from the cool professionalism of the radiologist. Annie exuded a sincere, human empathy which she managed to convey through tone of voice. This calmed my nerves long enough to keep me lying on the trolley to receive my shot of pethidine.

My colleagues could not hide their startled glances each morning when I arrived at the office double the size I was when I'd left the day before. Apart from the vanity issues, my size was uncomfortable. It was not easy to move around. When I was not working I could do nothing but surrender to the weight of water.

Tuesday

I was overcome by a queer feeling. I telephoned Dr Ong and asked if I could make an unscheduled visit in my lunch hour. I took a taxi to see him, not even calling Josh to explain what I was doing, not even thinking through to myself what I was doing. I was acting on instinct; propelled by a sense of disaster.

'I feel strange,' I said when I was sitting in front of him, 'I'm not going to make it. Take the twins out and place them in incubators. Give me a caesarean today.' He studied me quietly. 'I understand your emotional state Grace but the twins are too young to be taken out and placed into incubators, they would be too sick.' 'Hang on for another few weeks, just to give them more time to develop. After that, at the first sign of trouble and we will take them out.' He was right of course. But then so was I.

Wednesday

I felt more positive. I decided to mark this new mood, and new period in my life with a change of clothes. It was time to ditch my old clothes and the cheap larger-sized dresses I'd been wearing and embrace impending motherhood. I bought a jade green smock imprinted with bunches of tiny white flowers. This will do me until the end of the pregnancy, I said to the sales assistant.

Thursday

To put my mind at rest Dr Ong scheduled an ultra-sound appointment. The result showed the build up of fluid to be acute.

Friday

Another amnioreduction. Surprisingly I was sent home in the evening. Staff reductions.

'Guess who this is?' It was Annie. I lifted my head from the trolley and tried to focus. 'It's Twin 1,' she beamed, the smaller one. For reasons that noone could explain they'd all taken to referring to Twin 1 as the smaller or younger one. 'Look', she'd said, 'he's waving at us, he's giving the thumbs up. I've pinned this here to remind us of what we are doing in there.' I studied the picture. It did indeed look as if a tiny astronaut was buckled in giving central command the okay to go. 'Luke,' I said, 'His name is Luke. Twin II is Chester.' My voice was hoarse with drugs. It was the first time I wore the jade green smock and the first time I said their names aloud.

The mood in the engine room was oddly jovial. The small thumbs up cheered everyone. Up until then all movement had come from Chester. Luke, for the past three months, had not stirred. He was alive, but being deprived of essential fluids and nutrients left a question mark over his internal development. With the thumb, everyone in the room had made a connection with him and through the monitors they watched the underwater rescue mission.

'Who will I call if something goes wrong at midnight?' I joked, eyes closed to the pethidine.

'Call Dr Ong. He lives around the corner from the hospital.' Dr Frankel focused on the needle with his sleeves rolled up. It was another joke.

Midnight

I can still see the gate as I shuffle out of the house swathed in towels and move towards it. I can still feel the heat of Perth as it steamed up from the pavers in the driveway that midnight. I can still feel the warm sweet smell of amniotic fluid and apricot scented paper clenched in my hands after furious attempts to stop the flow. I curled up on the front seat holding everything in as best I could. We raced the five kilometres to the hospital. I was helped out of the cars and moved to a wheel chair. The woman behind the reception desk looked ghastly under neon lights. Two nurses helped me onto a trolley and pushed it down the blue-carpeted passage, past the women's toilet and into the lifts. I was taken to the third floor. Two more nurses heaved me onto a bed in a small room next to their station. That's when we were all drowned in a deluge of burst balloons and water.

Sunday

I stepped out from the cool lobby of the women's hospital. I remembered it was a public holiday in another part of the world. I realised it was Sunday. I still wore the jade green smock imprinted with bunches of tiny white flowers. At the house on Rochdale Road I took it off and threw it away.

Thursday -Hills with warm-up and Cool-down

'...She said 'shove Jack I'm walking out your fucking door.'' Paul Kelly blasts from my Ipod. Emu Bank. Fog. Visibility Zero. A photograph of the grey sheet that hangs over the water and a plod to the bridge and back is all there is time for. Last day – tomorrow I leave. I need to visit our old house at Wall Place and return a fork to the cheerful woman in the kitchenware shop at the Belconnen Markets who, at my dismay at being unable to buy a fork for my daily salad and noodles, promptly fished around under the counter and produced one.

By tomorrow I will have survived five days in Canberra on my own *and* managed to do it on the university subsistence allowance of $20 per day. This required an iron will and a fondness for small boxes of Coco Pops and instant noodles but there is a bag of apples and a litre of Lychee juice to spare. There is no longer guilt that the Canberra experience was made unpalatable because of me and that if I had changed my attitude we would have grown instant lawn and the fast-food version of friends. This needed to be put to rest. Instead what I've discovered is notwithstanding the fork, Canberra is ugly, dull, boring and cold with or without me. It *is* the place I always believed it to be. New arrivals should not come here. Their first view of Australia if they do may be irreversible. What do I take with me as a memory before I close this chapter? Reeds. Waterbirds. Benjamin Way dual-carriaged, perpetually empty. Perhaps the woman in pink fluffy slippers pushing her trolley through the market last Sunday. A town built in the service of monuments.

I think about Hèléne. It's only been five days and already the master classes seem light years away. On that second day, even with my soft-focused short-sighted view of the world, I could see from across the street that the woman walking past the train station was Hèléne. She was dressed from head to toe in

black and this accented her pallor. She drifted through the cold drizzle and early morning Adelaide rush-hour in a world of her own. Each ear plugged into a different medium she walked without the peering look of tourists who, like swans, arch their necks to the sky.

Hèléne lumbered forward with solid purpose. Her weight slowed her down. On her face there was the engraved bemused smile I'd seen the day before in the food hall. Her dress was Melbourne. It was with shock that during the course of the day we would discover that she was in her late forties. She seemed ageless in the way all those stone Buddha's manufactured in Bali seem ageless. She appeared unmarked by life and yet, already privy to the view beneath her sleeves, I knew better. Hèléne seemed slightly annoyed to be jolted out of her world when I darted across the road and tugged at her sleeve. 'Ah,' she said 'Bewdley Street.' As if my life were defined by a single experience. We fell into step.

I dumbly wondered, now that I had interrupted her, practically forcing her to turn off her Ipod, what I was going to talk about. We walked about three blocks together. Three blocks which seemed to take forever and were not relieved by the constant hammer of building works along North Terrace. I was in one of those uncertain panics, should I push on, should I hold back? She, placidly trundling forward in her black Doc Martins. 'You should read Joan Didion,' she said suddenly. '*The Year of Magical Thinking.* It's brilliant. She's written another one called *Blue Lights*, her daughter died you know, I think you'll get something out of it.' I'd already read those books but at least it opened a gap and we discussed Joan Didion until we reached the University where we parted ways. Joan Didion or not, I wasn't prepared to take the lift for a single floor. I said I'd see her upstairs.

For some people, a single childhood image is enough to sustain or haunt an entire adulthood. For Hèléne this memory involved a lemon tree. For me, it was a pair of giant butterfly wings. Who knows what Simon's memories were but they would have had something to do with collections. First it would have been toys, compendiums of books and then expanded into other things.

Simon once said that no matter how much money he had it would never be enough. Nor, as he pointed out when I flippantly stated he had more than enough to buy himself distractions, did they work. He would, he said, always be afraid that one day it would all be taken away from him. The totems he uses to ward off this calamity come in small plastic ropes which spring out of his wallet. One contains platinum credit cards from every major bank and the other loyalty cards for all the major American hotel chains.

Whether he travels for football in London or fireworks in Sydney on New-Year's Eve, Simon is guaranteed front row seats. In these small home-away-from-homes white fluffy dressing gowns and matching towelling bathroom slippers are hermetically sealed and reproduced. Pyramids of Crabtree & Evelyn soaps form little Egypts on marble deserts of first world bathrooms. In his solitary franchised world Simon finds predictability, order and impersonal exits. He never needs to leave his fingerprints on the world. He floats through it and observes. As to its damaged limbs, those unruly cancers which devour entire societies in the raw parts of the world, Simon reaches for the complimentary eye-pads, pops a pill, tunes in to Beethoven.

The work sent out prior to the master class was anonymous. The story about the mental asylum and the story about the lemon tree jarred with me. They did

not appear to have been written by the same person. The one, agonisingly precise in its clinical detail; the other was clumsy, as if the author could not get to grips with family undercurrents and had reverted, almost subconsciously, to the plaintive voice of the lost child. There'd been hints. For example my piece *The Blue Moon Cafe,* a story about a father and daughter whose relationship is crushed by forces neither of them can comprehend, went over the heads of the class. It was too opaque, they said. There was no narrative flow. The emotional nuances were missed.

'So what?' From a woman who wrote about sunrise on the Nile and strawberry daiquiris, 'I don't get it.'

'I ***get it****.'* The words were almost spat out. Hèléne's jolt into life surprised everyone. Until this point, for the last two days, she'd been busy with her castle walls and her gadgets and appeared only half listening. Had there been no conversation about Joan Didion on North Terrace to indicate her sharp intelligence and passion for reading, I could have sworn she was not interested. I was secretly pleased, although not unduly surprised, that she'd 'got it.'

'I had a *fucked* relationship with my father,' she said. 'FUCKED!!'

Beads of spits foamed at the corner of her mouth when she said this and, as if she had taken herself by surprise, wiped her mouth and quickly re-treated behind her moat of yellow notepads. She had already revealed too much. Later that day it was her turn to read out her work. There was theme to it. In each story she'd find a way to list her credentials. Type A personality. Two first-class Oxford degrees. Corporate connections. These were her weapons against the world. But from her work it became clear that she was more comfortable sitting propped up

in a bed in a sterile ward than under the shade of the lemon tree where with the fluid, unpredictable nature of family relationships were played out. These were out of her control. The aged lemon tree bore witness to a mother who hummed to herself and a Greek father: prisoner-of-war, war-hero, immigrant and cafe owner who thought a thick leather strap cured lesbians.

'It doesn't hurt you know,' Hèléne explained on day four. We'd all been dodging around the logistics of self-harm, unwilling to ask. 'The blade on the skin is relief. The pain is on the inside. The flow of blood releases it. Like a pressure cooker.' This got me thinking about my addiction to running and pre-disposition to child loss. Could this be an unconscious form of self-harm.

On the last night of the Master Class we went to the University Club for drinks. It was a festive couple of hours. By now we had no secrets from each other. Afterwards, Hèléne and I walked back to our respective hotels through the evening drizzle. They were quite close to each other. Despite her girth Hèléne was short, tiny in fact, and when we reached hers I towered over her to give her a hug.

'I look forward to reading your book about the lemon trees.'

'And yours about the butterfly wings. I'm told memoirs written by women our age are literary growth areas – there's been a lot of collateral damage.' She'd certainly given me something to think about.

After I left Hèléne I tried to remember how long it took for my running to return to me following the events of that December. It had been years. First I was not allowed to run; then I didn't want to. I was too busy trying to crawl out of the

empty shell I'd found myself in and when I did, when I'd managed to crawl my way to the surface and stumble over the lip of the well onto solid ground, I discovered the effort had taken its toll. My will was depleted. Shaving seconds off my 10km time no longer interested me. It seemed a facile, self-indulgent thing to do. As my friend said, I'd been transported into another dimension. I needed to find new ways to occupy time.

I wanted to write a book to honour my memories, fragmented as they were, of the things that happened in my life and how they affected me. After all, we were the generation that produced history. I wanted to remember my mother, the flying ant. I wanted to pin her down between the pages and give shape to her. Explain to the world how much I missed her. I've always been clumsy around these things. I wanted too to write about a troubled African country. I missed the smell of smoke on cold winter evenings; the smell of dust during the long dry; the damp smell of the city during seasonal storms. I missed its ha ha has and arbours of trees. Most of all I wanted to write about a pair of butterfly wings that were made out of wire coat hangers and bent into shape. The Lepidoptera was made out of hand-stitched sequins, black netting and a pair of my mother's old pantyhose.

Johannesburg 1961

The butterfly wings took shape late at night as I pretended to sleep. They were meant to be a surprise for a fancy dress party on the last day of my first school year. Each evening my mother set them out on the table in the hallway. She held the wings up to her eyes and stitched on sequins one at a time. There were billows of smoke. Bearded men sat about the floor with guitars, cheap wine and Lucky Strikes. My mother was popular. When she was done for the night, the wings were wrapped in plastic and shoved under her bed. I absorbed everything.

The year would be set apart from others and, like other special years, would be known by a number. '69 was the year men walked on the moon. '76 was the year of the riots. '94 was the year of the first democratic elections. These years belonged to everyone. '61 was my year. It was the year of the butterfly wings. It was the year pink puckered lips moved about the room like fishes for kisses.

It was February. On the chair next to my bed, a pair of polished brown shoes, white ankle socks, a starched green gingham Roseneath school uniform, a brown felt hat and a blazer materialised as if by magic. Next to the chair sat a small cardboard suitcase. It was midnight. Everything was ready. I sneaked out of bed and dressed quickly. Wearing the blazer and hat with the suitcase neatly positioned next to the chair I sat in the dark smoothing my skirt. Hours passed. When you are six, time creeps slowly. As the light changed and the shapes of the room became hesitatingly visible, my mother yawned her way out of the room she shared with Blueboy. She was on her way to the toilet. I must have stirred.

'*Jesus Christ!* Grace! What the hell do you think you're doing?' She clutched her heart at the unexpected sight of a midget in a hat and jacket moving in the dark.

'I am waiting to go to school.'

'Get the hell out of those clothes and get back to bed immediately, school is hours away!' School was only hours away, yes, but the journey would take much longer; longer than either of us imagined.

In June '61 the Treason Trial ended. That belonged to everyone. Nelson Mandela himself, even as I sat on the chair through the night waiting to start school, might have been watching the moon slide out of the sky through bars of his cell up at the Old Fort Prison. Who knows? What I know is that in February my generation brushed its teeth, slipped its feet into new brown shoes and marched out into the world for the first time as stiff as soldiers.

In November there would be the butterfly wings.

Canberra 2011

I walk up Belconnen Way and make notes about the weather, the trees and the entrance to Bunnings which hasn't changed in twenty years. I take a photograph of a small brown shabby sign which reads 'Page,' the suburb where we lived. Umberto Eco wrote in *The Island of the Day Before* that he needed his character to arrive on the island in August, because that was the month, a year before, Eco himself had visited the islands, and was therefore able to accurately describe the sunrises of that season. It is for this reason I am in Canberra this July.

My character will arrive at the house in Wall Place at around midday, the exact time she would have arrived back at the house after that night at Calvary hospital. Already recorded in my notebook is the fact that today, which is the anniversary of that day twenty years ago when she was discharged from the hospital, things feel brittle. The temperature is -2 with a high of 13 degrees. I heard it on the radio just as my character heard it on the car radio as her husband drove her home in the blue Ford Falcon, both of them wrapped in silence. Again I pull my notebook from one of my deep jacket pockets and write – Wind Chill factor about -10 – reminds me of Johannesburg - and then trudge along Belconnen Way identifying trees. Big gums, small gums, twisted gums, straggly bush gums, unidentifiable gums – what more can be said about gums? Descriptors: silver, sage.

As I walk I think about a cleaner back at the motel. We'd bumped into each other as I was leaving. She pushed a trolley of towels, packaged teas, sachets of sugar, milk and soaps down the corridor and knocked on doors. I stopped to say

hello and to tell her I would be leaving the next morning. I asked her if she wanted a bag of apples and a carton of lychee juice.

I said, 'Have a great day,' perhaps a little too enthusiastically. 'I'll try,' she said, 'although it's going to be hard for me from now on.'

'Oh?' I was unsure how to proceed. She obviously wanted to talk.

'I've left my husband, I've got kids, he's locked me out of the house, I can't get my things.' She was about to burst into tears with the rawness of it all.

'It will be hard in the beginning,' I said brightly, 'but it will work out well in the end.' I hated myself for the smooth way I dispensed this cheap advice. I couldn't bring myself to tell her just *how* hard it was going to be and wondered if she had the endurance or the stomach for it. Not many do. What could I say to this woman who seemed to think my life looked intact? Who seemed to think I knew the way to exit routes and shelter? I didn't have the heart to say there would be no place to run for cover. If another woman was involved things would be even worse. The husband would have moral support. A sergeant-at-arms who'd patrol his camp and she would discover just how sour old love can taste on the turn. I suggested Legal Aid to give her something; that plus a reminder about the apples. I opened the outside door. The wind was icy as it blasted down from the Brindabellas. What advice could I give? I was the one with the husband the real estate agent called 'a smarmy arrogant jumped up jerk.'

’95 was the year a tall Chinese anaesthetist placed the block of ice on my stomach in the operating theatre in the basement of the women’s hospital. On the way down in the lift Dr Ong in green surgical gown, wore a Mickey Mouse theatre cap and I wondered, flippantly, if this was meant to cheer me up. It was late in the afternoon and, because it was a Saturday, the entire team must have been on standby all day. Nobody could predict what time the twins would be delivered. With the ice, the tall Chinese anaesthetist wanted to check how the drugs had worked. He needn’t have worried; by late afternoon I was numb.

Much later Dr Ong referred me to an Irish woman, a psychologist who, he said, would understand my state of mind since she too had experienced Twin to Twin Transfusion Syndrome. Her small office overlooked Railway Parade. As soon as I walked in to the room the framed photographs of her twins in their university graduation gowns told me we shared nothing in common. Instead, I preferred to shoulder my grief, if that is what you call the vacant state I fell into, on my own. Solitariness in difficult times had always been my fall-back position.

Before the funeral everything to do with the night at the hospital was blanked out. There was the assumption on my part that I could just *move on.* The hospital sent a nurse to check on me every week for a few weeks after the birth. A cheerful busy person she took my blood pressure and pulse but I knew that under her bright banter she carefully assessed my mental state. I prepared myself for these visits, and with jokes and more irritating flippancy managed to convince her that I was on the road to recovery. Josh too put in an appearance. He poured tea, sat next to me with limp arms and he charmed her with his eyes all smoky. After she’d gone we resumed our distances. Me: foetal position on the bed in the spare room where I’d moved. With the door locked I lay under the window hearing the

neighbours move about their kitchen as they listened to cricket on the ABC. All they would have known of me, the surrogate member of their family, was a green gingham curtain that billowed gently through a half open window. Josh: Playing on his new computer and coming to grips with the Internet.

It was curled up in this way, in the dripping heat of '96, I heard a girl was missing.

Occupational Health and Safety Regulations enforced maternity leave. Those slow scorching days with nothing to do and noone to talk pressed down in listless waves of heat. I tried to paint the house white, feeling an intense need to erase everything around me.

When it was cooler, in the mornings and evenings, I walked until my shorts lost shape. An older woman walked the suburb too. She wore blue. Her arms and legs were freckled ropes. Like me she walked away from something. I thought she was crazy, but then she probably thought that of me too. These walks followed a set course up Rochdale Road, through Swanbourne, around the lake, through the Claremont shopping precinct and back up Alfred Road. I did this twice daily until the brain was still and the legs were numb.

Around Claremont it was impossible not to miss the edginess, the sense of disquiet that crept into the area following the disappearance. Scratch the surface of anyone's conversation and it was there, the shock, the worry, the curiosity of it. These things didn't happen to girls from good neighbourhoods. Her face rose like a small moon on shop windows, lampposts and circled around trees. It was a sweet, heart-shaped face with darkened lips framed by golden hair. Young. Expectant. By day Claremont buzzed with well-heeled clothing boutiques and up-

market coffee shops offering towers of moist, delicious cake to people who still had a taste for sweet things. There were thin shavings of parmesan cheese on crisp curly whorls of lettuce for those who did not.

In the Astoria on Bay View Terrace, a few months after the funeral, six at the most, Josh would arrive wearing a pair of my faded Levi's (the torn ones he always said made me look like a fat washed-out hippie) and a black polo neck sweater. He would announce he had found the woman who would make him happy. She was a temporary secretary who worked in his office in the city. Why he took to wearing my Levi's was anyone's guess. I'd always placed great sentimental attachment to them. The first item of clothing I'd bought when I returned from Bewdley Street. I'd even sat in a cold bath with them for hours to shrink them perfectly.

The period post-funeral was a time of tin. There were no conscious detachments. There were simply unresolved differences, or drifting rifts. Perhaps it was the fulfilment of something that began in Canberra or Thirteenth Street or maybe something that was never meant to be in the first place. People deal with grief, Dr Ong said at that last meeting, differently. You need to give each other a lot of space. We certainly did that. It would have been patently obvious to anyone that something would give. It was simply a question of what would trigger it.

At the same time, my salary was increased at work. Without consciously considering what I was doing, I'd organised for the payroll department to skim off the increased portion and divert into an account I'd opened at the Credit Union in Stirling Street. It was an act of marital treachery. Everything I'd earned went into

Josh's account and always had. It seemed to have been agreed, without discussion, that he was better at these things than me. To do something like this, so actively deceitful, was unlike me. It was contrary to anything Josh would suspect and I derived a delicious thrill in it. Somehow, at the bottom of the well, an unconscious part of me began to haul itself up hand over fist into a semblance of independence. I didn't know what I would find at the surface; only that I had to be better than the position it was in. Face down in the mud. Rock bottom. Prone.

'But what is Josh *supposed* to *doooo*?' Mrs Little with her middle-class Johannesburg whine worried my nerves. With the phone to my ear I beckoned Josh. She was *his* mother, *he* could speak to her. She'd been updated on the fact that I could not risk any more pregnancies. She was devastated. Poor Josh. What would he *dooooo*? The marriage was fast beginning to resemble a breeding program. Would we adopt? I didn't know. What he would *dooooo*, I hadn't thought of that either. Why did I have to think about it? With the twins barely in the ground the urge to slither down the wires and beat her senseless was overpowering. But a seed was planted and perhaps that's what Mrs Little meant to do. She made it sound as if an employee had failed at a task and should consider resigning before she got the sack. What *was* Josh to *doooo*? The unfinished blue room at the back of the house turned my stomach whenever I walked into it. It was here the waters drowned everything. I couldn't live in the house but still there was a sense of waiting. Finally, the thing that was to set us free arrived in a flood of a different sort.

It was late, around midnight. The radio next door had been switched off and no sounds came from the television set in our lounge room. I assumed Josh had gone to bed and the house given over to ghosts. Josh had taken to locking himself

inside his bedroom at night. That made two of us. This distance had not concerned me. I was too far down the well and didn't want to speak to anyone. Days would pass without a single word escaping from my lips. Every thought felt too heavy to translate into words and I was too tired to speak. I wanted to be sent back into a world of pethidine and left alone. Josh spent his days at work and his weekends at the beach. He was able to put things behind him in a way that I could not. The atmosphere in the house had been slowly building into a tight lid and then, one night, it let out steam. I awoke covered in blood. I needed help. Could I die? I banged on Josh's door.

'You want to play your games; go to the chemist yourself,' he shouted through the wood.

Blood poured down my legs. For the second time in months, wrapped in towels, I dragged open our large front gate and felt the heat rise from the pavers. Claremont was deserted. There was an all-night chemist on Stirling Highway with a car park that appeared dark and eerie in the distance. For a second I thought it was closed. Even with the fact that I could park the car close to the door, there was still distance to cover to get to the brightly lit interior, further still to reach help if anything happened. The counter was located at the far end of the store no doubt to protect the on-duty staff by giving them ample time to identify any issues that might walk through the door. I measured out the distances. If a girl could disappear a few hundred metres away surrounded by night-clubbers, what could happen in a lonely car park late at night? In addition to the towel, I wore a pair of large track suit pants which made me appear bulky and misshapen. It was, among other things, humiliating. I took a deep breath and lunged out of the car with weary fatalism. If this was rock bottom the only place left to go was up.

There was no point in remaining stranded in the house which had become a raft of mutual misery.

The fortnightly amount reached $600 in my credit union account on Stirling Street. At the same time an advertisement appeared in the community newspaper. *Two bedroomed villa near showgrounds, $150 per week.* It would be a squeeze. The deposit would use all the money in the credit union account but that's what it was for. I met the owner at the villa. Tall, dark, surly looking, he was clearly irritated by the flow of tenants and seemed to sense yet another fly-by-night horror story. Picture it: separated, early forties, thin, haunted, foreign - even though he quite liked the accent. He was not interested in sob stories nor did he want anything to do with aggravated husbands with the potential to roar up driveways and kick in doors. No references. No money obviously, or she wouldn't be renting this dump. No car either. Not a good sign. But then these were not good times. The boom was over. He slapped the lease agreement down on the counter in the awful 1970's kitchen. How to negotiate? How to ask for leaking taps to be fixed and locks put on the back door? A quick glimpse at the greasy fingerprints traversing the walls said it all.

'I don't want you phoning me at all hours of the day and night asking me to come over and fix things,' he barked.

'That suits me just fine. I don't want a caretaker who sticks his nose into my business either.' We were both shocked when I said that.

I didn't have the heart to tell the cleaner at the motel how difficult it would be. That for each step forward there would be ten-steps back. That for the first year she would wonder every day if she'd made a mistake. That loneliness would be

her constant companion. That when she was finally able to get back into her house she should take more care with her packing than I did.

I could also have told her that some things *are* more depressing than sitting alone at home every night with a video and a box of hot chips. The thing that is worse than sitting at home with a box of chips is standing alone at the Captain Stirling Hotel on a Friday night watching overweight divorcees with sandstone for faces and yachts on the bay mull over the pickings as if they really are something. This fetid pool of sharks and mutton dressed as piranhas was a blood sport devoid of any romantic pretentions. Here it was understood. Love was a transaction in which entire conversations took place without a word being spoken. I was out of my depth. This was where I met Dolly. She was playing pool with her daughters. Her eyes were not on the ball. Double-D cup, blonde hair, low-cut sequined tops which, despite the time warp, were pure Johannesburg. Her favourite expression: you look so happy you could shit.

In '96 too, when winter became official and the fronts began to move in wet sheets across the showgrounds, another girl went missing. The first girl had not yet been found. A fresh face appeared next to the heart shape which, like outdated posters for music festivals, had faded in six months to the point of being invisible to passers-by on the street. The new face came with long blonde hair and a strong jaw. Two tiny red moons waxed or waned in each eye. I was never quite sure.

Josh in the meantime advertised for someone to share the house with. Women only need apply. He was about a month away from the woman one who

would make him happy but in the meantime there was the mortgage to pay. Enter Donna, tall, blonde, New Zealand. She would tell me that she was newly separated and that she had announced the separation to her husband by throwing the television set out of a third story window. I wished I'd thought of it.

Our introduction was unusual. We'd been paired up at the self-defence classes for women being held in a basement at Sir Charles Gairdner hospital. Being dark and older than her, I did not fit the profile of the missing girls but you could never be too sure. Donna did fit the profile and took to the kick-boxing segment with an enthusiasm that pulped my nose. I saw stars. It was over apology coffee at the Astoria and moist orange cake that Donna told me she'd rented a room from a newly separated South African who lived in a house on Rochdale Road. His was a wife a bitch apparently. As an afterthought she said I might know him. Josh was furious.

'How can you spy on my life like that? She's my ex-wife. I don't want her to know my business.'

'But I didn't *know* she was your ex-wife until she told me and besides I don't *know* your business.'

'I think you'd better move out. I'll give you forty eight hours.'

Donna called in tears.

'Why don't you move in here? Then there'll be two of us to share the joys of the Speedway on Friday and choke on the fumes.'

Afterwards, I realised that accusations of secrecy and spying had all been a ruse. Josh had met the woman who would make him happy and was anxious to

get rid of Donna so that he could move her into the house. It was all very rushed. In January he cried over the twins in the chapel; by July he was living with somebody else. How quickly life can change. Less than a year before we'd sat in Dr Ong's wood-panelled rooms. Four years before that we left everything we knew for the sake of unborn children. Now we were entirely different people.

With Donna came sleep. Or rather a restless semblance of sleep in twisted sheets until the first waking birds. My position, emotionally and financially, was precarious. By the time Donna moved in, the sum of my assets included a second-hand red turbo-charged Honda sold to me for $4,000 by a man who was later eaten by a shark while swimming at Cottesloe. There were a few sticks of IKEA furniture, my collection of books and a rented fridge. My bank balance was in deficit not counting the loan for the car and my name on the title of two mortgages for houses I had no access to. On the plus side, there was a job with the telephone company and they were good to me. Also, I'd taken a lease on the villa for a year so I knew that for twelve months at least, the ground beneath my feet was secure. Outside of that there were no safety nets.

There were many dreams on those hot showground nights. Recurring dreams of angry seas crashing in from all sides and breaking against the glass cube I was sealed in. There was enough room to stand and breath as my entire world drowned. I could watch, safe and dry, from the bottom of the ocean.

There were long restless dreams of my father. I travelled into decaying landscapes and walked narrow midnight streets searching for him. Buildings with broken windows surrounded me. The mood was dangerous and the air cold.

I recognised these streets as the ones in the city where, as a child, my father would take me to visit one of his girlfriends who lived in an old building in Commissioner Street. That was in the days before Nora. Before the city was evacuated to the suburbs and became another place entirely. Sometimes I stumbled up winding stairwells that stretched to the sky or stood locked in old caged lifts that creaked up to a maze of narrow passageways and the smell of boiled cabbages and burnt toast. I'd knock on the flimsy doors and through the sliver of space allowed by the chain lock, the hard faces of women who looked like Nora would tell me he'd just left.

One night, things changed. I found him as I walked down a street in a one-horse town. The type of street found in the old Wild West where shadows are long and tumbleweeds roll in from the desert. There was one main street with shambling cardboard houses tacked together on each side. One side was in deep shade, the other in sunlight. Men in hats lolled against the walls of the flimsy wooden buildings and smoked. In the middle of the street a girl had been hit by a truck and lay mangled in the spokes of her bicycle. She lay in pools of blood and glass. Noone made any effort to help her. I stared at her from the sidewalk, seeing her shocked look and the matted auburn hair. A tall man in cricket flannels strolled out of a nearby haberdashery. In the gloom his face glowed with a strange light. I was forced to squint he was so bright. Even so, I recognised him.

'Daddy, where've you been? I've been searching for you.'

'I've been dead,' he said 'Ssshhhh, don't tell anyone you've seen me. Here, take my hand, let's cross to the sunny side of the street.'

He took my hand and we floated over the mangled girl. I looked up to speak, my mouth overflowing with words. He was gone. Only a trail of salt on the pillow indicated that he'd ever been.

'Smile child. You look so happy you could shit.' It became a routine: Thursday nights at the Astoria with Donna and Dolly in one of her tight sparkly tops lecturing me on the beguiling feminine arts.

'No one's going to be attracted to you with that sour face.'

'When I have something to smile about, I will. Leave me alone!'

Dolly was Zimbabwean but still thought of herself as Rhodesian. She was a survivor with no money but a mouth full of plums.

To watch Dolly work the room was to receive an education *la femme* as predator. With four husbands to her credit she knew what she was doing and exactly how to position herself in good light. Dolly knew how to attract men in boat shoes. She was on the hunt for number five or rather, as she plumily put it, interviewing potential candidates who might provide a superannuation fund. She had a preference for Australians who, she said, were more polite, less chauvinistic and better in bed. She found her current beau, Roger, through *Possibilities*, the lonely heart section of the community newspaper. He was a linesman for Telstra and had been separated from his wife for a full eighteen months before Dolly arrived with her cork-screw curls. What followed was a long dog-in-the-mangeresque battle that Dolly ultimately lost but not before many bitter tears had been shed and many late-night mercy dashes across town by Donna and me to talk her out of killing herself. Josh had no idea how lightly he'd been let off the

hook, nor did the woman who was making him happy.

The red Addidas shorts I'd given Barbara years before when I tried to talk her into the relay, inspired her to run. Culturally, at that time, it was an extraordinarily unusual thing for a black woman to do and politically it was a dangerous thing to do. Blockades, armed patrols, soldiers, dogs, *Buffels*, rubber bullets, the Rooi Rus. That was just the white side. Comrades, street vigilante groups like the one that killed her husband and ongoing intimidation for the slightest transgression of arbitrary township laws, could and did end in necklacing. Barbara ran through all of this, slowly, deliberately, calmly as was her style and this made her achievement all the more memorable. I learned all this through the letters that began to arrive at regular intervals once she'd found me. She found me when she met Blueboy through the running club and he passed on my address.

The letterbox for the villa complex resembled something from a by-gone era leaning messily into a forest of weeds. Emails were the method of communication and the letterbox served as a vestibule for junk mail, yellowing Community Newspapers and unwelcome bills. I checked it only sporadically which is why it was some time before I found the blue airmail envelope addressed in a hand I didn't recognise and postmarked Sandton, Johannesburg. It was grubby, covered in loose beach sand and its corners nibbled by snails. I made myself a cup of tea before opening it.

My dear

i sow your brother at the club. he did tell me how

things are going for you. he is telling me about the tweens my heart is sow for you. God is great we must pray and he will look after us. Who is going to look after you that side. You must come home so that we can take care of you you are one of us. i am so lucky i have met you i am raining with those shots you have given me. how grece man how can josh do this things to you. we are missing you this side. how is the wather that side.

your friend

Barbara

The logistics of the letter, in the days of instant communication, may not be properly be understood. Today people don't spend much time queuing at the post office. Today people don't usually write letters. In '96 the only people who queued at the Sandton post office were people who didn't have someone to do it for them, students, old people, maids or Grand Old English Ladies and their illiterate garden boys, so that they could help them, in a muddled way, send money back to the homelands in the kindly belief they couldn't do this for themselves. To be fair, many couldn't. Many could only leave a shaky X on the papers and did require the maternal assistance of white madam-hood, if, for no other reason, than to protect them from the clerks behind the counter; the bottom-rung Apartheid job-reservation Sonderkommandos. The queue at the Sandton Post Office swallowed lunch hours, Saturday mornings, rafts of morale. Anxious, time-pressed people tried not to display overt signs of irritation or draw

the ire of the people in charge of money orders and postage stamp books. They could find, when they reached the counter, a sign go up which read 'Closed.'

Memoirs are fond of recalling idyllic childhoods and benevolent nannies, kindly people who twinkled and hummed softly as they worked. The post office queue represented a snap shot of South African society at the time. These were the queues where the subalterns and minions of Empire played out their allotted roles. Shuffling Africans and Engelse mense, those whose ancestors had thrown women and children into concentration camps during the Boer War, were made to pay for the slightest infringement in form-filling duties. Behind the wooden counters were the front-line soldiers of Die Vaderland, the Noras of the world with power over stamps, the glints of gold glimmering between front teeth.

Barbara would have remained serene through all the messy shuffling. Her long red nails polished, her lips glossed, her shiny black wig immaculate. Nothing would ruffle her impeccable calm. This was a woman who ran through the townships mid-revolution. The frayed heels of her shoes however, had something to say about distance and waiting.

Barbara did not see me as a traitor or a chicken-runner as so many others did. She saw me as a friend. For her, the concept of treachery towards a nation with a hierarchical approach to citizenship was irrelevant. I held the letter in my hand for a long time. It was a turning point in an ongoing world of guilt and self-punishment. I have the letter still. I keep it in my sandalwood box near the front door along with her others.

Here is the second great dilemma I wrestled with in the villa next to the

showgrounds. The first, remember, when seated on Aunt Gwen's green velveteen couch in the small asbestos house in Vanderbijlpark, was children. Now her spectre rose before me in those empty days post twins, post Josh, post house, post country, post, post, post. Those warped angry knuckles shiny with purple arthritis. That emaciated body with the protruding stomach. It was a sign of kwashikor in children; in Aunt Gwen it signalled starvation of a different sort. With her belly filled with nicotine, whisky and refined lemon cream biscuits she would finally succumb to emphysema and drown in the thick black tar that boiled in her lungs. She died with her hairnet on, her perm to the end tightly pristine. But to my mind she'd died years before as she shuffled in her slippers and smoked behind the polystyrene net curtains that screened her from a society framed around children. She was always a tall slab of misery; a leper with a 'lot.' There'd simply been no place for her in the Jacaranda town or any other town, pre and post revolution. At best she might fill up a paragraph or two in a novel before the action moved on to happier things.

When I washed the dishes at the villa and stared across the showgrounds Aunt Gwen came back to haunt me. My view from the window was a dusty untarred driveway with a chicken wire fence not unlike the view from her window in the asbestos house in Vanderbijlpark. She would have stared out at a patch of ground that bloomed with white mushrooms of dog shit. The driveway separated my hanging-on, barely-there $150 a week life from the spectacle of the fun-fair, the ultimate childhood dream. In October I would hear their screams on the carousels and roundabouts. I would smell the popcorn and watch as heart-

clogging hot dogs and mountains of spun sugar in pastel shades passed me by. I stood in the kitchen with thoughts of Aunt Gwen, Fritz the sausage-dog and the green velveteen couch. What was I supposed to do for the next forty years alone on the continent of Australia? I was at an age where most dreams have been punctured and people know them for the balloons they are. Unlike Dolly, I had no illusions. This is the age when men bunker down tightly into cocoons of family and, even if many don't appreciate it, are at least wrapped in the silk of some kind of safety. Even Dolly, for all her blasé talk about the pointless futility of children (and she had many funny things to say about squeezing out watermelons), had two daughters and a brother she could turn to.

Would that change if I returned to South Africa where Blueboy would be a comfort but there would be no jobs for people like me and where violence spilled into the suburbs? I needed a kraal, a laager, a place behind the walls in the fortress city Johannesburg was shaping up to be but who would offer it? I was well aware that in terms of my age I was on the cheap end of any bargaining position. What to do? How to protect myself in a world where the use-by-date on people is about the same as yoghurt? Did I really want to face chicken-runner syndrome all over again? Whichever country I landed in my future was uncertain, misshapen, Aunt Gwenish without nicotine. Nor was there money to move. I was stuck. But then there was the letter from Barbara. '**you must come home so that we can take care of you you are one of us. we are missing you this side**.'

A few months later, there was the telephone call from Blueboy. 'It's Barbara.'

Boksburg is a small satellite close to Johannesburg founded in the service of gold mines. It has a particular historical interest for me. I've run through it many times with blue legs on cold Highveld mornings. More significant than its withering temperatures mid-winter is the lake. It was here that part of the body of a woman was found in a suitcase in '64. Another body part was found in a suitcase at Zoo Lake. I know this because I'd followed the case in the newspapers and cut out all the reports of it to paste into my blue photograph album in the days when my grandmother was never sure whether I was psychologically disturbed or would grow up to be a detective.

Boksburg is also the place Barbara died. She'd written that she'd moved to a small neat Tuscany style townhouse with a guard at the front gate to the complex. Soweto was too violent for her, she had written, and Hillbrow, which would have been the easiest for her to get to work, brimmed with crime and refugees. She spoke lovingly about her new place. I wondered if she lavished it with the same industry as she had the little house on Vilakhazi Street, waking up at 3.30am to clean it before she trained and went to work. Once, when we'd been wandering around Sandton in our lunch hour, she admired a crystal bowl. She ran her long nails around the rim of it and gently tilted the bowl to check the price before putting it down again.

The story of her death filtered through the running world. It was never reported in the newspapers. For the newspapers, the usual government corruption and a gold medal in the Olympic marathon took precedence. In a country where one woman is raped every twenty-eight seconds, or four per minute, there wouldn't be space to report them all.

Women do not run alone at 5.00am if they can avoid it unless they live in the northern suburbs where the residents pay security companies large sums of money to post guards on the corners of every block. Even then, it's risky. It was to be a hill session that Thursday. Barbara arranged to meet with her running group outside the complex where she lived. Always punctual, she did not make an appearance. Had it been anyone else the runners might have considered, after fifteen minutes stamping their feet in the chill and blowing into their gloved hands, that the person they waited for had decided to stay in bed. Who wouldn't? It was freezing. But this was Barbara.

The runners decided to investigate. It was still dark. The smell of smoke and frost hung over the Highveld. Seen from above, Johannesburg was a vista of shimmering lights. Down on the ground there were very few people about. The guard was not at the gate so the runners slipped under the boom and made their way to her townhouse. They knew the moment they saw the garage door open and an empty space where the car should be that something was wrong. One of the runners, an IT technician on call, had a mobile phone with him. He called the police. The complex slept as the group crossed the frost bitten lawn of Barbara's miniscule garden and found the front door. They noticed her running shoes neatly stacked outside under an old canvas chair on the verandah. It was just like her never to walk across the floor in muddy feet. The front door was slightly open.

The police report would say the body was found hanging from a beam in the kitchen. She'd been raped, (four men), stabbed and left to die. Parts of her body

still glistened from the kitchen oil smeared onto it where the marks of the iron they'd used to torture her sizzled in neat satin points. The cord of steam iron was twisted around her neck so that the iron, a grotesque necklace of sorts, pulled her head heavily on to her chest.

The schedule for today: visit the old hated house and see if it jogs any memories. Was it as dull as I remember? Has the furrow around the house with the ornamental cauliflowers and ice-pansies survived the last twenty years? Does Josh still own the house with his vision to sub-divide and make a killing intact?

Up ahead Coulter Drive separates the suburbs of Hawker and Page from the Belconnen shopping precinct. The intersection is less than two hundred metres from the house as the crow flies, if the crow were to fly through the under-pass. The house is screened and protected from traffic noise by a row of houses in front of it. As I planned, it is midday, the same time my character would have arrived home on the morning of the 11th July 1993 when she returned from Calvary hospital. On that day she leaned her head against the side window and stared blankly out at the rows of small identical brown brick houses which were separated from each other by identical brown wooden fences. What did she think? From this distance it is difficult to see her face as it is covered from the side by a thick curtain of auburn hair. Even if her face were visible it is doubtful much would be revealed. She was an expert at concealment.

A chainsaw revs and breaks what real estate agents describe as a 'whisper quiet' street. I crane my neck towards the sound of the chainsaw and see an Asian man in goggles straddling a thick branch. I think of Mr Li. 'Canbwewa too cole, no flenly.'

My legs turn right into Krichauff Street. There it is. Concealed by low branches a sign reads *Wall Place*. I am close. This is the street. This is where the two brindle Staffordshire terriers dangled from a tyre above the soft green front

lawn. The owner of the house, a man who walked as if he'd been in the military, was particular about his lawn. He spent large amounts of time watering it or picking out tiny weeds. The house now looks disappointingly shabby. The lawn, the dogs, the swing are all gone. The curtains are drawn. Whoever lives behind them doesn't have a car. A shopping trolley rusts in the branches of straggly bottlebrush. It has obviously been wheeled up from the mall and dumped. I turn into the street.

In ’97 I bought my first place with my own money. The advertisement for the flat read ‘close to the beach with sea views.’

Two rooms fully furnished in matching faux Mexican furniture with large tubs of happy plants which thrived on the sunny veranda. The previous owner had dabbled in holiday accommodation and interior design and this was obvious. There were polished floorboards and despite the original 1960s kitchen and plumbing that creaked late at night, the flat was tasteful and harmonious. I was lucky. A weight had been lifted. A page turned. Now we were on *my* page. I took stock. I owned a red second-hand Honda and flat with a view of the Radisson Hotel car-park. At night, the flat was lit by a giant yellow Shell across the road advertising petrol. This gave the rooms an exotic tropical glow. At the window at night I toasted the shell, the beach behind it, West Coast Highway beneath my window. I was forty-one. It was twenty years since the riots began.

To take a step back: The lease on the villa had come to an end. Donna moved to North Fremantle. She’d found a wealthy divorced cattle farmer who lived in Broome and needed a crash pad in the city. Hers was the crash. His was the pad. Eighteen months had passed since that December. A month before the settlement of the house on Rochdale Road was finalised another girl went missing. A third face now circled the trees and floated on the walls of the Claremont shopping precinct. I wanted to move out of the area. It seemed soaked in sadness. With the house on Rochdale Road sold and a settlement reached I received a cheque for $14,000 to start my life again. I telephoned the real estate agent Josh pushed down the stairs. The one who’d called him a ‘smarmy arrogant

jumped up jerk.' I asked him if he would help me make an offer on a flat I'd seen at the beach. He managed to get it at a good price. It was here, under red geraniums, that hung in wild ropes from terracotta pots on my window sill, that I met Walter.

I'd taken to gardening. This was my place. I occupied the space between the low set of steps at the end of my kitchen to my front door with purple pansies, black-eyed Susans, petunias, bougainvillea and basil. In the midst of this riot of colour, one evening, a few months after I returned from late-night shopping, the red tips of two cigarettes glowed on low stairs near my kitchen window. I smelt the familiar smell of hand-rolled tobacco and froze. Two Africans were seated in semi-shadow. They spoke to each other in low familiar murmurs and flicked their ash into my plants as they smoked.

I wasn't expecting Africans and they weren't expecting me. Nodding awkwardly, I placed my shopping bags on the ground and unlocked my front door. They were cool and appraising. I was tense. I was tense because I could tell at a glance they were from Johannesburg. It was something about them, the instant recognition of something I hadn't realised I'd missed. I knew, even as I recognised them, that the moment I opened my mouth they would recognise me too. Would they be hostile? The revolution was over, the country was free but I wasn't sure about my reception. Once in Myers Department store in the city an African woman threw a box at me the moment I opened my mouth and she recognised my accent. Nevertheless I felt something should be said. I introduced myself as the caretaker of the building. I was feeling them out, trying to establish

if they lived in the building. The younger one stared at his feet. He was the nephew, the visitor. The older one, who looked a bit younger than me, was the uncle. He'd just moved in to the flat next door, he said.

'Knock on my door if you need anything, light bulbs in the passage (I pointed to the ceiling), blown fuses, (I pointed to the main meter box).'

'Thanks.'

I knew he knew I was from Johannesburg.

Sometimes in the evenings when I returned home from work, Walter would come and talk to me. We would settle on the steps so he could smoke, or sometimes sit in either one of our flats and I came to learn another version of our history. Until I met Barbara and Walter, I believed my own life had been frugal; a tragedy starring me as Ophelia. They showed me I was wrong.

Walter didn't look like a freedom fighter. The tattooed surfers down at the beach with their dreadlocks, pierced tongues and tribal earrings looked more dangerous. Sitting cross-legged on an orange bean bag in his flat in beige slacks, Walter was neither lean nor muscular as could be expected from one who'd crawled across the border shortly after the riots. He must have been lean at some stage though, because he was on the run for a long time, travelling at nights, sheltering in safe-houses where he could find them. The countryside at that time was alive with informers, oppositional factions, police, special-squad operatives and people with their own agendas. He must have been lean when he crawled into Botswana at around the same time I was boarding a plane for London with the newly-minted marriage of convenience stamped into my identity document. I

would become British, then Australian. He would become Russian, East German, Australian. At heart we would both remain African.

We couldn't have known then that as we grabbed our dreams and held on to them as best we could in a world that burned, we'd wind up almost where we'd started. Living side by side in a crummy building underneath the world across a beach neither of us set foot on. Johannesburg people are not water people. Perhaps in each other we'd found the lost piece that had snapped off our floating identities or was it simply the chance to talk it over with the other side? To find some sort of resolution to all the years of unsettlement? Who knows? For awhile at least his presence was a comfort.

When he arrived in Botswana Walter joined Umkhonto we Sizwe and trained with the cells operating throughout the frontline states. Because he was classified as a terrorist, or guerrilla-fighter, it was too dangerous for him to have contact with his family. For two decades his family didn't know whether he'd survived or where he'd gone to. Many people simply disappeared. For his part Walter didn't know whether his family remained intact. 'Do you know,' I said 'Mbuyisa Makhubo who carried Hector Pieterson across the newspapers of the world disappeared on that day too? His mother received a letter from him in 1978 postmarked Nigeria. He was never seen or heard of again.'

'Where'd you get these?'

I loved the smooth feel of the Russian dolls and Walter had quite a collection of them. Their voluptuous simplicity, their broad faces garishly happy and rouged pink were itching to be picked up and stroked. One at a time I pulled out the dolls

within the dolls within the dolls and set them out in a row; a plump army of babushkas in floral aprons in descending order of height.

'They remind me of those chocolate sprinkle-spread packets, remember them? They came in red packets with a girl on the cover who holds a sprinkle spread packet with a girl on the cover doing the same thing and so on until infinity.'

'We didn't eat chocolate sprinkle-spread in the townships.' He chuckled. 'I got them in Russia.'

'Russia! What were you doing in Russia? I didn't think South Africans could go there.' In fact our green and gold passports were stamped with the following in purple letters and smudged ink: Countries for which this passport is valid. Alle Lande Uitgesonderd. All Countries except, Albania, Bulgaria, China (Peking), Cuba, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Mongolia, North Korea, Poland, Roumania, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, North Vietnam, unless otherwise endorsed. Everywhere else you could take your chances as long as you had a visa, a return ticket, a convenient marriage certificate and a good story.

'Well if you think of it like that I wasn't really a South African, technically speaking. I didn't have a passport and I didn't exactly go to Russia for a holiday. I was recruited. Would you like some tea?' I nodded. 'What do you mean recruited? Recruited by whom and to do what?'

'To come beck and blow you up.' Heh heh heh.

There were reasons Walter didn't tell the full story. Political reasons, current and past; people to be protected, himself included. He had a family

waiting on a visa to leave South Africa. He fell into the loose definition of a terrorist but then I suppose it becomes a matter of who does the defining. But he did tell me about the night homesickness led to a suicide attempt and a bed at Charles Gairdner Hospital. That shocked me too. The raised fists and angry faces that had been our staple diet for years on the evening news caused me, unconsciously, to sweep away thoughts about the emotional cost this might taking on the lives of individuals. The rioters were represented as a single unit – a dangerous mass, a solid seething block out to get *us.* I never considered the fact that terrorists had mothers who might be missed.

'Why don't you just go home? The revolution is over, you won. It's your country now. There is no need for you to be an exile anymore.'

'Eish. I deeeed go home. I could not find werk. There is no place for me. It's too violent. The people are crazy. I want to get my family out. It is no longer my country.' He flicked his ash into my plant.

I thought about Barbara. Whose country was it I wondered? When did it begin and when will it end? Did it begin with the Portuguese or the Dutch? Did it begin with the British or the Afrikaner? Did it begin when the Zulu swept down or the Xhosa moved up? Or did it begin earlier than that? Did it begin when France persecuted the Huguenots and drove some of them at least to the Cape? Did it begin when the British burnt their farms and threw their women and children into concentration camps? Did it begin with the Native Titles Land Act? Did it begin when Cecil Rhodes found diamonds or when he found gold? Did it begin when everyone met in the middle and fought over land, cows, women and

money? Did it begin with the Koi San? Sixty years from now will the question be: Did it begin with the Zimbabweans, the Nigerians or the Congolese? Did it begin when China took over the mines? Did it begin when the settlers arrived or did it begin when they left?

Two of the houses further up Wall Place have been demolished and sub-divided. Modern villas replace the old quarter-acre block. A pastiche of building materials creates housing which seems to struggle for identity. There is nothing that historians or people who study urban space will be able to point to and say, as they say of Hillbrow the suburb of my birth, that the decay of the tower blocks, those tall fortresses of broken windows which these days express nothing but hardship and emptiness, are visual metaphors for the failure of modernity. Nor could they point to these villas with anything like nostalgia and hark back to the unrivalled craftsmanship of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. The old red-brick govies, they too have a story. I'm not sure exactly what it is, but they have their place in the history of the area. These new houses with the odd slanting colour bond roof lines, queerly shaped windows and walls that don't know what fibre they're wearing, point to confusion.

Look! There it is! My old house! The gum, the Chinese Elm and the patch of worn out lawn and the letter box are all untouched. The pale lemon outer walls, painted by me, are intact. I too have left my mark on this suburb's history. All those gloomy predictions about making more work for the future by painting it have been disproved. It makes the summer it took to do it worthwhile. The walls still look pristine. Gone are my mother's flowerbeds but if I look closely I can still make out the indentations, overgrown with weeds, where the ornamental cabbages and ice-pansies used to be. They were seasonal flowers anyway. One bloom and it was all over. The next year they'd be replaced with something else. Temporary potted colour, that's all they were. The oak wine cask used as a tub

for my Sweet Williams is gone too. Everything else remains as it was. It's as if I have stepped back in time. I can still see my mother, kneeling amongst the cabbages as I walk up the path.

I watch the house for a while. If anyone is peering from a window I might raise suspicions. A strange woman hanging about in a huge coat with a notebook is not something you see everyday. I plan on heading back to the market via Nettlefold Street to return the fork and spend the afternoon working on my exegesis in my room. I turn to go. Nothing has been revealed. And then I see it.

A small red tricycle leans against the steps by the front door. The sun, moving into the afternoon, casts a shade over it. I stop. I had a tricycle once, just like it. Something occurs to me. Something I had never noticed before. The house behind my father in the only picture ever taken of us, the picture I keep in my sandalwood box along with the letter from Barbara, is a house just like this. Incredibly, it's almost exactly the same. The photograph, dog-eared and postage stamped, features a man in a pullover holding a baby. The pullover I remember was blue. In all the years I've looked at the photograph I've never noticed the house. My attention has always been on my father. The way the shadows pooled on his cheeks in the sun. It's the only evidence I have that once upon a time there was a family.

Wait. Here is a memory. A small girl cycles up the pathway on a red tricycle. She pedals furiously towards a woman kneeling with a spade in her hand. The woman digs her way around the house as she plants ice-pansies and ornamental cauliflowers. A bright green locust makes an appearance on the path in front of

the girl. Her shrill screams tear open the afternoon. A baby begins to wail in the distance. The woman, annoyed now, hoists herself up and slaps the girl, whack, right across the face. She falls off the tricycle and screams harder. The mother marches inside to attend to the baby.

The door opens. A car purrs as it waits at the bottom of the driveway. Two bearded men sit in the front seat smoking. The woman appears with suitcases, the girl, the baby in a carry crib. The men open the car doors for her, load the children onto the back seat and the luggage into the boot. The woman climbs into the front seat. They drive away from the house. The father is nowhere in sight. If there were tearful farewells the girl will never remember. As the car drives away the girl presses her face to the window, peers out at a landscape that seems vast, empty, mid-winter desolate.

They drive to Severn Court above the railway station at the bottom of Claim Street where the woman stays for a few months finding her feet. Next she will move to Miller's Mansions on Twist Street. The flat will have a lounge which doubles as a bedroom, an entrance hall with a dining room table and a small alcove to fit a single bed. It will be the girl's bed. These memories arrive like old photographs with their floating images, their subtle currents of air and the pressures of human touch.

It was November '61. There was Miller's Mansions on Twist Street. Joubert Park was across the road and a few blocks up the Old Fort prison. It was here my mother made the butterfly wings. See how close it all was. History and family could almost touch each other between the bars of our respective prisons.

Everybody dreamed of transformation, of freedom, of flight. At night, in locked cells and behind the closed doors of the flats in the neighbourhood, people lived on dreams to sustain them. Transformation and flight, night after night my mother bent over the butterfly wings.

On the day my generation kicked off their brown shoes to begin the summer holidays, my mother presented them to me. I'd known all along where she'd hidden them but went with the mystery. She loved the element of surprise. Along with the wings came a mask I hadn't seen before. It was made out of cardboard with silver glitter glued all over it. Elastic was threaded around the back so that it would stay attached to my face. It was too tight and it made me feel claustrophobic. When we arrived at the school for the fancy dress party, I refused to wear it. It rained that day. The city smelt of dust, the pavements were slippery with leaves, newspapers, stompies and the storm-water drains gushed jacaranda petals.

Johannesburg 1961

'Ag sistog!'

'Ag my moeder! Kyk hoe lyk hierdie kleintjie!'

'Ag shame man, your daughter is so sweeeet hey!'

'Bheka inthombazana encane!' Look at that little girl!

I was bedraggled. My wings, heavy with rain, dragged on the ground. My mother wanted to remove them and dry me so that I wouldn't catch a cold. The sun had come out as it does after a Highveld storm. I fought with her when she tried to take them off. Having struggled to get me into them, she could not get me out of them. I developed a sudden love affair with my wings. My arms were threaded through loops attached to the pantyhose so that when I flapped my arms the wings opened and closed. Not only that, with the fancy dress over and the photographs of trembling lips taken I fell in love with the mask too, and insisted on wearing it on the way home. It was so firmly attached to my face I could barely see out of the thin slits my mother had made for the eyes. Because of this, our journey down Twist Street took a long time to a chorus of women who clutched their shopping and looked at me in the limp way women do. I held my mother's hand and cocked my head backwards to see where I was going. At the flat the two bearded men waited with Blueboy.

We were going to the coast for the weekend. It was a spontaneous idea, a treat for my mother who they felt sure, needed a bit of a lift. One the men had a friend who owned a flat near Addington Beach. My mother said she needed to get out of this dump and that this bloody child was driving her crazy. She was being a

real little bitch.

Getting into the car was another issue. The wings made things awkward and bent into strange shapes when I sat on them. It was not terribly comfortable and I wanted to get out of them all of a sudden. I was no longer in love with my wings. But now that I had my way, my mother decided that I could stay that way, damp, bent, stubborn and half-strangled by the ribbons around my neck. The mask stayed on too. My mother, irritated, bundled Blueboy next to me at the back. Exhausted, she squeezed onto the front seat and sat between the two men. We were off to the coast, three adults, a baby and a cold butterfly.

I must have fallen asleep. Through the slits, when I awoke, I made out that it was dark. The gentle swish of the windscreen wipers and the whoosh of tyres on wet tar told me that it was raining too. In front three heads were illuminated by oncoming headlights. My mother told a joke. Peels of laughter. The glint of a bottle passed down the line between them. I drifted off.

There was scream and then the world tore apart. The car, airborne, skidded in the rain and flew over a low bridge. It scudded through farmland and came to rest when it hit a tractor. Gran told me this much later. All I remember is a dark mouth opening behind me as I was sucked into the roaring wetness of it. Then I flew back again, jerked inside by a hand on my foot. When she told me the story my grandmother said my mother must have turned around at the exact moment I vanished out the door and instinctively grabbed my foot and dragged me back inside. She saved my life. It all happened in a blink. All I remember is a night that roared. Then there was silence.

I couldn't see. There was rain outside and faint stirrings of movement on the seat next to me. Blueboy. I felt about. My hand rested on glass but underneath I could feel his soft warm body moving. I crawled out of the car. It was black and pelting down. Around me the ground seemed slimy. We must have travelled a long way off the road when the car slithered across the field. In the distance, through my slits, I could see occasional beams of passing light. The world felt heavy. I struggled for breath. It was as if the air had been sucked right out of me.

'Pick up the baby Grace.' It was my mother. Her calm voice reassured me. I could hear her, but I couldn't see her. I crawled back inside and groped for Blueboy with fingers fumbling through glass. In a kneeling position I struggled to get hold of him and pull him out of the crib. I couldn't see anything. The crib had been thrown forward. It was wedged between the seats but Blueboy had been protected by pillows and tucked in blankets. I felt his warm body wriggle as I dragged him out of the crib and struggled backwards out of the car. He was a dead weight, awkward and difficult to lift.

'Walk towards the road.' I couldn't see the road. I tilted my head to see through the slits and made out shapes in the rain. Shiny hideous hulks seemed to leer. They frightened me. I wanted my mother. Blueboy was weighing me down.

'Up here Grace, walk towards to the road.' I followed her voice. It seemed to whip in the wind. I tilted my head to see through the slits. There she was, on the road flagging down cars. Silver threads streamed in the headlights of passing cars, her red hair was plastered across her face. I could see her clearly. I

stumbled through the long wet grass, which at times was taller than me. Blueboy was howling. With the weight of the baby, the wings and the dragging mud I had to put him down. I moved towards my mother, slipping and sliding as I went. She re-appeared and disappeared through the grass. The journey took forever. Finally, I came to the embankment at the side of the road and crawled up it on my hands and knees pulling on tufts of wet grass.

The first people to come across the accident that night talked about it for several years. They would say what a strange sight it was to see a small girl appear out of the bush on the old Durban road somewhere near Volksrus. Drenched to the bone and covered in mud she appeared to wearing some sort of mangled butterfly outfit and a strange silver mask which looked the worst for wear. It was quite frightening. She'd practically walked straight out in front of the car oblivious. It was a miracle she wasn't hit. At first they thought it was an apparition or a decoy playing silly buggers to get them to stop the car; totsis who had friends in the bushes waiting to rob them. If it hadn't been for a set of coincidences they would not travelled down the road that night. They would not have stopped for the girl or found the baby lying in the long grass somewhere between car and the road.

I often think about that night. The mask prevented me from seeing many things. It prevented me from the seeing the bodies of the two men in the front seat. It prevented me from seeing the body of a woman catapulted through the windscreen and into the grass, her face in ribbons. She must have been half out of her seat, people said, in '61, when the tractor was hit.

I decide to return to the motel via Nettlefold Street. The street, hated at the time, is now disturbingly familiar. It's like a home coming of sorts, but not quite. The house at Wall Place is linked to so many distant memories but it has no power over me anymore. It is just a house. An ugly one at that, softened slightly by the Chinese elm out front. At the market I hand back the fork, have a coffee and buy a bottle of Merlot. When I get back to the motel it is late afternoon. The cleaner has taken the apples and the Lychee juice. I check my emails, pour a glass of wine and stare out the window. There is no inspiration to write. Instead I decide to work on my exegesis. Outside the window, across the street, a galah pecks at the verges.

When I first arrived in Australia I was enchanted with the idea of pink birds. Judith told me that they mated for life and if something happened to one of them, the other would live alone forever. Since then, whenever I see a galah on its own I search for its mate. Today I don't find it. I want to go out and sit on the pavement and stroke it. I close the curtains to shut out the distraction and get back to work. The book I am reading is an interpretation of a famous South African novelist. I read: *Gordimer's work has been particularly enthusiastically received in recent years in America and Europe: an international readership anxious to learn more about the complexities of the South African experience has found in her work what has seemed to be an accessible, thoughtful and subtle reflection of what it might be understood to have been 'really' like to have lived under South Africa's apartheid regime over the past forty years*. I sip my wine. I peep at the galah. It's still there pecking on the fringes. What was it really like to have lived under Apartheid for

forty years? Who can say? Our experiences were different. Lucky for Gordimer she lived in a world conducive to fiction.

‘So Where to Now?’

The Female Bildungsroman and the Missing Child

Introduction

> *Creative Writing as a postgraduate discourse occupies a liminal space in Australian Universities. A poor relation of a poor relation, it is marginal in the university environment as a whole and there are internal tensions regarding Creative Writing's disciplinary place within Humanities/English. Further, there is no consensus on what constitutes a Creative Writing exegesis, which comprises one half the award. In the absence of adequate definition a space can be used to probe the grey areas of our discipline.*[1]

Scholarship on the Creative Writing exegesis us does not offer a nationally recognized definition as to how it supposed to be structured. Indeed, apart from the requirement to make a contribution to knowledge and that it should be linked to the creative work, there is little available information as to what it should contain. As Kroll and Webb point out, the examiners of Creative Writing doctorates are challenged by the fact that 'each country, let alone each institution, has its own creative and academic culture.'[2] In light of this ambiguity, my understanding of the theoretical exegesis is that it should be an organic work linked to the creative component and required to engage with scholarship. It is therefore not a stand-alone dissertation but rather an accompanying scholarly work linked to the creative component through key themes and elements.

At the same time it should also offer insights into the student's writing practice in terms of the thought processes and decision-making required to produce the work. The reason for a self-commentary in what I understand to be a practice-based exegesis is to demonstrate problem-solving skills driven by

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[1] Vahri McKenzie, "Liminal Space: Postgraduate Creative Writing in Australian Universities," *Limina*, Special Edition (2007) : 20. Print.

[2] Jeri Kroll and Jen Webb, "Policies and Practicalities: Examining the Creative Writing Doctorate, *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 9:2, 166-178, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2012.665930>

knowledge of craft informed by research. As I discuss later, a static or narrow research focussed exegesis becomes problematic for creative writers who might begin a project with one focus but are forced to shift and expand their perspective as a result of the fluid nature of the creative process. It is therefore difficult to predict at the outset what the research component will comprise of although one can offer a specific area of focus at the outset which will be open to renegotiation as the creative work takes shape and places demands on the creative artist.

At the 17th Annual AAWP Conference held in November 2012, Webb, Lee Brien and Burr presented the findings of their Australia-wide focus group sessions which they'd hosted for the purpose of analysing the marking habits and expectations of Creative Writing PhD examiners. They found that most examiners agreed that the postgraduate student in their exegesis *must*: 'reflect critically on their own practice to extend knowledge for other people' and that 'the form of the thesis and the nature of the work [is] so diverse [that] each project is really its own project.'

In addition, the respondents of Webb, Lee Brien and Burr's study also agreed that 'the doctorate evaluates the capacity of that person to conduct independent research and deliver 'new knowledge, rather than evaluating their 'artistic ability.'[3] These findings suggest that the Creative Writing exegesis is organic and can be moulded to suit the creative work. Unshackled from the rules that govern formal academic dissertation writing it is open to innovation as long as it makes a contribution to knowledge and demonstrates evidence of research. In addition, the self-commentary on writing practice offers an adjunct service to

[3] Jen Webb, Donna Lee Brien and Sandra Burr, "Facing the final hurdle: creative arts PhD programs and examination standards' *Encounters: refereed conference papers of the 17th Annual AAWP Conference, 2012.*

knowledge since each work and therefore each experience in creating the work is different.

The Creative Writing exegesis therefore contributes to knowledge in two ways. The first is through chosen themes supported by independent research and the second is the way in which the research takes shape or is challenged in the creative form and whether or not there are any problems that stem from this. An example of this is the bildungsroman, my chosen field of research. It became quite clear very early into the project that the bildungsroman, as a genre, was inadequate as a structure for my work. I was forced to adopt other modes of representation and expand my research to accommodate this change. I discuss the reasons for this inadequacy in the following chapters.

Sally Berridge argues in 'Arts-based research and the creative PhD' that 'in an arts-based project, goals and issues are less well-defined – they may be multiple, diffuse and broad in scope, though nonetheless systematic, and there may be a more overt process of reflection when the scope, breadth and depth of the project may widen and deepen. She goes on, (and this has been my experience too), that in the process of broadening the scope of the exegesis to contain the new ideas and skills that she was forced to adopt, 'led to further conundrums about how to fit in all the relevant theoretical discussions into an exegesis of about 30,000 words without being shallow and superficial.' Berridge, like McKenzie with whom I opened this exegesis and discuss shortly, identifies creative writing as 'an 'in-between' risky space where anything can happen yet it is bounded by the rules of the academe.'[4]

[4] Sally Berridge 'Arts-based research and the creative PhD' [get details]

Berridge argues that it is essential to have supervisors and examiners who are 'both sympathetic to the cause and who are competent in the required literacies' to help postgraduate students chart their way through a doctorate the guidelines for which are at best vague and at worst contradictory and counterproductive.

Innovation in terms of the structure and presentation of the exegesis is another area where contributions to knowledge are possible. This can be achieved through testing the boundaries and destabilising the gulf between unstructured creativity and academic formalism. With this in mind, it was the idea of liminality and its potential to move between discourses and integrate the raft of unexpected issues that were beginning to burden my project, that I found most appealing about McKenzie's article 'Liminal Space: Postgraduate Creative Writing in Australian Universities.'

I came upon McKenzie's article when I was researching what is expected of the PhD Creative Writing exegesis. I had hoped to find some direction with regard to the dialogue between its two assessable components – the creative and the theoretical. Instead I found something else. What struck me was that - McKenzie's article is about systems of power; the relationships that operate within those structures; the influence each of these relationships has in harnessing power to its advantage; the opportunities available to affect or take part in the decision-making process; and finally, to achieve acknowledgement, visibility and legitimacy within the academy, to share in the spoils. The question of what constitutes cultural value and who determines it underpins McKenzie's concerns about the relationship between the creative and the theoretical, and whether or not creative writing, as a discipline, is valued within the academy.

Yes, she says, we are all part of the scholarly tradition, but some of us are considered more academic than others and the rewards are distributed accordingly. Creative writing, she argues, is the poor relation of a poor relation. It occupies a marginal position within the university environment and consequently, creative writing postgraduates inhabit a liminal space, 'where that term refers to situations that don't fit easily into dominant systems of categorisation, perhaps carrying a burden of irrelevancy or unimportance on several levels.' Despite this, she argues, and because of their liminality, postgraduate creative writing students are well placed to move between categories, 'to trouble the dichotomy between theoretical and experiential knowledge' and to open up a space that we can use to 'probe the grey areas of our discipline'[5] Since grey areas particularly in relation to space and in-between states of being are what my exegesis is about, I felt the licence offered by the creative doctorate would allow me to integrate the creative, the theoretical and my lived experience into one innovative body of work.[6]

[5] Mckenzie. *Liminal Space.* 21.

[6] To offer a frame for how I intend to proceed with the structure of this exegesis I point out that it's not only creative writers who have a tense relationship with theory. Some theorists themselves express exasperation with the gap between lived experience and theoretical knowledge. Elspeth Probyn, for example, has lost patience with what she sees as 'theoretical descriptions that are so abstract as to be meaningless' (17), Beverley Skeggs argues that in recent years there 'has been a marked tendency to move away from talking and listening to anyone outside academia' (2) and posits that 'feminist and cultural theorists proliferate with theories of identity and subject constructions but few of these theories explore the processes by which real women negotiate and understand themselves.' (1). From the creative side, Toni Morrison is unmoved by theorists who she argues, remain firmly entrenched within stereotypical modes of knowing. Instead she turns 'as a last resort' to creative writers who she argues 'are the most sensitive, the most intellectually anarchic, most representing, most probing of artists.'(15) Given the anxieties between theory and creative writing and the requirement to produce an exegesis which moves between both worlds, and in the absence of any clear definition of how the exegesis should be presented, I have borrowed from Probyn and offer here not a dissertation, but 'rather an invitation to come exploring' and I weave together both personal and theoretical reflection in a creative way. Probyn, who interweaves theoretical, literary and personal sources argues that narrative style is important when dealing with new ideas. *Blush* adopts an inter-disciplinary approach to theorising shame and is written in an accessible style. I have drawn some academic licence from this approach and have done the same with this exegesis. See: Probyn, Elspeth. *Blush.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. Print. Skeggs, Beverley. *Formations of Class and Gender.* Nottingham: Sage Publications. 1997. Print. Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark.* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 1992. Print.

Methodology

I opened this exegesis with a quote from McKenzie's article in order to foreground the anxieties around the creative/theoretical debate and to foreground the direction I will be taking in the structuring of this exegesis; namely the idea of transition or liminality and its potential to disrupt fixed ideas or dominant discourses. Since the creative and theoretical components (the dominant discourses of this project) are required to be linked, moving between them, as opposed to separating them, seemed to be an accommodating gesture that did justice to both.

In 'Arts-based research and the creative PhD', Berridge writes:

> 'if art and life are indeed connected, it is a logical progression to use artistic/creative practice to tell my life story: in my thesis I used words and images within a personal aesthetic framework to make perceptible (to myself and others) my stories, ideas and concepts that until this point had not been expressed, making my internal 'petrified world speak, sing and dance.'[7]

Berridge goes on that her thesis is concerned with autobiography, memory and identity and she submitted, in final form, two artist's books enclosed in a cardboard box painted to look like a steamer trunk despite university regulations about formal binding. Since my own work is concerned with similar themes to Berridge and while I intend to remain within university guidelines with respect to binding, I seek to expand upon autobiography as a genre and the exegesis as an

[7] Berridge, 'Arts-based research', p.3.

academic commentary by blurring the boundaries between them. To achieve this I will draw upon Berridge's idea of an 'in-between space' and McKenzie's 'liminal space' and offer experiential knowledge in the form of self-reflection as that risky place which challenges both creative and theoretical representations of my particular subject.

The knowledge I offer from my lived experience will take two forms. The first is from the position of a white working class background during the Apartheid years which will challenge the dominant discourse of the South African narrative. The second will, I hope, make a contribution to craft by reflecting on the pitfalls I faced in producing a work 'from below' and having to change horses mid-stream so to speak, in order to complete the project. What follows then is a reflection on the ways in which creative artists and theorists alike have represented Africa in general, white working class South African lives in particular, and my experience of a country, a suburb and a state of being in transition.

Using chapters that focus on a particular theme, I engage with the work of others in order to shed new light on old stories about Africa. Since the dominant colonial discourse is race, I adopt the liminal position in order to discuss the linkages between race, gender, citizenship and motherhood in the South African context. Because of the complexity of the colonial legacy, the race discourse is privileged in most scholarship. Since a contribution to *new* knowledge is a PhD requirement, I take the risky position of introducing other key, unpopular and ignored issues as an acknowledgement that South Africa is a multi-dimensional and not a single-issue society.

Since my area of interest is writing from below and the small stories of those

not normally represented in national narratives, the following chapters are structured individually around the key themes in the creative work. In choosing to structure my exegesis as an integration of the creative and the theoretical underpinned by lived experience, an exegesis which of necessity, examines a range of interweaving issues, I am motivated by the idea that

> … complex ideas in the social domain require complex descriptive models: they cannot be described or examined in simplicity, and are unsuited to conventional representative forms. … This is the risky business part of genuinely original work in the setting of a PhD, because of its innovation: there can be uncertainty in the student, the supervisors and the academy as to whether the new, unconventional work is acceptable. Is it genuinely 'new' or is it merely an aberration.[8]

Berridge and others are not alone in calling for new modes of expression for complex issues. Elspeth Probyn who integrates personal reflection with scholarly analysis in her work *Blush,* has argued that narrative style is important when dealing with new ideas. With this in mind I feel the liminal or risky space is a fitting mode for me to adopt as a way forward and I feel justified choosing this unconventional but by no means less rigorous mode to represent what is a complex society in transition.

[8] Berridge, Arts-based research. P.3.

An Image of Africa

In *Home and Exile* Chinua Achebe writes about writing as a system of power. For example, Achebe discusses how Western literature erased the existence of African culture by overlaying it with interpretations of its own. These interpretations, told through journals or novels or theoretical ponderings, created a bank of 'knowledge' about Africa for Western readers to consume. Achebe points to a study undertaken by Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow entitled *The Africa that Never Was* where, over a four-hundred-year period, Hammond and Jablow identify five hundred volumes of fiction and non-fiction about Africa. These produced a body of fantasy and myth which developed into a tradition 'with a vast storehouse of lurid images to which writers went again and again through the centuries to draw 'material' for their books.'[9]

Achebe credits *Mister Johnson*, a dismissive story about African life written by an Irishman and filled with images drawn from the above-mentioned storehouse, as the book that turned him into a writer when he understood his home was under literary attack. 'Not,' he says 'merely a house or a town, but more importantly, an awakening story in whose ambience my own existence had first begun to assemble it's fragments into a coherence and meaning.'[10] Achebe ponders that the literary abuse of a continent, and the collapse of its myriad cultural formations and national groups into an image of Africans 'as barely recognizable humanity,' had taken their toll in the way Africans began to see themselves through European eyes. Achebe concludes *Home and Exile* by celebrating the reclamation of African culture by African writers who grew tired

[9] Achebe, Chinua. *Home and Exile.* United Kingdom: Canongate, 2003. Print. 26.
[10] Ibid. 38.

of seeing their world explained and obscured by a thick crop of Wordsworth's Daffodils and took up the challenge to represent themselves. With the space clearing gestures provided by Heinemann's African Writers Series and later by post-colonial studies, for the first time future generations of African writers and readers had access to libraries of knowledge about their own stories.[11]

Stories then operate within their own systems of power and privilege. They are not downtrodden Cinderella's sweeping ashes at the fireside, nor are the writers who produce them. They can and do push back. What Achebe celebrates in *Home and Exile* is a new form of writing that reclaimed culture through small stories as the empire gathered its collective pens and wrote back. I too celebrate the de-centering of culture away from exclusive (and by this I mean elitist and exclusionary) European traditions towards the type of smaller story encapsulated within the rubric of post-colonial literature. This is how I came to writing. I wasn't interested or inspired by Victorian realism or the weighty tomes from Europe. I too, was forced into the rote learning of Wordsworth's Daffodils so despised by Jamaica Kincaid that it left her mute and sick in *Lucy*.[12] I wanted to read something that represented my world and that world was South Africa. Having said this, most white South Africans seemed to write within the European tradition and what they had to say and assume about the collective 'us' didn't, for reasons I will discuss, reflect my world.

While not wishing to engage with the epistemologies of post-colonial literature and post modernism, what attracted me to these formations of writing

[11] The future generation of writers Achebe celebrates includes many of the writers who directly influenced me in my writing of *Bloom* and in my thinking about issues that concerned *Bloom.* These writers do not only come from Africa but fall largely under the rubric of world literature or post-colonial literature and include Tsitsti Dangerambagna, Jamaica Kincaid and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. I open with Achebe because the concept of *Home and Exile* in terms of separation from country is relevant to *Bloom.* However the concept of home or exile can also describe psychological states and it is this internal displacement that also concerns *Bloom.*

[12] Kincaid, Jamaica. *Lucy.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990. 29. Print.

was the exciting potential to disrupt seamless linear narratives which normalized particular modes of being.[13] In my case, the world that needed literary disrupting was smug, white middle-class South African liberalism in the throes of an endless anxiety attack over its position in the new order. These anxieties were and are played out in a range of fictions and theories, which, in my view, merely serve to re-inscribe cultural hegemony through contriteness and repentance in ways that simply repeat old paradigms.[14] A good example of this is *Country of my Skull* by Afrikaans poet and journalist Antjie Krog.[15]

Country of my Skull has the reputation of being an exemplary post-Apartheid synthesis of personal and political narratives. The primary subject of the book is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC as it is known, was a public forum which took place in South Africa following the fall of Apartheid as a way of facilitating national healing through declaring out in the open the crimes of the past. In a country where obfuscation was the norm during the Apartheid years, the idea behind the TRC was that through truth and the granting of amnesty for that truth, suffering would be acknowledged and this would facilitate a path towards reconciliation and the reconstruction of broken lives and a broken society. Indeed the publisher's note to Krog's book acknowledges the silencing that occurred during Apartheid and celebrates the fact that for the first time in our history, the small stories and struggles of people were being brought out into the open. It ends with the following moving passage:

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[13] For key texts in this field see Ashcroft, Bill., Griffiths, Gareth. and Tiffin, Helene. eds. *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 1989. _____. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 1995 and Bill, _____. *Post-Colonial Studies*:*Key Concepts.* London: Routledge, 2000.

[14] A good example of this is Melissa Steyn's book *Whiteness Just Ain't What it Used to Be* which expresses an impressive class and gender blindness by theorising the white middle-class condition as the normative and lists, in an orderly and systematic way, the types of privileges the white middle classes routinely accessed under Apartheid. Her 'speaking for' white South Africans paradoxically reformulates cultural hegemony even as she seeks to disavow and deconstruct it. Steyn, Melissa. *Whiteness Just Isn't What it Used to Be* . New York: State University of New York, 2001. See Mary West for an analysis of white women's writing which she argues, reformulates old assumptions through new forms of contriteness. West, Mary. *White Women Writing White*. Cape Town: David Philip Publisher. 2009.

[15] Antjie Krog, *Country of my Skull*, Johannesburg, Random House, 1998.

> Many voices of this country were long silent, unheard, often unheeded before they spoke, in their own tongues, at the microphones of South Africa's Truth Commission. The voices of ordinary people have entered the public discourse and shaped the passage of history. They speak here to all who care to listen.[16]

We move to page 1 of the book, to a chapter entitled 'They Never Wept the Men of my Race' and what becomes apparent is that Krog is going to weep for them. Copiously and on every page, drowning out the voices of the historically silenced. Despite writing that 'victims, and not perpetrators, should be the beginning, the focus and the central point of the legislation. … Victims should have several point of entry into the process'[17] the book becomes more about Krog (who, if not in spirit then at least in race and culture is identified as a perpetrator) and her horrified reaction to hidden Apartheid crimes. She attempts to distance herself from it by foregrounding her own pain and sense of betrayal to the extent that the victims function as mere props while Krog's own anguish takes centre stage. It is bad enough that the small stories of victims require the facilitation of the educated white elite in order to be heard but Krog effectively appropriates the collective victimhood and inserts herself into it.

Another subtle and disturbing aspect of *Country of my Skull* is the way in which even as Krog reports on the horrifying acts of her fellow white countrymen, she invokes tropes of barbaric Africa and undermines black victimhood by juxtaposing her story with fragments of life on her brother's farm constantly under threat by 'muti' drinking thieves. Her use of the word 'muti' is artful since

[16] Krog, *Country*, p.viii
[17] Krog, *Country*, p.5

it signifies and invokes the unchristian, illogical other and normalizes the need for security and surveillance of the other, the very tenets of which are the subject of the TRC. I sympathise with Krog because the mission to write about the white experience is difficult and this was why I did not want my story to become an adjunct to a commentary about Apartheid. Nevertheless in the spirit of the TRC I believe there should be a space for all our stories to be told. Healing comes in the telling and the struggle to make sense of our experiences even if they are clumsy. Regardless of privilege, in one way or another, Apartheid silenced us all.When I began *Bloom* it was with the idea of telling a small story. I wanted to creatively engage with my experience as a migrant and write about how I coped with perinatal death without a network of support and how this resulted first in post natal depression followed by clinical depression and a long period of darkness. Following a six-month stretch in 1995 during which time I'd lost my mother to cancer, twins to stillbirth, my marriage along with my house and I was living alone in a city where I didn't know anyone, I received the news one morning that my step-brother had committed suicide in America by gassing himself in his car. He was twenty-seven and going through a divorce just as I was. I was in Australia and he was in America; we were both in some form of flux following the dismantling of Apartheid.

Casper was a young Afrikaner who wanted nothing more than to be a male model and own a flashy car. I was the proverbial misfit who Casper had, for some odd reason, developed an attachment to. He would surprise me by remembering my birthday on odd years or a letter would arrive out of the blue. Our respective families, which between them put the 'D' in dysfunctional, were in South Africa. At least Casper's was. My mother had recently passed away which left one

surviving relative, my brother. When I was given the news of Casper's death it broke me. Even without the combined circumstances of parental and child loss, Casper had been unable to cope with emotional, cultural and physical dislocation. While I wasn't exactly coping well either, I was still alive. What was the difference between us? Casper's death, more than all the deaths that pressed in on me at that time, made me realise acutely how thin the thread that binds us to people is when we find ourselves in states of exile and how much psychological damage, we, as white South Africans, had suffered as a result of Apartheid. [18]

There is also the memory that until now, I have always kept to myself. During this time of being entirely alone in the world and one Sunday morning being unable to bear it, I attached the hose of my vacuum cleaner to the exhaust of my car. It fitted perfectly. As I sat in car in the hot sun thinking about what I was going to do next, it occurred to me that I should at least leave a suicide note. I stepped out of the car, went into my bedroom and sat down to write. While I didn't produce a book that day, Phaswane Mpe wrote *Welcome to our Hillbrow* as a distraction from suicide prompted, in part, by a stalled academic thesis and a period of unwellness. In his book, suicides litter the streets of Hillbrow, a suburb I will be writing about in this exegesis. Tragically for Mpe and with eerie prophecy, the book that stalled Mpe's thesis did not heal his unwellness. He abandoned his studies on the advice of a traditional healer to whom he had turned for a cure for the nightmares that plagued him. He was advised to become

[18] In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison expresses an irritation with what she sees as the 'indifference of literary criticism' to issues outside stereotypical racial paradigms. She asks, for instance, why it is that while the victimhood of race has been more than adequately theorised (and in keeping the focus on the victimhood of race whiteness reformulates and re-foregrounds itself), little time has been spent in 'serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination and behaviour of the masters.' (p.12) I have wondered this myself. There is the sense that to open this debate is to offer an apologist argument by suggesting that masters were victims too and this view, as I discuss in relation to Victoria Burrows reading of *Wide Sargassa Sea*, is open to criticism. With *Bloom* I attempt to creatively engage with this issue and in this exegesis I theorise how this damage could psychologically act out.

a traditional healer and following this advice, died on the eve of his initiation. [19]

What interests me about Mpe is the way in which language, the vocalization of trauma and finding the words to insert a space between dominant discourses seems to have affected his mental health. In Translating the Nation, academic and writer Michael Green writes at length about how the official language policy of South Africa is 'fraught with the history it tries to transcend.'[20] At stake is having a voice and being able to articulate thoughts and knowledge in your own language without the requirement to have that voice facilitated through, in Mpe's case, English, the language of oppression.

For writers like Mpe, whose home language was Sepedi but whose publishing future depended on works in English, this presented something of a contradiction to understanding what it means to be post-colonial. Add to this the anxieties that weave themselves through the novel which amount to a clash between city and rural, modern and tribal culture and authentic South African versus immigrant interloper, it becomes apparent that for Mpe, the cultural 'knot' was both traumatic and complex.

It could be argued that Mpe was positioned uneasily between two contradictory identities. One required assimilation into the hegemonic cultural apparatus of language at the cost of tribal culture. It appears that in abandoning his university studies he had reached a decision about this. However, I suggest that as frustrated as Mpe might have been that he could only publish in English and while he did not live to become a traditional healer, he healed through the

[19] Green, Michael. "Translating the Nation: From Plaatje to Mpe," *Journal of South African Studies.* 34. 2 (2008) : 325-342. Print.
[20] Green, Michael. "Translating the Nation: Phaswane Mpe and the fiction of post-apartheid," *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa.* 10. 1 (2005) : 3-16. Print.

power of narrative by demanding a space for a suburb that had, until he wrote about it, been virtually ignored. The success of the book has lent the neighbourhood of Hillbrow a sense of self and gained for Mpe a set of steps leading into the suburb appropriately called *Welcome to our Hillbrow*. When I discovered *Welcome*, I had already begun *Bloom* and I too, informed by depressing dystopian Internet versions of what had become of the suburb, wanted to create a space for the suburb. Mpe beat me to it.[21]

I don't know why Casper felt he couldn't go home. I do know why I did. I feared and fear the patriarchy that is still very much a feature of South African life. That I survived during that particular time where I felt acutely exiled was due in no small part to my friend Barbara, who wrote me a letter of inclusion: 'You are one of us, come home, we will look after you.' Unfortunately, she was the only one who wrote me a letter like that after my mother died and the irony of a black woman reaching out to a former 'oppressor' beached in a foreign place did not escape me. Given our historical circumstances, in writing my small story I wanted to acknowledge Barbara's gesture and the letters and emails that have followed over the years which have helped keep intact the fragile threads which make the difference between a sense of home, or a sense of exile.

Victoria Burrows in *Whiteness and Trauma* makes the point that for Jamaica's Creole population post emancipation, it was 'the act of abandonment by their own race [the British] that add[ed] an extra edge of bitterness and despair' to their plight.[22] I too felt this sense of abandonment most keenly as 'those who stayed'

[21] See http://deathofjohannesburg.blogspot.com.au<last accessed 11 November 2012>.
[22] Burrows, Victoria. *Whiteness and Trauma:The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison.* New York:Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Burrows was commenting on Jean Rhys's *Wide Saragossa Sea.* I discuss this shortly. The description however is an apt one to describe a sense of cultural displacement some of us were made to feel as a result emmigration. Marie Tumarkin writes about the Russian experience and the meaning and perceptions of

seemed to close ranks on 'those who left.' Through the characters Barbara and Walter, I wanted to suggest a far more nuanced and complex South African world than the one that has hitherto been pulled from Hammond and Jablow's lurid storehouse of easy African images. I wanted to write a story that was different in content and format to the white South African narratives I have read. I chose, in my ignorance, as the genre to represent this new type of story, the bildungsroman. As I was to tortuously discover, the bildungsroman as a framework for my story contradicted my purpose to disrupt seamless narratives since the rite of passage genre is simplistic in itself and linked to the middle class discourse I was trying to shrug off. I had to attempt to write the bildung before discovering in my case, that it couldn't be written. I was already well into the story before I was forced to shift to a fictional autobiographical trauma narrative. I have kept as my sub title, 'the female bildungsroman and the missing child' because this exegesis reflects on how I discovered that the structure of the bildung and its ideological underpinnings, is inadequate to represent lives that have been fragmented and shattered by war. This is because the bildungsroman is a traditionally male rite of passage novel with a Eurocentric focus in which a young man comes reaches maturity through adventure.

Before I move into a brief discussion about what autobiographical fiction offered by way of narrative strategy over the traditional bildungsroman I feel it is important to address the issue of white trauma seen through the prism of Victoria Burrow's reading of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a way of pre-empting a whiteness critique that could be leveled at me. There are two reasons I abandoned the bildungsroman. The first reason was that the story to be told

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courage through the experiences of writers and philosophers who live in various states of political and emotional exile. Tumarkin, Maria. *Courage*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007.

quite simply did not fit the framework I had chosen for it.[23] The second reason concerned the question of how to tell a white 'rites of passage' narrative against a historical context of ongoing black trauma without eliding black history through foreground one's own suffering much like the way Krog does in *Country of my Skull*. Burrows writes:

> It is vital to keep in mind that while trauma narratives are cultural constructs or personal and historical memory, hegemonic cultural tropes and social normatives serve to conceal or highlight these memories and construct which versions of the past become legitimated knowledge.[24]

In what is otherwise a fascinating reading of Rhys's *Wide Saragossa Sea*, Burrows criticises Rhys for her appropriation of 'marooning' and 'zombification' to describe the compromised Creole position post emancipation.[25] Rhys, Burrows argues, appropriates the historical trauma of Jamaica slavery into an internalised form of physic wounding for Rhys's Creole character and this results in a form of madness. However, rather than acknowledge the overlapping traumas of slavery and white Creole abandonment by Britain, Rhys is criticized for eliding the brutality of slave history by privileging the trauma of the forced abandonment of

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[23] Tanya Dalziell, for example, makes a similar argument in her reading of three post-colonial bildungsroman texts namely Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy.* Oddly, the latter two texts inspired my counter-response with *Bloom* but from a white perspective. Dalziell argues that the traditional rite of passage which leads to self-fulfilment or a sense of self-hood, is thwarted in these texts by the gendered cultural and political context the protagonists operated in and that instead of a rite of passage leading to self-hood, the protagonists discover a 'mournful recognition of the ongoing negotiations, public and private, required to live in a contemporary culture marked by colonialism's legacies and the multiple losses they precipitate.' Dalziell suggests that rather than imposing ready-made frameworks (such as the bildungsroman – my insertion), 'other ways of remembering, representing, and conceiving of women's rites of passage in post-colonial contexts may be possible.' Dalziell, Tanya. "Coming-of-Age, Coming to Mourning," in *Rites of Passage in Post Colonial Women's Writing*. Amsterdam:New York: Rodopi, 2010, 254-263.

[24] Burrows. *Whiteness and Trauma*. 40.

[25] In *The Post-Colonial and the Postmodern* Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that syncretism has been made possible by the international exchange of commodities and that art, writing and sculpture have evolved in and through the colonial. He argues against cultural exclusivity and in this light, I do not feel that Rhys's appropriation of marooning to describe the Creole condition to be anything more than absorption of slave culture as a result of her exposure to it. Kwame Anthony, Appiah. "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern." *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*. 119-124

white Creole luxury which was deeply implicated and profited from the ongoing brutality of the slave trade. The Creole case, Burrows argues, is legitimized through narrative strategies such as the inclusion of the sympathetic ex-slave Christophine whose consoling presence and loyalty to the Creole protagonist, legitimizes Creole victimhood and invokes sympathy for them.[26] Burrows is skeptical about what she sees as an attempt to re-focus the gaze away from the real site of trauma, which is the slave narrative, and displace it onto the secondary trauma which was the Creole loss of privilege and abandonment by Britain. *Country of my Skull* clearly does this which is why I did not want to mimic it and chose instead to place the protagonist front and centre in the narrative.

Since I have attempted to do something similar in terms of integrating political trauma with individual trauma, I am grimly aware that similar criticisms could be leveled at me, particularly since I too have a sympathetic black woman character with 'spunks.'[27] It could be argued for instance that the friendship between Grace and Barbara is a strategy to invoke sympathy for the disgraced and displaced white condition. I accept this criticism could be made. However, I reject it on the grounds that I believe it stymies voice and produces a form of literary paralysis and this returns us to the days of pre-space clearing gestures.[28] My own writer's block was at one point produced by precisely the type of critique Burrows raises against Rhys. Where I see my story as different to Rhys's is that Grace's abject state links to family trauma, more so than to the political, although it is the political that unnerves it. Ultimately I hoped that my inclusion of the

[26] Burrows. *Whiteness and Trauma*. 39.
[27] Ibid. 39.
[28] In South Africa at present there appears to be literary muteness fuelled by anxieties around how to represent each other in and through the legacy of Apartheid. This dilemma comes about because a previously available 'other' and the struggle narrative which informed much of South African writing, is no longer available. An entire journal of *Safundi* was devoted to this question. *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*. 13. 1-2 (2012). In particular Barnard, Rita. "Ugly Feelings, Negative Dialectics: Reflections on Postapartheid Shame." 151-170. Charos, Caitlin. "States of Shame: South African Writing after Apartheid." 273-304 and Twidle, Hedley. ""In a Country where You couldn't Make this Shit up"?:Literary Non-Fiction in South Africa." 5-28.

black characters and my small forays into African language through the exchanges between Grace, Petrus and Old Simon would point to intraculturation and an acknowledgement of a shared traumatic history as opposed to appropriating African culture in order to seek cheap sympathies.

Once I realized I had become mired in the unsuitability of a bildungsroman for my particular story, and had made the decision to cross over into the autobiographical, ethical issues arose about how to represent both the living and the deceased and whether I should write in the fictional or non-fictional mode. Autobiography is imbued with the notion of truth. The author infers that the story is real and the narrator is who he or she claims to be. Linda Anderson argues that autobiography has been seen to aid the diversification of culture and subjects through its appeal to different communities, its formal multiplicity and its excessive productivity.

However it has also been a bit of bone that critics have pulled between them. For this reason, argues, Anderson, autobiography is almost impossible to define.[29] It is a mode that is liminal in itself, 'unruly and even slightly disreputable' with a reputation for slipperiness, argues Anderson, which has come about *because* of its persuasiveness.

This malleability or liminality has made literary critics want to contain it, define it and stamp it with academic authority before it bolts away and becomes too easily accessible. It seems to me that what lies at the heart of the anxieties swirling around autobiography as a legitimate mode of expression and story telling, links back to the tension and even the power struggle between the

[29] Anderson's book *Autobiography* discusses the way autobiography emerged as a form in opposition to historically male Eurocentric classical realist texts. Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography*. London: Routledge, 2001.

creative and the theoretical. This struggle is mired in the question of who speaks to whom and underpinned by the unstated assumption that *real* writing is something else. Classical realism, perhaps, and its links to elite male dominated institutional power. It was, after all, the female centered autobiographical small stories with their tales of the home which most benefited from, and formed the backbone of, post-colonial literature. These were attempts by women to reclaim their histories. Therefore the slightly disheveled, slippery and disreputable autobiographical mode with its reliance on lived experience as opposed to theoretical interpretations, suited my attempts to tell the story of a disheveled and disreputable suburb through Grace's memories.[30] The question of truth and sincerity is paramount to the autobiographical mode since it relies upon lived experience.

However, autobiography does offer some leeway for the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction. Nancy Miller suggests that the sincerity of the autobiographical mode implies a male subject as women are less likely to be believed on account of who they are.[31] If, by this, Miller means that men are ethically believed to be the purveyors of truth and women aren't, then Joan Didion in her mystery fiction *Democracy* offers a good example of how deceitful, creative or dexterous, women can be as she skillfully blurs the lines between fact and fiction. In a fragmentary story about love, loss and politics Didion spins a

[30] It's worth noting at this point that had I written *Bloom* outside of the academy and without the requirement of having to produce a theoretical exegesis, I may have muddled along without paying too much attention to genre. However creative writing's ambiguity within the Academy and the requirement to theorise what I had written made me conscious of what I was doing and why I was doing it. At times I felt this to be intrusive to the creative process and points to the tensions McKenzie outlines in her essay with which I opened this exegesis. The tensions between the two disciplines and the requirements to write in both tended at times to contradict each other. There has been much scholarly debate about this. See Sved, Miriam. 'Fractured Writing: Creativity, the University and the Australian Culture Wars.' *Text* 9. 2 (2005) : 1-15. Web. http://www.textjournal.com.au and Brook, Scott. *Accounting for the Creative.* Report for the School of Culture and Communications. The University of Melbourne. (2009) : 1-50. http://www.aawp.org.au/publications-aawp <last accessed 15 October 2012.> However, the need to read and produce theory has been useful in unlocking what I was trying to do which wasn't entirely clear to me at the time and for helping me penetrate texts in ways I hadn't considered before. Abjection theory, for example, to be discussed shortly, is a case in point.

[31] Anderson. *Autobiography.* 3.

fiction around what is publicly known about her life. As a writer, Didion enjoys a high profile in America, the details of which are easily available. Using her public profile Didion interweaves fact with fiction as she works through the 'drafts' of a novel she is writing and through these drafts the story is told with multiple possibilities for an ending.[32]

Since the bildungsroman as a narrative framework wasn't working for me, I adopted the fictional autobiographical mode because it allowed me to juxtapose a personal narrative against the known facts of our political history but also, for reasons that will be explained, offered me creative license to bend the truth when it came to writing about my mother.

In the past, when I told the truth about my life, people didn't believe me. Once, when I was around eighteen, a boyfriend's mother after quizzing me for several hours about my childhood and I, in good faith responded truthfully, announced to her friends that I had a rather vivid imagination. If this wasn't the case I wouldn't be writing but I didn't appreciate her interpretation that I was spinning a fantasy, tinged with deceit, when I was in fact telling the truth. With *Bloom* I decided to make use of this wild imagination of mine to tell the truth, albeit as fiction. I was inspired by Brian Castro's fine autobiographical fiction *Shanghai Dancing* which moves not only backwards and forwards in time in what amounts to small vignettes, but moves between centuries giving the sense of beautifully crafted photographs.

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[32] My indebtedness to Joan Didion should be obvious as she is directly referenced in *Bloom*. I turned to Didion to see how she wrote about the loss of her husband followed a year later by the loss of her daughter. How far should a writer go to tell of personal misfortune and how much should they tell? I read somewhere (and I didn't reference it) that Didion was criticised for laying bare her private pain and leaving it with the reader. While this was a concern for me in writing about loss, I also wonder what it says about readers who prefer to be entertained by terrible fictions rather than bare witness to terrible truths. I also feel that writing offers solace to those who identify with the subject matter and for this reason I decided to proceed with my own story. I personally liked the pared back and repetitive imagery Didion uses which evokes a sense of haunting loss without burdening the narrative with overt displays of emotion. See Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001. Print. _____. *Blue Nights*. Australia: Fourth Estate, 2011. Print. _____. *Democracy.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984. Print.

In order to contextualise Grace within her small story and describe her present, I needed to reflect on the past and in doing so, rather than imagine or create a world, I wanted to recreate my world, and give voice to Hillbrow, the suburb where I was born and spent substantive parts of my life. It occurred to me at the time I was considering this project that I had never seen Hillbrow or the lives of Hillbrowans in stories. This was before I discovered Mpe's *Welcome to Hillbrow* and he too asks the question, 'how is it that Hillbrow is so popular but writers ignore it?'[33] His book was another thin strand linking me to the idea of home and making me pause to ask why it was that Hillbrow itself was a place of exile *within* South Africa whose history has been elided from the literature. One of the conclusions I came to during my research was that Hillbrow's eclectic community disrupts what Richard Samin has called 'a persistent mode of thinking which largely prevailed under the old political dispensation' with its propensity to 'formulate judgments on the basis of simplistic divisions or binary opposites, resorting to rigid categories of inclusion and exclusion.'[34]

In the reams of creative and theoretical knowledge produced about our troubled country, it was as if we, the people who lived stacked in the sky in Ponte Towers, Highpoint or the Quirenelle, had never existed.[35] It seemed as if the drama of our national discourse had been played out in shanty towns, neatly

[33] Mpe, Phaswane. *Welcome to our Hillbrow.* Pietermartizburg: Natal University Press, 2001. 30. Print.

[34] I like Samin's interpretation because it accords closely with my own view that Hillbrow is, and always has been, an abject space. It resists easy categorisation and that is why it is ignored. Samin, Richard. "Reappraising the myth of the new South Africa: Phaswane Mpe's Welcome to our Hillbrow." *Alizés* 24 Sept. 2004: 4. Web. For an insightful sociological study on the fall and fall of Hillbrow during the transition period and the reasons behind it see Morris, Alan. *Bleakness & Light.* Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1999. Morris's empirical study, conducted over a ten year period, is the only one ever undertaken on what is the most densely populated square mile in the southern hemisphere. It sheds light on the way in which the suburb was, in a sense, sacrificed, by the Apartheid government and the way the mixed race inhabitants negotiated their lives during the transition period. He notes himself that scholarship has tended to focus on the white middle-class suburban spaces or the black townships and this affirms my proposition that the knowledge producers of South Africa have consistently promoted an uncomplicated binarial image of the country loaded with middle-class assumptions about who we all were. Morris's findings largely contradict the slim, almost absent, creative interpretations of the suburb such as Gordimer's *A World of Strangers* which I discuss later.

[35] These are just some of the tower blocks that comprise Hillbrow flatland. Ponte Towers at one stage, when Hillbrow was a white area, had the un-enviable reputation of an extraordinarily high suicide rate. Hillbrow and its reputation for suicide is something Mpe makes full use of in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow.* The fact that nearly all his characters hurl themselves out of windows suggests that in Hillbrow, the desperate lives of its inhabitants squeezed between dominant discourses haven't changed. What is even more interesting is that Hillbrow as a suicide suburb has not attracted scholarly interest.

ordered suburbs, on farms which invoked old colonial paradigms in terms of power relationships but few wrote about the inner city. Why was a suburb, which boasted such a high concentration of artistic and intellectual life, almost entirely absented from the literature of South Africa; or even worse, when it *was* represented, imagined to contain the basest forms of human life? One reason for this, I suggest, is that writers who wrote about us invariably came from middle-class homes and through the university system and were therefore recipients of the material benefits and comforts of white privilege.

To return to Achebe before I move on. Achebe offers a wonderful example of the way in which Africans internalised that which devalued them through stories like *Heart of Darkness* and viewed their own cultures as inferior and needing to be replaced by some form of English mimicry. He criticises a successful Nigerian writer living in London whom he does not name. The writer, he infers, suffers from an acute case of cultural cringe and demeans other Nigerian writers for being 'stilted' and 'plodding.' The writer to whom Achebe refers, describes life in England and exposure to the English way of life as enjoyable because 'the language is so academic and perfect.' She continues, 'even if you remove the cover, you can always say who is an African writer. But with some of my books you can't tell that easily any more because, I think, using the language every day and staying in the culture my Africanness, is, in a way, being diluted.' Poor woman. Achebe writes back: 'That does it for all those beleaguered African writers struggling at home to tell the story of their land. That they should one and all emigrate to London or Paris to dilute their Africanness and become, oh, 'so academic and perfect.' The psychology of the dispossessed can be truly

frightening.' [36]

Achebe hits the nail on the head. I have much sympathy for the Nigerian lady novelist, her sense of otherness and her quest for perfection through language. I too have struggled with forms of self-erasure throughout this project. Constantly plagued by self-doubt and struggling with the subject matter as being too depressing or unbelievable for readers, I was desperately trying to frame my life within a 'convenient' rites of passage narrative with 'a predictable ending' that would make both myself and others happy. It wasn't working.

The psychology of the dispossessed offers a useful entry into a discussion of homelessness and how I came to frame Grace through Marie Cardinal's *The Words to Say It*.[37] It was thinking through ideas about trauma and dispossession as a universal condition that I was able to find a way forward, even it meant running around in circles. Cathy Caruth has argued that trauma repeats itself. She argues that the original psychic wound cannot be known as it is not available to the conscious mind as a result of the time lapse between the moment of the original trauma and its comprehension. Because of this, trauma repeats endlessly, setting up a system of echoes that bear witness to the original trauma through the perpetually crying voice.[38] Therefore to have Grace running in circles around the lake can be read metaphorically as the repetitive cycles of trauma which also allow for the story to be told. In *The Trauma Question* Roger Luckhurst argues that trauma 'violently opens passageways between systems that were once

[36] Achebe. *Home*. 71-72.
[37] Cardinal, Marie. *The Words to Say It*. USA: VanVactor & Goodheart, 1996. Print.
[38] Caruth discusses Freud's fascination with the way in which trauma appears almost as a 'possession', a type of fate that endlessly repeats in some individuals and he questions why that it is. I have often wondered this myself. It occurred to me, in reading Caruth, that the tension between creative writing and theory finds some sort of redemptive partnership in the realm of psychoanalytic theory. Caruth argues that literature, like psychoanalytic theory, is interested in the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing and she argues that it is at the point where knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and theory meet. This was true in my case as I stumbled around the bildungsroman and as I demonstrate later when I apply abjection theory to Cardinal's *The Words to Say It.* See Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience*. Baltimore:London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996. 2-3. Print.

discrete making unforeseen connections that distress or confound.'[39] In this interpretation, what Luckhurst effectively describes is a liminal space between two systems of knowledge, identities or dominant discourses into which an individual who has experienced trauma is catapulted. By extending these ideas and applying them to Julia Kristeva's abjection theories *Bloom* shifted from the unworkable linear format, to an unstructured trauma narrative.[40]

[39] Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question.* London:New York: Routledge, 2008. 3. Print.
[40] Luckhurst quotes Jean-François Lyotard speaking about the capacity of art to bear witness to pain and unlock the aporia of trauma through narrative. Narrative does not say what cannot be said, but rather it says than it cannot say it. Luckhurst. *The Trauma Question.* 81.

Homelessness

A few years after my immigration to Australia I returned to South Africa to visit my brother. Six years had passed. It was 1994 and South Africa, under the conciliatory presidency of Nelson Mandela, basked for the first time in its history in a shared nationhood. Regardless of skin colour we were all citizens of the optimistically entitled Rainbow Nation. As we drove through the northern suburbs of Johannesburg it occurred to me that in effect I was driving through a new country. I'd been there for the conception, for most of its violent gestation period but I had missed the parturition. While the cityscape looked exactly as I remembered it, with the exception of the visual reminders of increased personal security, the suburbs that I knew so well were otherwise unchanged. One aspect of life as I'd known it that was changed forever, however, was Hillbrow, the suburb of my birth. Now a symbol of urban decay on a par, for example, with cities like Detroit, the demographic had shifted from a predominantly white neighbourhood to black. I insisted we drive through the suburb so that I could relocate familiar landmarks and feel a sense of 'home.' 'We can't get out of the car,' my brother said, 'it's too dangerous. Lock your door and roll up your window.'

The day I drove through the suburbs with my brother I listened to the radio. It too had changed. The boring old South African Broadcasting Corporation, which once through its programs and soap-opera serials, extolled us to be better citizens in both official languages, English and Afrikaans, had been largely replaced by African voices and township music. Occupied by thoughts and observations of these changes, I was caught unawares by the familiar voice of

Miriam Makeba. Suddenly, the space of the car was possessed by a song that was subconsciously as much a part of my emotional make-up as whatever passed for home and indeed unleashed the question in my mind as to where, or who, or what was home. The song was *Qongqothwane*, a traditional Xhosa wedding song which is known throughout the world, and to white South Africans, by the name given to it by the British colonials who could not pronounce its African name – The Click Song. Noone was more surprised than me when without warning I burst into tears.

In *My Traitor's Heart*, Rian Malan, the Afrikaans writer, describes his own return from exile in similar terms: 'I saw a gang of blacks pushing luggage around on a trolley. They were just ordinary black workmen, blank and inscrutable, chattering in an incomprehensible tongue, but I was transfixed by the sight of them. I stood there staring, cursing myself for the tears running down my cheeks. It was so stupid.'[41]

In recalling her own 'small cloudburst of emotion' at the site and sighting of Uluru,[42] Elspeth Probyn describes the moment as an 'extreme form of guilt' that as a white person she should be held in thrall by the symbol of Aboriginal Australia. Guilt however, according to her, is overrated. It is something that can be quickly apologized for and forgotten. Shame however, tugs at the spirit. It has a quiet insistence that refuses to let us go, at least not if we strive to lead a honourable life. Shame, according to Probyn, insists upon our humanity particularly as writers because it raises the question of ethics in how we

[41] Malan, Rian. *My Traitor's Heart*. London:The Bodley Head, 1990. 87. Print.
[42] Uluru is known outside Australia as Ayers Rock. Uluru is a sacred site of great spiritual significance for the Anangu people.

represent people and events.[43] Kwame Anthony Appiah has suggested that as writers we should show 'a concern for human suffering' that insists upon a rejection of master narratives and a transcendence of the 'obligations to churches and to nations' and focuses instead on what it means and feels to be human.[44] What I take from Probyn's description of her experience at Uluru is the moment: 'a white-hot intensity that burned through layers of memory and perception. I have never felt so out of place in my life or so simultaneously desired to be a part of that place.'[45] Her tears were the body's response to her interest or desire to be a part of the spiritual community of the rock, a desire to truly feel this was home, and a deep-rooted shame and humiliation that the colour of her skin aligned her with a community of conquest.

The philosophical musings however, of white writers searching for reasons to explain their large and small cloudbursts of emotion is something Toni Morrison has an issue with. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison describes Marie Cardinal's psychological response to Louis Armstrong's music as 'an internal alignment with a socially governed relationship with race.'[46] What Morrison discusses is the way in which white writers link their pivotal moments of self-discovery to black people. Cardinal describes the exact moment her madness and breakdown took hold of her when a particularly shrill note from Armstrong's trumpet 'tore at the nerves of those who followed it.'[47]

She asks 'what on earth was Louis playing that night? What was in his music that drove this sensitive young girl hyperventilating into the street to be struck by

[43] Probyn. *Blush*. xvii.
[44] Appiah. The Postcolonial and the Postmodern. 123.
[45] Probyn. *Blush.* 45.
[46] Morrison. *Playing*. viii.
[47] Ibid. vii

the beauty and ravage of a camelia's 'svelte appearance but torn apart inside?' Would an Edit Piaf concert or a Dvorak composition have the same effect?'[48]

Well yes, it would, is my response, born out of experiential knowledge and based on my London experiences. I would even add that madness or breakdowns don't require anything as lofty as jazz concerts or classical compositions but can be invoked by something as mundane as Michael Parkinson and Bette Midler in conversation on television. While I think Morrison is being ungenerous in using Cardinal as an example, I take her point and the point is that she critiques the way in which black people operate in fiction not written by them. Even as I write this I am aware that I can be accused of this type of literary sacrificial lamb myself by the way I have used the character Barbara in order to raise attention to rape, and I hope Morrison will forgive me.[49]

When I first interpreted Morrison's argument, which later underpins my discussion to come of Nadine Gordimer, I understood its implications and depth only superficially. However, in working through this exegesis my understanding of Morrison's theories has broadened. I was thinking about why it is that I have been so powerfully influenced and emotionally moved by black writing. Books

[48] Ibid. p.vii

[49] The decision to use Barbara as a sacrificial for rape was not taken lightly and born of long, depressing hours researching rape in South Africa. I could, and perhaps should, have avoided the issue entirely. However I felt it would be remiss to ignore it in a country where the rape statistic, depending on the source sits between one woman raped every 13 to 20 seconds. *This* would to elide the reality of the ongoing violence, or threat of violence to women in South Africa for the purpose of smoothing over rape politics. Rape has become a taboo subject to discuss or write about because it invokes the stereotypical 'black men as rapists' trope. However ignoring this issue does not resolve or reduce the rape statistic. It is irrelevant, when writing about rape in South Africa, what cultural group the rape victim falls into since criticism and accusations of racism will flow either way. The linkage of rape with race politics has prevented any meaningful dialogue on the subject. This greatly affects a woman's right to live without fear and says much about the silencing of the ongoing war on South African women. I chose a black woman because in reality more black women are raped than white ones, but their rapes are under-reported or not reported. The imagery for Barbara's rape was taken from an account of the actual rape of a shebeen queen. The rape was not reported in the media or resolved by police. For a fictive and factual high profile accounts of rape in South Africa Coetzee, JM. *Disgrace.* London: Vintage, 2010 and Thamm, Marianne. *I have a Life*. Johannesburg: Penguin, 1998 and Smith, Charlene. 'Every 26 seconds a woman gets raped, it was my turn last Thursday night', *Mail & Guardian* 24 Nov. 2009. n. pag. Web. Coetzee, who is well known for his literary activism, was roundly criticised for *Disgrace* and dubbed a racist for his depressing portrait of a farm rape. Charos, in a discussion of writers who are critical of the way 'gendered and abused bodies are made to carry the nation's shame' also suggests that fiction 'with its unique possibilities for exploring ambiguities … may be the one realm where the potentially brutal or divisive effects of shame can be ethically imagined.' Charos. States of Shame. 284.'

such as *Beloved*, *Nervous Conditions*, *Welcome to our Hillbrow* and *Half a Yellow Sun* feature significantly in shaping my thinking and I wondered why, given there are few white characters in the books for me to identify with. Morrison has said, and I assume this to be true for most black writers, that as a black writer she is 'struggling with and through a language that can evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, and dismissive 'othering' of people.'[50] It was only when I tried to understand my own emotional response to Nadine Gordimer, to the point of wanting to hurl her books across the room, that I understood how the patronizing paternalism of the patrician class is viewed from the position of the 'other.' Privilege brings with it an assumption that there will be always an available pool of lesser beings to service one's literary needs. Gordimer is important to *Bloom* and I discuss the reasons along with offering a textual example of her book *A World of Strangers* later on.

I am profoundly grateful to have discovered Cardinal through Morrison because her book *The Words to Say It* became a crucial element in solving the structural problems I was beginning to have with *Bloom*. However Morrison's insight about a socially governed relationship with race is a useful one for those of us born in colonized countries. It contains within it the nucleus of Probyn's statement which is that physical responses such as tears, or, in extreme cases, Cardinal's abject madness, to my mind at least, point to a fissured identity that can never be reconciled. We are paradoxically from and not from the countries of our birth.

The day I drove through the suburbs of Johannesburg with my brother, I felt a profound sense of loss and dislocation. Within a few short years all the markers

[50] Morrison. *Playing*. x

by which I had understood my identity had been dismantled or erased. I seemed to float in the vestibule of the motor car as a transitory presence, not Australian, not new South African since I hadn't been there for the moment of its birth, and I was marked by my skin colour as a perpetrator of the old South Africa. Paradoxically the Click Song seemed to call me back but at the same time it distanced me – it was as if I'd glimpsed something familiar in a dream and reaching out to it, I'd woken up and it was gone. I felt a sense of rage too, that the mess of Apartheid had been my inheritance. I hadn't been born when the Nationalist government came to power and yet it seemed I had spent my life unable to avoid its contamination and shame.[51]

I was no longer a citizen of the old South Africa, none of us were. We were a nation in the process of being born. How we would grow up and what we would be was profoundly unsettling. All of our identities so carefully stratified, catalogued and documented in 'pass books' or 'Books of Life' and spatially mapped by the architects of Apartheid according to the dictates of white supremacy had been dismantled.[52] Suddenly *I* was the floating migrant, a tourist surreptiously taking photographs of the streets I once took for granted as being mine from under the dashboard of my brother's car. I was the liminal space. I could no longer run home for comfort as I had in the past; there was no home to go to, no powerbase, no voice and in my case, apart from a brother, no family. In her book *Whiteness Just Ain't What it Used to Be* sociologist Melissa Steyn has

[51] Many years later when I wrote an essay for a post-colonial unit on the splintered identity of the Chinese Diaspora, I wrote, by way of explaining the protagonist in the film *Almost a Love Story*, that '... ten years later this emotional link to the past is an attachment to Theresa Tang music suggesting that his identity has undergone a process of re-negotiation from mainlander to transnational diasporic subject.' It never occurred to me that this mode of being was now me.

[52] The 'Passbook' became the symbol of Apartheid control. All black South Africans were required to carry one at all times or risk imprisonment, fines or being sent to work farms if caught without one. The passbook, used to control the influx of blacks into the Urban Areas, became the most visible, humiliating and frustrating demonstrations of Apartheid beauracracy. Whites were required to carry a 'Book of Life' which doubled as identity document and catalogue of life events such as marriage, driver's licence etc. While the requirement to produce the Book of Life for any administrative procedure such as opening a bank account, the penalties for not producing one were not on a par with passbook penalties.

called this condition a state of un-homeliness encompassing a loss of home, loss of autonomy and control, loss of a sense of relevance, loss of guaranteed legitimacy, loss of honour, loss of faith. Steyn was right: shedding white skin did hurt.[53]

In *White Women Writing White* Mary West comments that South African white women's writing is markedly pre-occupied by the spatial, both domestic and geographic. West writes:

> … this sense of 'unhomeliness' at times manifests itself quite predominantly in a desperate attempt to hold on tenaciously to a sense of 'homeliness,' and at times, a conscious attempt to confront and adapt to a displacement.[54]

She is not the first theorist to remark on this. Dennis Walder in *Alone in a Landscape: Lessing's African Stories Remembered*, takes issue with theorists who argue that the nostalgia, which is a feature of some post-colonial writing, implies a de-historicizing trend which romanticizes the past and denies the brutality of the colonial encounter. These theorists seem to have the same quarrel with South African writers that Burrows does with Rhys. The issue is how to be a witness to both stories at the same time without privileging the one over the other and reasserting the dominant discourse.[55]

In his defence of Doris Lessing, Walder quotes Lessing: 'the emotional impulse behind nearly all white writing … is a nostalgia, a longing, a reaching out for

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[53] Her exact words were 'a white skin is not skin that can be shed without losing some blood.' Steyn, *Whiteness Just Isn't What it Used to Be.* xvii.
[54] West, *White Women Writing White*. 25 and Steyn, Melissa. "Rehabiliting a Whiteness Disgraced: Afrikaner White Talk in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *Communication Quarterly* 52. 2 (2004) : 143-169.
[55] Cathy Caruth in her reading of *Hiroshima mon amour*, suggests this can be done within an encounter that takes place at the site of the catastrophe. Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience*. xvii.

something lost; hard to define but instantly recognizable.'[56] Even without the benefit of Lessing's insight a friend commenting on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's book *Half a Yellow Sun* exclaimed to me, 'why is it that white writers write about the landscape and black writers write about people?' I think I responded at the time that we had the land and they had the people but I leave it to someone else to offer a scholarly interpretation.

However, this nostalgia for land or country was an accurate observation of what happened to me when I first arrived in Australia. The more I tried to write a female bildungsroman centered on child loss and childlessness, which was the original intention behind *Bloom*, the more I wrote about space. I was haunted by two places, the site of my childhood, which was Hillbrow, and Canberra, the place I lived for three years as a new migrant. Both places, it can be argued, were the first houses by which I came to understand the world I found myself in.[57] Either writing endlessly about Hillbrow was an avoidance strategy on my part, something that even now I can't discount, or the two were intrinsically linked in some form of traumatic loop that intersected in Australia.

Probyn describes feelings of shame as producing a physical reaction in the form of tears, or a blush. This, she argues, gestures towards shame being the fine line between moving forward into new interest or falling back into humiliation. What she describes is a liminal state whereby the individual will either shift into a new state of being or regress.[58] This theory, when applied to place, accurately describes Grace's state of being in Canberra. It was the place where Grace was

[56] Walder, Dennis. ""Alone in a Landscape":Lessing's African Stories Remembered," *Sage* 43. 2 (2008) : 100.
[57] The epigraph to *Bloom* was taken from David Malouf's book *12 edmonstone street*. Of the three short stories which comprise different sections of his life, Malouf reflects on the first house of experience as a place which shapes our view of the world. See Malouf, David. *12 edmonstone street.* London: Vintage, 1985.
[58] Probyn. *Blush*. 14.

required to make a decision about identity and instead of doing this, or rather while the process of absorbing another culture took shape, she hovered in the liminal space of migrant purgatory.

While I think Probyn's theories around shame are gentle and framed by the Western middle-class discourse of which she is a part, I began to think about how far and into what shape the liminality of shame could be stretched. How, for example, might shame be radicalized and applied to an extreme situation such as a country going through a revolution? What would a physical response be in that situation?

The transition period in South Africa offers a good example of an ambiguous state. Noone knew what was going to happen. Sitting in the bubble of the motorcar, I was an observer, linked to the land but removed from it. I was also removed from family. My mother and grandmother had both died since my immigration and, as a result of the move to Australia, my relationship with my brother was strained. It was as if he had psychologically closed the door and in small ways, constantly reminded me that I was not part of the Rainbow Nation.

My few remaining friends too, wrapped in rainbow blankets, began to drop off the tree. It was almost as if they were drawing back into the laager, a new laager covered in Ndebele paintings as a way of demonstrating their commitment to whatever this new identity might be. The walls of suburban houses presented an odd paradox. Even as they grew higher and the electronic gates more sophisticated to keep Africa out, murals featuring African indigenous art appeared on the outside of many of these homes. It was a strange, contradictory metaphor suggestive of white Africa's ongoing struggle to reconcile the past with

the present. A flaunted visual alliance with Africa symbolically ends at the wrought iron Rottweiler patrolled gate.[59]

Lady Nigerian novelists living in London are not the only ones who can mimic. I see this as a form of psychological dispossession too; a desperate and wary attempt at reframing identity within a fluid liminal space.

Since my life had moved to Australia, I could not move forward into the new nation; I was living in another nation. As a result, I felt my identity to be in a state of permanent contradiction, chaos and wrapped in a blanket of its own; a profound sense of loss. Paradoxically, I was home, but I was still in exile. This estrangement from my roots or profound sense of unhomeliness raised Probyn's 'small cloudburst of emotion' up a notch. It was more like a Highveld thunderstorm. To explain Grace and her endless loops of haunting, I began to think about how Julia Kristeva's theories around abjection might be applied to explain Grace's psychological dispossession and accommodate the story of child-loss. [60]

Kristeva has argued that in order to become a social self, the elements of a society deemed to be impure need to be expunged through the body in the form of excrement, menstrual blood, urine, semen, tears, vomit and so on as a way of

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[59] I don't wish to make light of either the need for security or the sincerity of those who embraced African cultural symbols. I simply point out the complex contradictory world we live in.

[60] Kristeva, Julia. *The Powers of Horror.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. After I made the decision to 'theorise' Grace around abjection, I began to see abjection wherever I looked. For example Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather,* argues that abjection, meaning to expel, to cast out or away is 'richly suggestive' for her purposes which is to examine the complex interweavings of the race, gender and class. *Imperial Leather* and the idea of abjection greatly re-shaped the way I saw and understood Hillbrow as a liminal, ill-defined and therefore abject space. Whereas I grew up believing it to be a down-at-heel area with a vague notion that the address attracted a stigma, McClintock's work made me question what underpinned these perceptions and why they existed in the first place. McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather.* Routledge:New York, 1995. Print. Anna Gething, in *Menstrual Metamorphis and 'the foreign country of femaleness'* read's Kate Grenville's *Lillian's Story* through abjection played out through gluttony and food. I had begun my research with *Lillian's Story* in order to get a sense of Australian women's writing particularly around childlessness. I wanted to see what the issues were, if any, given that *Lillian's Story* is a contemporary novel that did not have to negotiate revolutions and racial issues. As the most contemporary of the novels I researched, I wondered if *Lillian's Story* would produce a positive outcome for the childless protagonist. See Grenville, Kate. *Lillian's Story.* Sydney: George, Allen and Unwin. 1985. Print. Anna, Gething, "Menstrual Metamporphosis and the "foreign country of femaleness"," in Dodgson-Katiyo, Pauline, and Wisker, Gina, eds. *Rites of Passage in Post Colonial Women's Writing*. Amsterdam:New York: Rodopi, 2010. 268-282. Print.

reclaiming selfhood or resolving internal dislodgement or psychological exile. In other words, the self sits at the border of beingness and responds to a stimulus that signifies another self and violently expels it through bodily fluids as a self-protective re-assertion of self. When I began to understand that I was leading Grace towards a fictionalized childhood trauma, I decided to frame the miscarriages with the idea that they were a psychosomatic response linked to a state of abjection. I wanted to imply that Grace's mother death resulted not only in trauma but was causational of interrupted childhood rites of passage. The car accident was the scene of the original crying voice and this caused Grace to repeat cycles of trauma particularly around family issues. Grace was unable to move forward into a new adult cycle nor could she return to the past and thus she remained trapped in a liminal space complicated by political upheaval and migration. Read as a metaphor the loops of Lake Ginninderra reflect this repetitive state.[61]

Victor Turner writes:

> … the structural 'invisibility' of limina personae has a twofold character. They are at one no longer classified and not yet classified. In so far as they are no longer classified, the symbols that represent them are, in many societies, drawn from the biology of death, decomposition, catabolism, and other physical processes that have a negative tinge, such as menstruation (frequently regarded as the absence or loss of a foetus.

[61] See Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage." in Carus, Louise, Forster, Steven and Little, Meredith Madhi. eds. *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing. 6. Print. Van Gennup, Arno. *The Rites of Passage.* London: Routledge, 2004. 49. Print.

Similarly, Van Gennup who produced the seminal work on human rites of passages wrote, 'Rites of pregnancy and childbirth must be viewed as having considerable individual and social importance.' While for *Bloom* I appropriated abjection theories simply to offer a theoretical explanation for the book, I become more convinced of the link between the psychological and the physical and between trauma and bodily disruption as I explored rites of passage theories across disciplines. The blocked voice, a feature of self-harm is, I argue, emotional entrapment within the liminal space or a stalled rite of passage.

I first came to ideas of abjection through Cardinal's *The Words to Say It,* Cardinal's autobiographical fiction explores the beginning of her mental collapse at a Louis Armstrong concert and subsequent seven-year psychoanalysis. Throughout her book Cardinal refers to the horror, or the psychological condition that produces outpourings of bodily fluids and an overwhelming sense of fear as the unidentifiable, all-consuming 'Thing'.

I was struck by the similarities between Cardinal's experience with the Thing and my own experiences in London. My own Thing was exacerbated by my experiences with xenophobia and the attempted rape described in *Bloom* and underpinned by family issues. It happened without warning and was triggered one dismal night when I watched Bette Midler being interviewed on television.

Unlike Cardinal, who came from a wealthy family with connections to psychiatric professionals, I did not have access to medical resources, nor did I want them. I was twenty-one, living alone in London and I had seen *One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest*. I had convinced myself that I was one step away from shuffling down dingy corridors after a pre-frontal lobotomy so I avoided the

doctor's rooms. The attacks, when they came, were debilitating and, like Cardinal, I too thought I would die. I returned to Africa and began to participate in long distance running. This activity over a period of time helped me recover. However, in attempting to write *Bloom* as a narrative of child loss and subsequent post-natal depression, I was drawn, reluctantly, back into the past because one of the predispositions for post-natal depression is a previous history of depression and mental illness. Again I was confronted with my own attempts to impose order through narrative and what seemed to be an ongoing and repetitive, if not fated, pre-disposition to disorder. The more I attempted to gloss over the truth, the more it demanded to be told. In *On Writer's Block*, Victoria Nelson refers to the creative process as playing like a child and makes the case for spontaneity with the creative flow. Nelson writes that blocks come about as protective mechanisms that shields the writer from a 'withering blast of hatred from within' and 'the deeply ingrained habits of self-laceration.' [62] Cardinal has written about the deep social shame and silencing that surrounds madness and depression and the struggle to articulate it or set it free. I found that to explain Grace and tell my small story, the needs of the narrative pulled me in directions I did not want to go and I was becoming blocked.

In *Bloom* long distance running offers a useful way to separate chapters, signpost a particular train of thought and serve as a connective tissue between events. It offered a literary strategy to pull together a fragmented narrative in much the same way as running pulled together my own emotional chaos post-London. Running grounds the reader in one place while at the same time gestures towards the repetitive nature of trauma and allowed for memories to

[62] Nelson, Victoria. *On Writer's Block.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993. 6.

resurface which reveal something about Grace. Running is also a positive activity and I wanted to infuse the text with life-giving energy that implied recovery. As a writing device to propel the narrative forward (or in circles) running around the lake operates in much the same way as Cardinal uses her visits to the psychiatrist to peel away the flakes of memory as she unravels the mystery of the Thing. By adopting a fragmentary narrative, Cardinal was quickly able to move between Algeria and France, her childhood and the tortured present but at the same time, by hinting at a darker something, moved the plot forward since the reader was curious to know what that dark something was. The disruptive structure of the narrative also invoked the disturbed state of Cardinal's mind as the protagonist struggles to recall the past.

What intrigued me about Cardinal's experience was the linkage between country, family and the physical manifestation of internal trauma. In effect, Cardinal integrates the body with the body politic. Her family issues included a loved but absent father and a distant French mother who tried to instill into Cardinal the bourgeois values that she loathed, are set against the lived world of the Algerian revolution and her unstable place in it. My mother too tried to instill into me an ideological system that I despised and which I tried to escape several times. The trip to London for example was an attempt to outrun both the revolution and Scientology the cult I was born into and which I resisted with the same intensity as Cardinal resisted socialization into her mother's middle class Catholic world.

While I did not despise my mother the way Cardinal did, my relationship with her was difficult and best described as absent. My mother had contracted herself to the cult for the rest of her life and she lived with them in a commune. Access to

her was restricted and predicated upon joining the cult. I resisted. Family life was therefore fraught with anxiety, worry and loss. My childhood was spent trying to find a place that offered me some form of emotional sustenance or nurture. For me this was country and fiction. Immigration then was simply a repetition of chronic homelessness linked to an absent mother. My life, as raw material, offered enough mess to confound a linear approach. Political instability exacerbated this and complicated the desire for an episodic trajectory with a neat, redemptive ending.

Cardinal's mother kept her ideologically separated from Algeria, the country of her birth, in much the same way as legislation kept all white South Africans ideologically separated from our country of birth and Scientology attempted to keep me separated from 'normal' white South African life. I didn't fit into any of the worlds open to me. As a family we were so far from normal that I haven't yet been able to find an appropriate category. Hillbrow was a perfect place to live because it was the place most likely to accommodate others with equally unstructured or fractured lives.

In wrestling with how this could be written and explained, I turned to two ideas that revolve around the premise of a knot. Both became central to *Bloom's* own knot or the writer's block that Grace freely acknowledges she is suffering from. Confounded by her inability to tell her story, Grace likens it to 'a snarl of events which had culminated in a solid, un-identifiable, molten lump; in the way of a fine gold chain caught in a knot. ' Grace notes that there is 'no clear point' to her book, no linear structure, no plot and no identifiable conflict to be resolved. What she identifies, but does not recognise, is an organic trauma narrative. Luckhurst has argued that 'if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation

then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence.'[63] It was this knottiness that brought about the abandonment of the bildungsroman.

Luckhurst defines the trauma knot as multiple strands of knowledge bound together in a complex interweaving which can only be understood through plural, inter-disciplinary perspectives. If this is the case, what hope does one small failed bildungsroman turned trauma narrative have in achieving coherence? I believe *The Words to Say It* framed by Kristeva's ideas around abjection, go some way towards creatively connecting many of these traumatic threads bound up in ideas of country, identity, displacement and inclusive, most importantly, with the entwined, equally snarled second knot, the mother and daughter relationship.

Burrows envisions the metaphor of the knot to explain the mother and daughter relationship as a way of evoking 'the passionate, ambivalent strength and changing dimensions of the mother-daughter bond.' Knots, she argues, can be untied and retied with unlimited possibility as well as having the potential for snarled complexity. Burrows urges us to remain aware of the risk of 'valorising mutual bonding, nurturing, reciprocity and inter-subjective empathy, while omitting the fact that this relationship is often infused not just with love, joy and sharing of identities, but also aggression, ambivalence and even hate.'[64] Mother and daughter relationships are also entangled within other struggles. Race, class and gender issues particularly in post-colonial narratives complicate rites of passage, and come burdened by the traumatic histories of the colonial encounter.

The ambivalent mother and daughter relationship as an internalized knot

[63] Luckhurst. *The Trauma Question*. 88
[64] Burrows. *Whiteness and Trauma.* 1-3.

bleeds out of Cardinal in a physical enactment of emotional trauma in a searing metaphorical rupture linking birth, motherhood, daughterhood and country together. Cardinal frames her understanding of the Thing and the link between self and country in terms of childbirth. She writes: 'It seems to me that the Thing took root in me permanently when I understood that we were to assassinate Algeria. For Algeria was my real mother. I carried her inside me the way a child carries the blood of his parents in his veins.'[65]

The expulsion of blood, which flows through almost every page of Cardinal's book, is explained by her psychiatrist as a psychosomatic disorder brought on by external stimuli. To my mind blood represents voice or a crying out of internalized trauma through abjection in a radicalized version of Probyn's tears which she argues gesture towards a response to shame. In writing about trauma, Luckhurst describes blood as a leakage 'between mental and physical symptoms.'[66] What interested me about Cardinal's narrative and informed the way I shaped my own story, was that memory, particularly when linked to trauma is not linear. 'Traumatic memory,' Luckurst argues, 'persists in a half-life, rather like a ghost, a haunting absent present of another time.'[67] These ideas around haunting were to significantly shape my ideas for *Bloom*. I would draw the fractured threads of my narrative about place and motherhood back into the womb and explain Grace's miscarriages through abjection. Interestingly, when I read the translator's note to *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva is quoted as saying 'war goes straight to their tummies' when talking about women living through political

[65] Cardinal. *The Words*. 88

[66] Luckhurst. *The Trauma Question*. 3. See Laye-Gindhu, Aviva, and Schonert-Reichl, Kimberley, A., "Nonsuicidal Self-Harm Among Community Adolescents: Understanding the 'What's" and "Why's" of Self Harm." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 34. 5 (2005) : 447-457 and Gratz, Kim, L., "Risk Factors for Deliberate Self-Harm Among Female College Students." *American Journal of Orthopyschiatry* 76. 2 (2006) : 283-250 for psychological case studies of self-harm. Both studies share the conclusion that self-harm is brought about emotional inarticulation and an inabillity to draw boundaries. This results in over compensation in other areas such as the drive for high achievement which produces a different set of pressures. The build up is release through blood letting or cutting.

[67] Luckhurst. *The Trauma Question*. 81

turbulence.[68]

Kristeva argues, 'it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. These expelled elements can never be fully obliterated; they haunt the subject's identity with the threat of disruption or even dissolution.' For Cardinal, for Grace and for myself, what disturbed identity, system and order was revolution and the position of one caught in a situation of irresolvable contradiction. Thus, for Cardinal, the destruction of the body politic is absorbed into the physical body and expelled as a process of abjection as motherhood, childhood, citizenship and identity are fused into The Thing:

> A 'something' that I did not recognise as a Thing. A weight of meaningless about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.[69]

Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and Cardinal's *The Words to Say It* were published a year apart and offer an extraordinary example of an inter-disciplinary conversation which affirms what Probyn and Luckhurst have to say about shame and trauma respectively. They argue that an inter-disciplinary approach is required to fully appreciate the potential of these epistemologies. For example, Kristeva's theories posit abjection as a form of rebirth or reclamation of self 'I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs and vomit' finds resonance in

[68] Kristeva. *Powers of Horror*. ix.
[69] Ibid. 2

Cardinal's interpretation of the Thing and the way it is expressed through birth metaphors. Cardinal writes: '… the Thing had won. There was only it and me from now on. We were finally shut in alone with our secretions – blood, sweat, mucus, pus, saliva and vomit.' She describes herself undergoing psychotherapy as 'this woman, on a couch, curled up, like a fetus in the womb … huge embryo of myself.'[70]

Using Cardinal's work as a useful model I began to think about ways I could fictionalize my experience through Grace by inferring that she was haunted by a darker self as a result of buried childhood trauma; what that trauma might be she needed to discover in Canberra. A trip to Canberra would help me weave together the disparate elements of my life (and Grace's) that were beginning to mushroom in the dark and more importantly, it would help me write about my mother in a way that articulated what I couldn't and didn't want to say.

[70] Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror.* 3 and Cardinal. *The Words*. 17:13.

Alone in the Landscape

There is not enough time or space in this exegesis to undertake an analysis of the myriad theories and arguments that surround the bildungsroman as a genre, its suitability to represent the cultural experiences of women or its humanistic and ideological underpinnings. What seems to be universally agreed is that the bildungsroman offers a poor framework to describe the lives of women regardless of colour, culture or creed with the acknowledgement that for women of colour the journey is particularly difficult. In her literature review of the available scholarly work with the bildungsroman as a focus, Barbara Fuderer notes 'the theoretical debate continues on whether the female bildungsroman as a genre is a revision, a variant, a sub-genre, an expansion or an impossibility.' [71] I offer instead in broad strokes, what I understood a bildungsroman to be when, perhaps naively, I decided that for my PhD I would write one and draw autobiographically from my life. My understanding of the genre when I began *Bloom* was that the bildungsroman was a rite of passage novel in the linear realist tradition and it follows the fortunes of a young protagonist who goes out into the world and through the acquisition of worldly knowledge, (achieved somewhat painfully), acquires maturity and a satisfying sense of self-hood.

My naivety in adopting the genre was inspired by three novels. They were Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*. I saw elements or assumptions in each of them that I thought I could build upon or challenge. My early optimism was spurred on by the idea that I would examine a selection of female bildungsroman novels across a century

[71] For a comprehensive bibliography of female bildungsromans written in English and a summary of the main arguments feminist theorists have engaged with in relation to the rites of passage novel, see Fuderer, Laura Sue. *The Female Bildungsroman in English*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990.

of women's writing to determine whether, apart from cultural specificities, there were any differences in the way women writers handled childlessness. I thought that this would comprise my theoretical component which, I imagined, would sit alongside my bildungsroman novel and would in turn reveal a hitherto undiscovered gem of an insight. Just to complicate things for myself I intended to weave all this through a double mother and daughter bildungsroman reflecting the different social conditions each woman experienced and show how this impacted on their relationship with children or, in the case of Grace, childlessness. I began with Sylvia Plath who best represented my mother's era.

Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* for example ponders the opportunities available for Western women in the 1950s through her character Esther Greenwood. In fact it was Plath's opening sentence, 'it was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York' that inspired the opening sentence of *Bloom* with 'it all started to change about a month before the murders began.'[72] I decided to thread the Claremont murders, which occurred in Perth between 1996 and 1997, as a narrative device to locate Grace in Perth within a particular historical context.[73] Greenwood's character is thinly based on Plath's early life and her aspirations to be a writer and therefore arguably Greenwood's musing about the lack of opportunities for women and her dread of turning out like her mother can be read as Plath's own frustrations. Later, when I discuss the difficulties in writing about my mother, it is because I contextualise her as another Esther

[72] Sylvia, Plath. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber & Faber, 1966. 1

[73] I considered the ethical implications of referring to the Claremont murders. One of the victim's fathers for instance, lashed out at Debbie Marshall for trying to make money out of their family tragedy by writing an investigative book on the subject. However Robert Drewe's autobiography *The Shark Net* is framed by the trial of serial killer Eric Cooke who was hanged for a series of murders in Perth in the 1960s. Drewe is lauded for his portrayal of suburbia coming to terms with these murders and in light of this, I made the decision to include references to the murders because of the sense of neighbourhood melancholy that seeped into Grace's story at that time. See Glennon, Una. *Ciara's Gift.* Perth: UWA Press, 2010. Print. Marshall, Debbie. *The Devil's Garden.* Sydney: Random House, 2007. Print. Drewe, Robert. *The Shark Net.* Sydney: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Greenwood. In fact, in the early drafts of *Bloom* I had called her Esther. In terms of the complexity of Burrow's mother/daughter knot, I felt too much identification with my mother as woman without financial support, to be able to freely criticize her choices from a daughter's perspective [74] It was this reluctance that began firstly to unravel the idea of a double bildungsroman and it was the issue of child loss that caused me to abandon it entirely.

Greenwood ponders her fate as an English major who does not possess shorthand skills, a skill that would set her apart from other girls and automatically pave the way for her to become a secretary which would be a step up from a typist in a typing pool. The alternate for Greenwood was even worse. 'I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.' Plath rails against the limited opportunities available for women in the 1950s and what she sees as the stultifying world of middle-class married life which she likens to a trancelike state offering no creative or intellectual life outside motherhood. Plath considered this to be mind-numbing. My mother did too.

However, while much feminist scholarship has turned around the issue of choice and the opportunities available (or not) for women, very little has probed the experience of childlessness.[75] Creative writers have been more responsive to

[74] In "Sweetest and Best in Womanhood?" Brenda Walker makes the point that the experience of motherhood and mothering is class-based. Middle-class women idealised motherhood and child rearing was seen as duty whereas working class women have a more practical approach to motherhood. She also points to a crucial element of the female bildungsroman and that is the role writing plays in determining self-hood and offering a voice. See Walker, Brenda. ""Sweetest and best in Womanhood"? Representations of Maternity in Australian Women's fiction." *Westerly* 4 (1989) : 69-75.

[75] An example of this oversight becomes apparent in Fuderer's summaries. Feminist scholarship has theorized the rites of passage novel as a rite of disappointment. Rather than a journey which which leads to fulfillment the protagonist gradually becomes aware of her lack of options. Or, as Dalziell has argued, a rite of mourning whereby the colonized protagonist, in moving forward, has to give up her culture and be absorbed into the dominant discourse usually in a menial role and complicated by colonial paradigms. Others have argued for a successful older protagonist or changing social conditions leading to a less disappointing rite of passage. Few theorists, if any, have analysed the bildungsroman from the

imagining the lives of childless women although much of it has been negative. Therefore the first question that was to underpin my bildungsroman was what is the bildung for the childless woman? As I discovered, there isn't one, at least not in the bildungsroman.

The second book I responded to was *Nervous Conditions*. Out of the three texts to have inspired me, *Nervous Conditions* is perhaps closest to my heart, because the protagonist Tambudzai struggles with the two central concerns of my own life and these are a brother who grows into the patriarch and the struggle to obtain an education.[76] As a feat of writing which gives a voice to girls like Tambudzai, Dangarembga's novel exemplifies the power of narrative to open a space and to bridge the cultural gap between readers and writers. Of her own writing career, and she is one of the new breed of African writers Achebe celebrates, Dangarembga has said, 'I started writing because I realised that I had not seen myself in literature, and I wanted to see myself.'[77] In Tambudzai I saw *myself*.

Tanya Dalziell reads the bildungsroman or the rite of passage novel and

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perspective of a childless protagonist. The few writers who do write about childless women appear to have an equally gloomy outlook for their protagonists. Of the novels accepted to fall into the category of bildungsroman, Nella Larson's childless protagonist in *Passing* falls from a window. Toni Morrison's *Sula* dies of illness, Olive Schreiner's Lyndall dies of grief as a result of child loss. See Morrison, Toni. *Sula*, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1973. Print. Larson, Nella. *Passing.* New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969. Print. Schreiner, Olive. *The Story of an African Farm*. London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1883. Print. If changing social conditions offer a hope for the female bildungsroman, the same is not true for the imagined worlds of childless women as evidenced by Lillian in *Lillian's Story*. While Grenville's protagonist Lillian is represented more optimistically (Lillian does after all come from a privileged background and attend university) she is linked to madness and abjection as a consequence of an over-bearing if not abusive father. The aforementioned examples are hardly exhaustive of the genre given their cultural variance and century they span. However there is a consistency to the representation of childlessness with the most optimistic, albeit still gloomy, *Lillian's Story*. For further reading about female agency in the bildungsroman and representations of childlessness refer to Midalia, Susan. *The Politics of Agency in the Contemporary Female Bildungsroman*. Unpublished Thesis. Perth: University of Western Australia, 1998 and Carroll, Vanessa. *Childless Women in History and Literature*. Unpublished Thesis. Houston: The University of Houston Clear Lake, 2006.

[76] In a recent article, Koffie Charles-Hector Yao-Kouame's reading of *On Black Sisters Street* suggests that the faith placed in Western education by African women as a means of social advancement continues despite outcomes suggestive of a very different reality. See Yao-Kouame, Koffie, Charles-Hector, "On how the underdevelopment of African states supplies European cities with African womem sex workers – Chika Uniwqwe's approach in 'On Black Sisters Street." <http://www.academia.edi/20676 > Therefore, sadly, for many African women, the traditional rite of passage through education which they believe leads to freedom of choice, financial stability and automony remains a tricky cultural compromise and dissapointingly out of reach.

[77] Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*. Great Britain: The Women's Press Ltd, 1988. x

Tambudzai's journey within it, as a framework that is too convenient and inadequate to fully express

> the gendered histories of specific colonial circumstances that influence political, social and affective life and speaks simultaneously to the challenges such losses pose to understandings of history, of the self, and of the forms culturally available to represent them.[78]

While the achievement of a Western education might be the successful completion of a rite of passage according to Western standards, Dalziell insists Tambudzai's journey, rather than culminate in the successful transition of passage, culminates instead in a form of mourning. It is her brother's untimely death that has allowed for Tambudzai's to receive the British colonial education that she has longed for, but which will erase her Shona culture just as it had begun to erase her brother's before his death.[79]

The third novel to inspire my interest in the female bildungsroman was Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*. The novel is concerned with the personal development of the protagonist Lucy, who like Esther Greenwood, travels to New York (from the Caribbean) to find a life away from the domestic drudgery of Antigua and the dull gendered future that has been mapped out for her according to island tradition. Instead, what she discovers is that rather than it being a journey which takes her into a bright new future, it becomes a journey of loss and compromise. To move

[78] Dalziell. Coming into Mourning. 262

[79] Ibid. 262. Linked to the debate about post-colonial rite of passage novels are the assumptions Western feminists make about post-colonial women being 'post' and about their aspirations around motherhood and self-hood which might sit at odds with Western ideals of selfhood and 'having it all.' These presumptions on the part of Western feminists have come under fire from post-colonial theorists. See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *The Post Colonial Studies Reader.* 269-272. Sulari, Sara. "Women Skin Deep: Feminism and the Post Colonial Condition." *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*. 273-280 and Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, "Under Western Eyes - Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*. 259-263.

forward means to leave her culture and her mother. Of the painful liminal space Lucy finds herself in New York she muses:

> What a surprise this was to me, that I longed to be back in the place that I came from, that I longed to sleep in a bed I had outgrown, that I longed to be with people whose smallest, most natural gesture would call up in me such a rage that I longed to see them all dead at my feet.[80]

Her dark humour aside, Lucy speaks of the burden of her displacement using similar terms to Cardinal, as if it were an un-nameable, unreachable Thing:

> something heavy and hard. It stayed there, and I could not think of one thing to make it go away. I thought, so this must be living, this must be the beginning of the time people later refer to as 'years ago when I was young.'[81]

If brother and education problems attracted me to *Nervous Conditions*, then it is Kincaid's fraught mother-daughter relationship that attracted me to *Lucy*. Lucy describes her relationship with her mother as 'the only true love in my whole life I would ever know.'[82] Dalziell argues that Lucy's loss and mourning for the mother are underpinned by the colonial inheritance and Lucy's disgust at both her mother's meek acceptance of British patriarchal gendered order and at what she sees as her mother's abandonment of her as attention is turned to the education of her brother. The mother makes the assumption that Lucy will get married and become a mother herself and Lucy feels betrayed by the lack of

[80] Kincaid. *Lucy*. 6
[81] Ibid. 24
[82] Ibid. 133

ambition foisted on her and her mother's easy acquiescence with a gendered second-class citizen life.[83] This seems to be the consistent story for bright girls from the colonies regardless of colour or culture. Lucy's sense of betrayal and anger at her mother is messily entwined with guilt and love.

What interested me, as I read these books, is the role British education played in shattering cultures and creating division between parents and their children. However, despite the difficulties each of these characters experience, there is coherence to the narrative structure of these respective books and also coherence to the backgrounds of the protagonists. People are looking out for them. People have their best interests at heart. It may not be the type of interest each of these protagonists is looking for but at least they have families, communities, somebody in their corner.

The same can't be said for the self-educated Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm,* a bildungsroman set in a 'literal and allegorical wasteland' populated by fractured, fragmented, duplicitous people and dependent orphaned girls.[84] The story is not important here. What is important is the structure of the book. It has been pointed out that as a white South African, Schreiner was compromised in her ability to represent the colonial world. She was both colonizer and colonized and therefore, unsurprisingly, her bildungsroman was fragmented. [85]

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[83] Dalziell. Coming into Mourning. 256

[84] Barasch, Carol. *An Oliver Schreiner Reader*. London:New York: Pandora, 1987. Print.

[85] See Moore-Gilbert, Bart. 'Olive Schreiner's Story of an African Farm: Reconciling Feminism and Anti-Imperialism.' *Women a Cultural Review.* 14. 1 (2003) : 85-103. Moore-Gilbert offers a synopsis of the four key periods and focus of Schreiner scholarship. Moore-Gilbert's argument seeks to trace the impact of the subaltern on the coloniser's unconscious and how this is reflected in representation. Burdett argues that Schreiner was compelled to work with contradictions and points out that issues for her not only included race, gender and class but also metropolis and colony. I suggest Schreiner's representation of Lyndall is suggestive of the complex and contradictory issues Schreiner struggled with. Her persistent reference to Lyndall's tiny frame and doll-like appearance invokes the 'weaker sex' trope which contradicted Schreiner's feminist message told through Lyndall's impassioned references to John Stuart Mill. It was as if she pandered to the stereotype of feminine beauty even as she rallied what that femininity ideologically represented. My own view of

Carol Barasch sums up Schreiner's world and her position as a writer in it, she writes:.

> Schreiner's texts enact struggles between different discourses of power, they ask questions that can't easily be dismissed. She both participates in racist mythology and begins to deconstruct it from a women's perspective within a colonial system. There are powerful contradictions resulting from a flawed social order.[86]

In referring to *The Story of an African Farm* as an 'odd duck,' Jed Esty argues:

> the novel's assimilation of an uneven and markedly colonial temporality unsettles the inherited formal dictates of the Goethean bildungsroman. *African Farm* invokes yet breaks the bildungroman's genetic code of progressive temporality. It thus literalises the basic political and economic fact of imperial time: the colonies do not, in a strict sense cannot, come of age under the rule of empire.[87]

This I suggest was part of the reason I couldn't write a Goethean bildungsroman either.

Jean Marquard, a former Professor at the University of Witwatersrand in

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Schreiner falls into the Liz Stanley and Carolyn Burdett school of thought. These theorists focus on Schreiner as a progressive for her era but complicated by the contradictory nature of her social world. It is this complexity that I believe fragments *The Story of an African Farm* as Schreiner attempts to come to grips with vast interwoven social issues at a very young age. See Stanley, Liz. *Imperialism, Labour and the New Woman*: *Olive Schreiner's Social Theory*. Durham: The Sociology Press, 2002. Print. Burdett, Carolyn. *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism, Evolution, Gender, Empire.* New York: Palgrave, 2001. Print. Mill, John, Stuart. *The Subjection of Women*. New York: Prometheus Books. 1861. Print. Mill's writings influenced Schreiner and shaped her social commentary and thinking particularly in relation to labour and women. For further reading on Schreiner's social theories, her concept of the new man and woman and what she saw as sexual enslavement or parasitism brought about by race and gender inequality, see Schreiner, Olive. *Women and Labour*. *Project Gutenberg*, (2008). Web. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1440/1440-h/1440-h.htm>

[86] Barsach. *An Oliver Schreiner Reader*. 20.

[87] Esty, Jed. 'The Colonial Bildungsroman: The Story of an African Farm and the Ghost of Goethe.' *Victorian Studies*. Maryland: Indiana University Press. 49. 3 (2007) : 407.

Johannesburg wrote in the 1980s at the height of South Africa's state of unrest that:

> … the contemporary white writer now reverses the confident European assumptions of the past by imposing upon himself [sic], or his protagonist, rather than on the African, the role of (good or bad) alien. South African literature is full of lost and alienated beings, identity seekers in a fragmented and 'foreign' landscape - burdened by guilt and worry, unable to bridge the gap between cultures, doomed to some form of psychological if not actual, exile.[88]

Marquard considered the displaced subject to be 'tiresomely repetitive.' I can only imagine how tiresome she would find Grace running around lake. While Marquard's interpretation of the way in which writers expressed their social and lived states may have an element of truth to it, I consider it be an ungenerous view. I prefer Dennis Walder's interpretation that writers, alone in landscapes, 'figure the present as a place marked by a trail of survivors searching for their roots, for a home, in the ruins of history.'[89] I like the idea of the ruins of history which invokes a landscape pockmarked by unrecognizable, burnt out shells of the past through which the protagonist must travel in search of him or herself, as if piecing together a puzzle. What springs to mind is WG Sebald's book *Austerlitz* whose protagonist travels across Europe trying to find his other self.

Luckhurst defines the trauma aesthetic, of which *Austerlitz* along with Toni

[88] Wagner, Kathrin. *Rereading Nadine Gordimer.* Johannesburg:Maskew Miller Longman, 1994. 44.
[89] Walder, Dennis. '"Alone in a Landscape": Lessing's African Stories Remembered.' *Sage* 43. 2 (2008) : 102.

Morrison's *Beloved* are considered prime examples, as an experimentation with form which 'defies the habituation of trauma into numbing and domesticating social conventions.' The strategies writers use to achieve this disrupting effect include, 'interruptions, temporal disorder, refusal of easy readerly identification, disarming play with narrative framing, disjunct movements in style, tense, focalisation or discourse and a resistance to closure that is demonstrated in compulsive telling and re-telling' or, as is the case with *Bloom* an unfinished story.[90]

Originally *Bloom* did not begin with Grace coming out of hospital; it began at the Johannesburg Zoo when she was a child. I adopted the linear approach and, as a logical rite of passage following the trip to London, Grace would, in a typical bildungsroman get married and settle down. However, *Bloom* began to get messy. Traditional bildungromans do not factor in revolutions and sudden shifts to Canberra. Nor do they factor in divorce. This would upset the traditional format of both the novel and the underpinning ideas of what middle-class family life should be. Redemptive characters were hard to find and Grace was struggling to reach epiphanies. My own life, namely white South African womanhood gone horribly wrong, was beginning to appear a poor choice for a bildung. I was stuck. So where to now?

The decision to have Grace run laps around a lake in Canberra in the middle of winter was made when I realised that the bildung as a genre was inadequate to represent Grace. *Bloom* had become mired in how to represent Canberra because the city, and the disruption it caused to Grace's life was a departure from the linear mode. There was to be no neat ending or redemptive resolution. Instead,

[90] Luckhurst. *The Trauma Question.* 89

Canberra, to borrow from Dalziell, was a place of mourning. I considered removing Canberra from the story altogether in order to squeeze a 'fit' but I realised Canberra was also my entry point into Australia and the beginning of a new bildung or a rebirth of sorts. To have removed it would mean that I was eliding my own history. This struck me as an avoidance of emotional truth because both London and Canberra represented pivotal moments in my life when direction and identity changed and I was thrown into a state of dissolution. In Canberra I was literally and allegorical alone in the landscape. Where I struggled with a state of exile and questions of belonging rooted in childhood but masked, when I was in South Africa, by an umbilical attachment to country.

In commenting on Schreiner's 'odd duck' of a bildung, Liz Stanley warns us not to interpret Schreiner's work as strictly autobiographical. She writes:

> … the autobiographical may form a basis for fiction writing but the unfolding requirements of plot, narrative and characterization with the writing process shift and change the factual into the fictional.[91]

I found this to be the case and Canberra my litmus test in determining what to do with the novel, how far I was willing to accommodate truth and when I should switch to fiction. Also, since I was writing in Australia, I felt it important to give Australia a presence. However, because I didn't have emotional attachment to the 'here' as opposed to the 'elsewhere' it was challenging identifying and negotiating competing loyalties. Ironically, *Bloom* as a failed bildung demanded the stroppy child grow up.

[91] Stanley. *Imperialism*. 21.

In *Locating the Imagined*, which offers a meditation on the importance of place to a writer and a writer's responsibility to it, Tess Brady makes several key points that resonated with me in my struggles with *Bloom.* In order to write about place, she argues, a writer needs to know it well. Although I'd lived in Canberra for three years, I didn't know it well. I'd arrived there as an immigrant and sealed myself off from it in a form of stubborn protectionism and it had sealed itself off from me.

Feedback I received from a reader of my first incomplete draft suggested that while Grace came across as an empathetic character in South Africa, she was entirely negative and dislikable in Canberra. Grace came across, said my reader, as stunned or shell shocked. She suggested I should produce a friend for her and provide a happy ending or some form of redemption to encourage readers, particularly Australian ones, to like her.

While this reader was genuinely interested in providing useful feedback, it had the effect of paralyzing me and causing my anxieties around belonging to bubble to the surface and affect my writing. I'd adopted a strategy of creative avoidance that kept me busy churning out reams of paper but did not necessarily lead anywhere. By not confronting Canberra, I was, in a literary sense, returning to where I was comfortable and that was Hillbrow. As Brady says, and I can't argue with it, migrants 'come to a landscape for the first time and can only perceive it through their knowing of the old world, through their old world eyes.'[92]

Since my experiences 'out in the world' particularly London, had been

[92] Brady, Tess. 'Place: Locating the Imagined.' *The Writer's Reader*. Ed. Walker. Brenda. Sydney:Halstead Press, 2007. 46

traumatic and underpinned by political narratives, my old world eyes were hostile to say the least and most comfortable, ironically in one of the least safe places on earth. Brady goes on to say that the complexity of two places co-exists in the mind of the migrant as a shadow, a 'here' and 'elsewhere.' The new place is foregrounded against the ghost of the old place. There were two traumatic histories at odds with each other. I knew my writing was much stronger when I was 'at home' because home is where the memories are.

Caruth in her reading of *Hiroshima mon amour* suggests that to avoid a collision of competing traumatic histories and risk privileging one over the other, is to stage an event at the site of the catastrophe which will invoke both the horror of that which cannot be told and allow for other narratives to be told. In the case of *Hiroshima mon amour,* the event was a love story between a French woman, who had been brutally tarred and feathered as a result of her love for a German, and a Japanese man who had experienced Hiroshima. Both had traumatic pasts and the French woman's story of brutal tar and feathering for falling in love with German occupier could be accommodated without eclipsing the horror of Hiroshima or presuming to explain, or own, the experience of those who had perished there.[93] Canberra was my personal site of catastrophe. Grace's return there to run laps around the lake offered a space where 'here' and 'elsewhere' could be accommodated with overlapping histories while at the same time keeping the reader grounded in one place.

Another issue arose out of comments from the early draft. An anonymous reader from the Department, one of the people charged with approving (or disproving) the fifty pages I submitted to meet my first milestone, responded that

[93] Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience*. 27.

the descriptions of Johannesburg, which originally opened the book, were mundane and the snippets of everyday life unremarkable. Also, said my reader, I had not racially profiled Grace early on in the novel. As a result, the reader did not know if Grace was black, white or Jewish and therefore she could not position her sympathies accordingly. I was surprised that a postdoctoral reader at a liberal Western university required directions in order to understand what I hoped was a human story. This reliance on stock characters is precisely the point both Achebe and Morrison roundly criticize. I thought what was in essence a family narrative about loss should be able to stand up without recourse to racial crutches.

I don't exclude myself from readerly expectation either. I offer as an example, my response to Ngozi Adichie's book *Half a Yellow Sun,* a family narrative set against the Biafran war. I found Adichie's character, Kainene, so compelling that I was drawn into her world and I hung on her every word, eagerly waiting for her reappearance to see what she would do next. When Kainene disappeared, presumed killed, I emailed Adichie in stunned disbelief. 'How could you do this?' I shouted in caps lock. Later I read an interview with Adichie in which she talked about this character and said that Kainene's disappearance upset half the Nigerian nation. Concerned, angry women demanding to know what had happened to Kainene bombarded her in supermarkets.

Half a Yellow Sun was dedicated to Adichie's two grandfathers who did not survive the war and also to her two grandmothers who both did. I couldn't help wondering how many family ghosts had been laid to rest among those pages. I wondered too, if the women in the supermarket were Igbo, and if, in Kainane's disappearance, their own sense of erasure at the Igbo nation's absorption into

Nigeria was transferred on to her. Adichie has said that her father still weeps when he remembers his father who died in the camps; the power of struggle and exile through war haunts and this haunting is something I tried to infuse into Grace. As I read *Half a Yellow Sun*, even though I knew the historical outcome, I found myself trudging along with the refugees hoping, that by some miracle, fiction would overturn the facts of history. Needless to say, Adichie never replied to my email.

Adichie did not only kill one sentimental character, she killed two. The emotional impact I felt as a reader at the disappearance of Kainene was responsible for the rape and death of Barbara in *Bloom.* I was aware, given our historical circumstances and the comment from my reader about where her sympathies might lie, that Barbara would be seen as a redemptive figure. By writing about her, I sought to disrupt the stereotypical power relationships that seem to perpetually recycle themselves in white South African novels through madam and maid tropes. Instead, I wanted to suggest that friendships could and did exist between women. Not every black woman was a maid. Not every white woman was a madam. I sought to destabilise the idea that strength and power always vested in white women and downtrodden victimhood belonged to black women. In *Bloom* it is Grace who is the passive downtrodden victim. Which is probably why I was so attached to Kainene. Kainene was privileged, powerful and courageous. Kainene didn't take shit.

The decision *not to* racially profile Grace early in the novel was a deliberate strategy on my part to avoid the pitfalls of racial stereotyping. I wanted to avoid them altogether and not only in the South African context. If, I had announced on page 1, that Grace was a white South African, I was aware that I invoked the

tropes of our historical condition and was setting her up for judgment. Not only did I want to avoid racial stereotypes but also I am incredibly bored by them.

[94]This is not an African Farm or a township or suburb. This is Hillbrow.

Elsewhere - Welcome to our Hillbrow

When I began researching Hillbrow, I was as astounded as Mpe to discover that Hillbrow has rarely been represented in South African literature.[95] I wondered what it meant in terms of the way in which we were globally understood; affluent white middle class, black underclass. In *Imperial Leather* Anne McClintock writes of the way in which the dominant class maintained its posture of orderliness, lawfulness and purity by invoking its chaotic and contaminated opposite:

> Lurking in the resplendent metropolis, the crowd embodied a savage and dangerous underclass waiting to spring upon the propertied classes. As the embodiment of deviant agency, the crowd became the metonymic symbol of the unemployed and unruly who were in turn associated with women, particularly prostitutes and alcoholics; who

[94] Photograph courtesy Graham Hall with permission from the Lost Johannesburg site administrator. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Lost-Johannesburg/333052263451369><last accessed 12 November 2012>
[95] In the almost fifty years that separate *A World of Strangers* and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, I could only find three literary works that used Hillbrow as a setting or explored the lives of Hillbrowans. Two of these are discussed in this exegesis. The third is Ivan Vladislavic's book which appeared at the about the same time as Phaswane Mpe's. See Vladislavic, Ivan. *The Restless Supermarket.* Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 2001. Print.

> were in turn associated with children; who were associated with primitive and the realm of Empire.[96]

McClintock argues that the degenerate classes, which are defined as departures from the normal human type, were necessary to the self-definition of the middle class. Progress could only be measured by the distance other lagged behind. McClintock writes:

> … certain groups are expelled and obliged to inhabit the impossible edges of modernity; the slum, the ghetto, the garret, the brothel, the convent, the colonial Bantustan. Abject peoples are those whom industrial imperialism reject but cannot do without … [they] inhabit the cusp of domesticity and the market, industry and empire, the abject return to haunt modernity as its constitutive inner repudiation; the rejected from which one does not party … it is a liminal state that hovers on the threshold of the body and body politic.[97]

I read Hillbrow as McClintock's abject space and suggest the reason for its cultural invisibility, which has been more than compensated for by negative media profiling, is because Hillbrow is a departure from the comfort zone of the black and white binary which frames South African perceptions about who they are, and it always has been. The suburb disrupts the idea of a superior glossy white homogenous group because while Hillbrowans came from all walks of life, they did not fit into the category 'normal' for a variety of reasons, white poverty

[96] McClintock. *Imperial Leather.* 115.
[97] Ibid. 115.

and a strong immigrant presence being two of them.[98] This is not to suggest that Hillbrow was exclusively impoverished when it was a white area, it was not. The population of Hillbrow was and is, an eclectic mix of people that was both multi-racial and cross-cultural. Because Hillbrow was also an area of cheap rent and some buildings were protected by rent control, there was a high concentration of women in various stages of life, generally in states of flux and usually suffering financial hardship as a result of being widowed or divorced.[99] An example of this is my mother who sought refuge there when she left my father. Hillbrow is important to me personally because until I researched the suburb I didn't realise how my own thinking, and hostility towards northern suburbs middle class white South Africa, had been shaped by an unconscious sense of Hillbrow's 'otherness.' It also explained for me the mystery of why my sister-in-law attempted to teach me how to wash clothes informed by her perceptions of the Caliban horrors who inhabited Hillbrow and which I write about in *Bloom*.

Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* is a savage critique of South Africans themselves for their xenophobic attitudes towards the suburb which is framed by

[98] White poverty exists and always has but receives little attention. See Sally, Gaule, "Poor White South Africa," *Afterimage*. 24.4 (1997) : 1-5 and Roger, Ballen, *Brutal, Tender, Human, Animal.* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2000). Some of the criticism aimed at writers like Nadine Gordimer who wrote for an international readership was that they ignored cultural and class differences in white South African society. In addition, a quick reference to sociologist Melissa Steyn's list of what 'normal' white South African life represented reduces the entire demographic of Hillbrow to one sentence '… these things were common to practically all white households, even working-class homes, English and Afrikaans, give or take a few differences in cultural nuances.' Steyn. *Whiteness*. xi. In terms of Steyn's classification, Hillbrow represents a sizable aberration to the way she believes we all lived. In the new South Africa, with its largely immigrant population, Hillbrow again looms large as a 'problem to solve' in what Murray et al have argued, stems from a mindset informed by 'the problem of scholarship and representation relating to Africa as a whole and the fact that the starting point for many studies on Africa has been the 'sciences of alterity and difference.' Murray, Noelene, Shepherd, Nick and Hall, Martin. *Desire Lines: Space Memory and Identity in the Post-Apartheid City*. London:New York, Routledge. 2007. 8. While I accept a certain nitpickety-ness on this subject on my part, I believe that until the 'grey' areas are probed (and Hilbrow, which was legally classified as a 'grey area' by the Apartheid regime seems a good place to start) and laid bare through scholarship and story, the underlying structures that support a stratified society remain firmly in place. This social stratification enables neat assumptions to be made which are translated into law or a system of beliefs which demonise or elevate a particular group of people. Recent South African scholarship which looks at the way identity is formulated around space is an attempt to begin peeling back these layers. The question has never been asked for example what ideological assumptions drive the elevation of the rebuilt Sophiatown, Hillbrow's black alter-ego in the 1960s, into a mythologised cultural mecca linked to the struggle while Hillbrow is demonised as, in Mpe's words, the euphamism for every conceivable social horror. Both suburbs had similar demographics in terms of urban (as opposed to suburban or rural) eclectic communities with strong inter-cultural, migrant and artistic presences and both were directly or indirectly, destroyed by the Apartheid regime. Sophiatown was dramatically bulldozed and its occupants carted away in trucks whilst Hillbrow was destroyed more slowly, through the flight of capital, the intervention of legislation and from within. It could be argued that Hillbrow today is the Sophiatown of yesterday.

[99] I include a discussion of the suburb here because it is relevant to my discussion of Nadine Gordimer's book *A World of Strangers* and the way she represented Hillbrow when it was a white suburb.

and around the shadowy figure of the Hillbrow prostitute as purveyors of disease, most notably AIDS, and responsible for, either directly or indirectly, the downfall of men.[100] If I harboured any anxieties that Grace's story was too fragmented and messy to tell, *Welcome to our Hillbrow* blows them to smithereens as Mpe moves between the real and the surreal in a doomed love story which is, at its heart, a struggle between the traditional rural world and the urban bound up in the figure of the mythologized Hillbrow woman. The issue that underpins his rant is the way in which rumour, endorsed by consistent negative media representations of the suburb, present it as a place of crime, corruption and prostitution.[101] These speculations, over a long period of time, have had a devastating affect on the lives and livelihoods of the people who live there. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow,* urban myths and unfounded rumours ravage the minds of the good people of rural Tiragalong from whence Mpe's protagonist Referentse has come. It tells the story of a young man from the rural areas who comes to the city to study at the university. These are the elements of the Goethean bildungsroman. However, on arrival in Hillbrow, Johannesburg's spatial 'other' the neatly ordered European world of linear narratives and episodic plotlines comes chaotically undone.

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[100] Sixty years earlier, Mpe's central themes, namely the tension between rural and urban culture, were played out in Alan Paton's classic *Cry the Beloved Country*. In what was globally understood to be impassioned white liberalism on behalf of the African (the book was endorsed by Oprah's bookclub after all) it is in fact a highly assumptive and imperialistic view that subtly engages in civilizing tropes by steering 'bad' blacks back to the tribal lands towards humble 'good' blacks in the form of the Reverend Khumalo. The moral responsibility for the corruption of good country boys is blamed on diseased women like Reverend Khumalo's sister who runs an illicit shebeen and prostitutes herself to survive. Paton's version of what constituted a 'good' black who was linked to Christian faith, not only promoted this humble chief version of an African globally to the irritation of urban Africans, but it seems to have established the bad woman cliché and located her in the city. Nothing has changed. Similarly Ivan Vladislavic opens *The Restless Supermarket* with the recourse to the cliché of the drunken prostitute Queen of Sheba as she lurches out of an alley next to Hypermeats. It seems we can't get away from this image. Hillbrow was in fact home to thousands of women who held down mundane, low paid jobs like supermarket cashiers and bank tellers. See Paton, Alan. *Cry the Beloved Country.* London: Vintage, 200. Print.

[101] The hapless prostitute as euphemism for Hillbrow underpins notions of purity and authenticity that inform both black and white cultural groups. However it appears that it was Olive Schreiner alone of her peers and the scholars who followed her, who seems to have recognized and theorised the broader ideological and economic conditions that cause prostitution and its opposite, what she called 'sex parasitism.' While Paton and Gordimer both offer versions of middle-class South African life through the lens of haughty British liberalism, Schreiner, who grew up poor, understood too well, the lack of opportunity for the colonized subject *and* working class women. Schreiner's hyperbolic *Women and Labour* is closely attuned with Anne McClintock's more cerebral *Imperial Leather.* I have often wondered, given that Schreiner's estranged husband Samuel Cronwright lived in Parktown while she lived in isolation in the Karoo, whether her particularly vicious attack on sexual parasites (over privileged women which equated in Schreiner's mind, to totally useless women), wasn't informed by Cronwright's apparent predilection for them. What Schreiner attempted to unpick and foreground was the political and economic structures that kept women financially dependent regardless of race. Schreiner understood race to be the smokescreen that blurred the underlying patriarchal power structures which yoked together women and colonized subjects.

Mpe represents Hillbrow as an open wound, a place in which disease and death are ever present. Even the protagonist Referentse is dead and from the opening page he stumbles as a ghost through the wreckage of his life. The omniscient narrators, in the form of the ancestors, offer Referentse their perspective of what has happened to bring him to suicide. They inform him that it was the persistent rumour mongering and misrepresentation of a love rival that brought about a trail of suicides, necklaced bodies and failed dreams that confound the lives of the characters, haunt the text and culminate in Referentse's own suicide.[102]

Like Schreiner, and also myself, Mpe layers the primary story with other social issues and comments upon what he sees as the failed rainbow nation largely brought about by South Africans themselves. In terms of narrative strategy and structure, the book is broken into distinct sections which echo Schreiner's compartmentalized 'odd duck.' *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is a story in the process of being written and through which the story of Hillbrow is told. As with the case of Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, it almost seems as if the issues - AIDS, cultural representation, xenophobia, the failed Rainbow Nation, the hypocrisy and intolerance of South Africans themselves are the unspeakable big 'Thing' which eschews easy understanding and overwhelm the text. How can individual lives be reprised intact from the ruins of a fragmented society? Everything has shattered and this is structurally reflected in the chaotic random state of the novel. As Gugu Hlongwane suggests, in Hillbrow there is no evidence of the Rainbow Nation or black homogeneity or solidarity. Taking the tensions with whites out of the

[102] Necklacing is a particularly horrific form of murder involving a petrol soaked tyre being placed around the victim's neck and setting it alight. It came to prominence during the struggle years when township kangaroo courts terrorised the locals with the threat of necklacing as a punishment for any number of arbitrary offences.

equation, Africans themselves are fragmented by a tension between immigrants from other parts of Africa and conflicts between the rural and the urban world. A myriad of cultures in transition unleashed from the yoke of Apartheid and in collision with an influx of refugees with conflicting interests compete for scarce resources. [103]

Mpe disrupts the narrative by shifting back and forth in time and dislocates the reader through the use of ghosts, magic realism and bouts of steady stream of consciousness. It is almost as if the novel (much like the nation) has no firm footing on which to stand and Mpe struggles to find the words to say what the Thing is, because the Thing comprises so many different things. I found this to be the case with *Bloom* too as issues collide and intersect with each other. Richard Samin writes of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*:

> … the novel thus gradually builds up a picture of the neighbourhood as a place rife with ambiguities where negative aspects coexist with positive ones and whose social fabric is an entangled web of interwoven life stories. They map out Hillbrow as a mental territory which lives on and expands in each of it's inhabitants' consciousness.[104]

What Mpe represents is an entanglement of lives, a knot, the threads of which

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[103] For critical approaches to *Welcome to our Hillbrow* see Green, Michael, 'Translating the Nation: From Plaatje to Mpe'. _____. 'Translating the Nation:Phaswane Mpe and the fiction of post-apartheid.' Hlongwane, Gugu. '"Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction" The City and Its Discontents in Phaswane Mpe's Welcome to Our Hillbrow.' *Ariel* 37. 4 (2006) : 69-82. Print. Samin, Richard. 'Reappraising the myth of the new South Africa:Phaswane Mpe's Welcome to our Hillbrow." For another version of Hillbrow see Vladislavic, Ivan. *The Restless Supermarket*. For a critical analysis of *The Restless* Supermarket, see Marias, Mike. 'Reading against race: J.M Coetzee's Disgrace, Justin Cartwright's White Lightening and Ivan Vladislavic's The Restless Supermarket.' *Journal of Literary Studies* 19. 3-4 (2007) : 271-289. Print. For an architectural account of the suburb see Chipkin, Clive. *Johannesburg Style:Architecture & Society 1990-1960*. Cape Town: David Phillips Publishers, 1993. Print. Finally, to gain a greater appreciation for the spatial difference in the enjoyment of and access to privilege during the Gold Rush and the birth of Johannesburg and the establishment of Parktown and the Northern Suburbs as hub for the British liberal white elite see Foster, Jeremy. 'Landscape Phenomenology and the Imaginings of a New South Africa on Parktown Ridge.' *African Studies* 55. 2 (1996) : 93-126.

[104] Samin. *Reappraising the Myth*. 4

weave around and through each other without beginning or end. One of the key features of *Welcome to our Hillbrow* is Mpe's disruption of the South African binary from the black perspective. Mpe, using the liminality of the suburb and the public attitude to it, prises open a refreshing space to reflect critically on issues facing the nation beginning with a focus on black culture and the inter-cultural struggles that have received little attention in the overwhelming and persistent focus on black-white antagonisms. It is instead a novel that appeals for a universal humanity.

In a study of space, Sarah Nuttal writes:

> … one of the more potent ways of disrupting or 'jamming' the dominant imaginings of Africa, is to concern ourselves anew with space and with discontinuities, to resist our topographical imagination … we need to identify sites within the continent, entry and exit points not usually dwelt upon in research and public discourse, that defamiliarise commonsense readings of Africa.[105]

Hillbrow is one area that defamiliarises knowledge about South Africa and Mpe achieves this disruption by writing a disruptive, dystopian novel. However, what Mpe seems to suggest is that the othering of Hillbrow is something that has only occurred since the area changed demographic. Gordimer's 1950s novel *A World of Strangers* suggests this is not the case.

Nadine Gordimer was particularly good at perpetuating dominant imaginings about South Africa. In her analysis of Gordimer's life and work Katrin Wagner in

[105] Mbembe, Achille, and Nuttal, Sara. 'Writing the World from an African Metropolis.' *Public Culture*. 16. 3 (2004) :347-72.

Rereading Nadine Gordimer suggests that Gordimer underplayed the realities of social class and compromised on issues of gender and represented South Africa as a single-issue society.[106] During the Apartheid era, Gordimer was arguably the 'voice' that represented our world. With sound international networks, access to publishers and contracts with *The New Yorker*, she was largely read overseas and it was through her representations of us that people came to know us. Her literary activism notwithstanding, Gordimer has also been criticized for reproducing for a global readership a continuation of the 'exotic' African novel through a shared set of Western values opposed to Apartheid.

Gordimer's representation of Hillbrow women in *A World of Strangers* is a good example of the romanticisation of Africans as noble figures at the expense of crudely portrayed working class whites through which her own British liberal upper middle class milieu, and the readership to whom she appealed, is redeemed, if not exalted. If Achebe in *An Image of Africa* was apoplectic about Conrad's representation of Africans in *Heart of Darkness*, I was apoplectic by Gordimer's representation of Hillbrow in *A World of Strangers.* Of her famed literary activism (which won her a Nobel Prize), leading black writer Ezekiel Mphahlele had this to say, 'black characters interested Gordimer only so far as they throw light on the subtleties of group attitudes and pig headedness amongst whites.'[107]

A World of Strangers is a classic male bildungsroman. It tells the story of the young British Toby Hood who arrives in South Africa during the 1950s. He is

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[106] Wagner. *Rereading Nadine Gordimer*. 4

[107] For an interesting account of Gordimer's life and work see Roberts, Suresh Robert. *No Cold Kitchen*. Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2005. Print. *No Cold Kitchen* was an authorized biography by Trinidadian born Roberts. When the book was completed Gordimer withdrew her authorization because she didn't like aspects that had been revealed about her which included unflattering comments about activist Ruth First ('the silly bitch') and being piqued that Doris Lessing had not congratulated her on her Nobel Prize. The withdrawal of her permission caused Roberts to lose publishing contracts in America and Great Britain.

going to work for a publishing company in Johannesburg as an escape from his parents and their humanitarian idealism. This is demonstrated through the causes they champion in obscure parts of the Third World. Hood's cynicism is obvious as he muses, 'my mother and father gave up a great many small things, unworthy things that together constituted a workable framework of living, but what did they have to offer in its place? Freedom; an empty international plain where a wind turns over newspapers in languages you don't understand.'[108]

Obviously his attitude is going to change when he arrives in South Africa. The nationalist regime is already in power but the ideology of Apartheid is still in the process of being codified and translated into the national narrative. *A World of Strangers* ends with the onset of the treason trial which took place between 1958 and 1961.[109] Hood, who befriends Stephen Sithole an engaging African larrikin or, in South African slang, a *skelem*, is portrayed as a concerned liberal humanist linked to the world of activism through his parents. While the almost universally unlikeable white characters drink, party and dressage pony their way through the novel in an over-the-top display of white decadence, Hood is the moral voice and centre of the narrative. He is also British and Gordimer goes to great lengths to separate the over-consumptive British world of the northern suburbs from the showy and divorced bad mother Cecil Rowe identified as South African. Cecil Rowe lives in Hillbrow and relies on her looks to attract a wealthy husband who will rescue her and transport her to the glittery world of the suburbs. While there is much truth in the fact that the Cecil Rowes of the world needed to rely on their looks to attract financial rescue, Gordimer does not attempt to probe the

[108] Gordimer, Nadine. *A World of Strangers*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1958. 32. Print.
[109] This is the significance of the date 1961 in *Bloom*. The Treason Trial is not to be confused with The Rivonia Trial that began in 1963 and resulted in Nelson Mandela's incarceration on Robben Island. It is entirely possible that my mother, who began her subversive life as a communist, shifted to Scientology when the Communist Party was banned. I never asked her.

structure that keeps Rowe in a financially vulnerable position. Instead Rowe is set up as 'loose' and worse, a bad mother and operates as a foil for the romanticized good mother, in the form of Rowe's African maid.

Hood slowly comes of age through his friendship with Sithole as he begins to understand and witness life in the Apartheid State (demonstrated by the racism of Hillbrow women) and this brings him closer to his parents, as metaphor for the enlightened Western world's activism. Hood leaves South Africa as the Treason Trial arrests are reported in the newspaper and vows to return to fight on the side the African until he is free from Afrikaner Nationalist tyranny.[110] The implication is obvious. He has discovered self-hood through woolly liberal selflessness and, in becoming an activist like his parents, British liberalism is privileged as humane over Afrikaner nationalism and brutality. Gordimer ends the book with Hood embracing and laughing with an African as 'a young policeman (a word synonymous during the Apartheid era with Afrikaner), on which suspicion was like the serious frown wrinkling the brow of a puppy, watched us.'[111] In terms of the elisions of history, British colonialism and the ideological, economic and legislative framework it established over three hundred years and upon which Afrikaner nationalism was built, is deftly avoided.

Gordimer's romanticisation of black Africans, white Englishmen and the relationships between them are stereotypical and nauseating. However it is her representation of Hillbrow that exposes both her class snobbery and her

[110] I use the word 'he' deliberately since Gordimer eschewed anything to do with feminism and women's rights. Her view was human rights was the more pressing social issue in South Africa rather than the rights of a few middle-class women. Both Schreiner and McClintock, along with millions of working class women would have disagreed with her. Anne McClintock has astutely commented on Gordimer's 'imperial' view. She writes 'asking women to wait until after the revolution serves merely as a strategic tactic to defer women's demands. ... Not only does it conceal the fact that nationalisms are from the outset constituted in gender power, but as the lesson of international history portend; women who are not empowered to organise during the struggle will not be empowered to organise after the struggle.' McClintock. *Imperial Leather.* 385. This has proven to be the case. For a critical approach to Gordimer's white women's protagonists see Visel, Robin. 'Othering the Self: Nadine Gordimer's Colonial Heroines.' *Ariel* 19.4 (1988) : 33-41. Web. 25 Nov. 2012.
[111] Gordimer. *A World of Strangers*. 254.

ambivalence towards women's issues. With the exception of African women whom Gordimer portrays sympathetically, albeit remaining within the perpetual madam and maid paradigm, white women are represented either as decorative, 'horribly ageing schoolgirls' or, as in the case of Cecil Rowe and Mrs Jarvis, both Hillbrow dwellers, they appear before the world as a bunch of loose, gold-digging, spiteful, grunting savages.[112]

This is Gordimer's representation of Hillbrow's Mrs Jarvis, distributed to an international audience as an example of loathsome South African life. Gordimer writes:

> The caretaker of the flats was standing there; she wore her fur coat, a long-haired animal with tawny stripes that made a chevron down to her bosom, and her huge, regularly-painted face confronted me like a target in a shooting game. She was one of those people quite common in Johannesburg, who don't seem to be Afrikaans-speaking, but don't really speak English either. She whined like an Australian, she dropped aitches like a Cockney - it would take an expert in phonetics to convey what she made do with for communication. [113]

Having established Mrs Jarvis as a vaudevillesque figure who is part human and part animal because she is neither English or Afrikaans (she is worse, she is a

[112] Later I discuss Athol Fugard's sensitive portrayal of Milly and her abandonment by the world and the world of men in *People are Living There.* Fugard was one of the few South African writers who wrote about the lives of marginalised but in a way that attempted to draw attention to their human frailties as opposed to their racial positions. Milly too was a landlady who lived in Hillbrow, or rather in Braamfontein which is on the border of Hillbrow.

[113] Gordimer. *A World of Strangers.* 38. One of the key issues that raised the hackles of both Achebe and Morrison was the way in which white writers signified black barbarity by withholding language so they are forced to speak in grunts and hand gestures. Gordimer's portrayal of Mrs Jarvis follows a similar pattern. The practical policing of Apartheid and the confrontations between the racial groups is subtly shoved onto the hybrid characters in the novel who are identified as 'South African' while the authentically British, Afrikaans or African characters all have some form of redemption attributed to them. Thus Hillbrow and the hybridity encoded in Mrs Jarvis become euphemism for the ugly face of Apartheid.

hybrid not only of the two white racial groups but of the animal kingdom as well), Gordimer allows her to speak:

> Yoo can't bring kaffirs in my bullding,' Mrs Jarvis screams, 'sitting there like this is a bloody backyard location, I mean to say, the other tenants is got a right to 'ev yoo thrown out. Kaffir women coming here, behaving like scum, living with decent people. Wha'd yoo think, sitting here with kaffirs.[114]

Clearly, Morrison's view that the Africanist presence in American literature, which she saw as functioning only as vaudeville, or a side-show and which carried no meaning other to 'provide local colour' or 'the occasional bout of jungle fever,' was not only the preserve of American novels but also, in South Africa, included class. In South Africa, liberal humanist writers like Gordimer had no recourse to racial others since that would contradict their position. The working class, in *A World of* Strangers at least, offered a useful substitute. Mrs Jarvis is made to carry the full weight of Apartheid without enjoying access to its many privileges and economic benefits.

While Gordimer treats her own world of upper middle-class white liberalism scarcely any better, she exempts *herself* from the petty behaviours of her characters by virtue of her belief that writers were objective observers in their societies. She has been quoted as saying, 'the white writer's task as a cultural worker is to raise the consciousness of white people.'[115] Notwithstanding this pompous assumption with more than a blush of civilizing mission, I saw it as my task to raise the consciousness of people about Hillbrow. With the inclusion of

[114] Ibid. 39
[115] Wagner. *Rereading Nadine Gordimer.* 8.

Mrs Agnew and Grace's grandmother in *Bloom* I sought to offer a more vulnerable, realistic and humanized version of Hillbrow women.[116]

To conclude with Achebe's quarrel with Conrad. Achebe is particularly incensed by Conrad not because he withholds language from the rudimentary souls of Africa, although that enrages him too, but because of his power and influence as writer. Conrad's contribution, argues Achebe, falls into a different class of permanent literature 'read and taught by and constantly evaluated by serious academics.'[117] Achebe raises the question of artistic good faith and criticises the use of trickery as a means to bombard readers into a stupor so that they accept the versions of world that appear before them. With a Nobel prize on her mantelpiece which invests upon the recipient some form of honour or service to human truth, Gordimer falls into Conrad's category. In his now un-authorised biography, Suresh Roberts recalls an incident where Gordimer transplanted a racist scene she had witnessed in America into a novel about South Africa. The line 'look mommy, a baby maid' was no doubt designed to underscore our racism. I'm not sure we needed the help.

[116] In his sociological study, Morris offers examples of the difficulties faced by the predominantly women Hillbrow caretakers who were placed in the unenviable position of having to police Apartheid's Group Areas Act. However, he also points to instances where tenants protected caretakers who contravened the Group Areas Act by allowing mixed race residents.
[117] Achebe. An Image of Africa. 790.

The Absent Mother

We are standing, my brother and I, at Zoo Lake. We are watching my godchildren play on the jungle gym. We reminisce about the time when I was around six and my brother was four, and our mother left us at Zoo Lake with a picnic basket. Imagine a busy road and a lake surrounded by expansive grounds; enough room in the world for toddlers to drown or get lost in. My mother set us down with the basket in the one of the small thatched rondavels that comes equipped with a table in the centre and benches on each side and she leaves blowing kisses. She tells us to go careful on the sandwiches, and not to wander too close to the water. She leaves me in charge. I could be wrong, but I am sure I am six. My brother doesn't remember these things and foolishly I remind him. I know he will turn to me, in what has become an annual event. He'll be *incredulous*. 'I just don't understand,' he says, 'why you are not angry with Mom. She *abandoned* us! What woman *abandons* her children?' He warms to his subject. 'Why *aren't* you angry.' My mind casts about emptily. 'I'm just not,' I said unwilling to risk an argument on my last day.

My brother, who, in late fatherhood, has become the font of family values in the way of reformed smokers says, 'Well I don't wear the rose coloured glasses that you do around mom.' Nobody can accuse him of wearing tinted glasses. In the book he began a year after I started mine and published in June 2012, he has this to say about our mother:

> Would you have preferred to bypass the nappies, and education and the dreary tedium of raising children? Would you have preferred to give birth to an eighteen year

> old Scientologist with similar interests? Would that have been more convenient for you? Would that have been less work? Where the fuck have you *been* my whole life! What have you *done* with my life! [118]

His criticisms of what he sees as my mother's deficient nurturing follows a discussion earlier during my trip when, mindful of his anxieties around his children, I negotiate the thorny subject of crime in the country by saying that 'in case' anything should happen I'll take care of them. He is *incredulous* then too. 'You can't,' he says, 'you're too old!' Welcome to *my* South Africa and the female bildungsroman.

In *The Reader* Bernard Schlink presents the reader with a conundrum. His character Michael Berg has discovered that his former, much older lover Hanna, Schmidt had been a Nazi guard before they met. She is brought to trial for war crimes relating to the murder of a group of Jewish women. Hanna's guilt is neither proved nor disproved. She accepts culpability rather than confess to the personal shame of illiteracy. In his seeking to understand her, Berg travels to the camps, now in disuse and which seem, decades later and without the presence of soldiers, barbed wire and prisoners, almost benign, even cheerful and inviting. Berg feels a sense of estrangement from the landscape because as a German, born after the crime of the Holocaust, he is unable to locate the post-war Germany that he knew, within the Germany of frozen Holocaust images. For Berg there is a sense of here and elsewhere. The haunting presence of a shadow of another place that too forms part of his identity. He feels shame at having loved a Nazi and guilt for feeling this shame. His conundrum is that to forgive Hanna is a failure to

[118] Clark, Bruce. *Love Sex Fleas God*. Cape Town: Umuzi, 2012. 191

understand the seriousness of her alleged crime. Failing to understand her as an individual, and as a person who he had once loved, would betray her for a second time. The first time being when he had pretended he hadn't seen her at the swimming pool when she came looking for him. Berg thinks:

> I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that. When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding. But even as I wanted to understand Hanna, failing to understand her meant betraying her all over again. I could not resolve this. I wanted to pose myself both tasks – understanding and condemnation. But it was impossible to do both. [119]

Hanna is on trial because a Jewish child who survives the event Hanna stands accused of, writes about her experience years later as an adult. Her testimony is drawn from traumatic childhood memory upon which the case against the accused is built. The childhood memoir, according to Berg, 'exudes numbness. It never gives the barracks leaders, the female guards, or the uniformed security force clear enough faces or shapes for the reader to be able to relate to them, to judge their acts for better or worse.'[120] Numbness of course would be the appropriate emotion for what the woman has been through but it does raise questions about witnessing and testimony particularly from a child's point of

[119] Schlink, Bernard. *The Reader*. Great Britain: Phoenix, 1997. 156.
[120] Ibid. 118.

view when those memories may have been overlain with trauma. It is precisely the struggle to remember that haunts Grace, Cardinal and WG Sebald's character in *Austerlitz*.

What interests me about Schlink is the way he has tried to separate the individual from the ideology and offers instead a human story stylistically formulated as a trauma narrative. The disturbance in the novel is not as obvious as it in *Austerlitz* for example, yet Schlink employs many of the same narrative devices. These include disruptive time, the sense of melancholy that seeps through Berg's character and the idea of the former Germany as a ghost haunting post-war Germany.

The heart of Schlink's dilemma, as a German writer, appears to be a question of ethics and how to represent what Caruth has argued to be 'the question of history [which] is a matter not only what we see and know but also of what is ethical to tell.[121]

Schlink's attempt to represent the dilemma of inherited and shameful histories through Berg, also feature protagonists alone in landscapes whose entrapment in and by national shame is signified through images of repetitive movement. For example, in one scene, Berg pays a surprise visit to Hanna by taking a ride on the tram where she works. She ignores him. Berg reflects:

> I felt rejected, exiled from the real world in which people lived and worked and loved. It was as I were condemned to ride forever in an empty tram to nowhere.[122]

[121] Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience*. 26.
[122] Schlink. *The Reader*. 43.

The sense of endless haunting and coming to grips with that which is unfathomable, is what I tried to achieve with Grace as she walks or runs around the streets of Canberra. She too is looking for something but she does not know what it is.

However ethical questions do not only arise in trauma narratives concerning historical events. Ethics concern families too. If my brother and I were characters in *The Reader* then it is my brother's book that publicly names and shames my mother with accusations of bad motherhood drawn from childhood memory. It is a confessional non-fictional autobiography invested with the notion of truth. However to my mind the story to be told was more complex than a simple case of reckless motherhood. Rather my mother's story was threaded through and complicated by the knots of the colonial/Apartheid legacy. These played a part in her decisions.

For this reason I have sympathy for Michael Berg whose conundrum I shared. I felt that to tell the truth would be a betrayal of my mother and subject her to the lurid spectacle evoked by the word 'Scientology.' My resistance to and repugnance for the cult was counterbalanced by an equal amount of love and filial loyalty for my mother along with knowledge of her emotional and financial struggles and it was these that drove her seek sanctuary with the cult in the first place. I was well aware of the potential for sensationalism and I rejected it. It was for this reason I interwove fact with fiction and made Grace's memory, its patchiness, unreliability and gradual awakening the focus of *Bloom*. How to ethically represent my mother began to complicate one part of the double-bildungsroman I imaged I would write.

Burrows begins her book *Whiteness and Trauma* by asking us to imagine 'a densely threaded knot.' This visual image, or metaphor, she suggests as a useful approach to thinking about the ambivalent interwoven and entangled mother/daughter relationship that is 'loosely tied together bodily and physically' but which evokes 'the passionate, ambivalent strength and changing dimensions of the mother/daughter bond.'[123] The knot as metaphor is particularly helpful when thinking about the complexity and malleability of mother/daughter relationships.

My own mother/daughter knot was more closely aligned to Kincaid's than, for example Cardinal's on whom she blames all of her traumas. Kincaid's melancholic reflection of her mother as a lost love affair who, 'for ten of my twenty years, half my life, I have been mourning the end of a love affair, perhaps the only true love in my whole life that I would ever know'[124] is suggestive of the ambiguity of mother and daughter relationships placed under strain by social conditions. Unlike Kincaid's mother, who has envisioned for her daughter the dull life of a housewife and against which Lucy (as Kincaid's alter-ego) rebels, my mother had no intention of spending her life sweeping the yard or tending to children and vegetables.

In *Vivesection*, Gerard Windsor writes: 'my mother is my material and my mother is still alive. What can I do?'[125] As both my parents were dead did this imply their lives became open season and I could write about them as I liked?

Given that our mother is the ghost to whose skirts my brother and I still cling, I borrowed from Morrison and inverted *Beloved* to turn my mother into a ghost.

[123] Burrows. *Whiteness and Trauma*. 1-2.
[124] Kincaid. *Lucy*. 133.
[125] Windsor, Gerard. *The Mansions of Bedlam and Other Stories*. St Lucia:Qld:UQP, 2001. 103. Print.

This allowed me to slip between the real and surreal and also to avoid bad motherhood and good woman tropes of the type found on the back of my brother's book, which, I hasten to add, he didn't write. Nevertheless:

> .... the world's best dad, had a nightmare childhood that spewed him out onto the streets at age 16, uneducated and livid. Deep into adulthood he remained pretty much like that, until the love of a good woman grounded him.[126]

Behind every good woman, lies the middle class family romance with its notions of womanly virtue and poised behind her, the shadowy, phantasm spectacle of the bad woman. In this case it was my mother. I wasn't going there.

In commenting on the trauma narrative and *Beloved* in particular, Luckhurst suggests:

> that the use of supernatural foregrounds the limits of historiography, law or medicine to convey the lived experience of traumatized subjects and its transgenerational consequence: this experience requires fantastical tropes, exploded time schemes and impossible causations. [127]

Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* also employs a ghost and ghostly narrators in the form of omniscient ancestors. Ghosts offer useful ways to both engage with the notion of haunting but also for their ability to appear and disappear without the requirement of explanation. Textual ghosts shatter both the limits of the real

[126] Clark. *Love*. Back cover.
[127] Luckhurst. *The Trauma Question.* 97.

and narrative realism.

At the first creative writing class I attended as a way of coping with the news that my mother was dying of cancer, I received a handout of Kincaid's short story *My Mother*. In order to contextualize Grace's ambivalence to children I needed to locate her alongside the mothering she received which, through flashback, would build to the car accident and explain her fictive state of abjection. I made use of and built upon Kincaid's celebrated whimsical style for which the book of short stories containing the story *My Mother*, is well known. Through the use of images of transformation such as the flying ant and the butterfly wings I wanted to build both the relationship between mother and daughter and use the insects to invoke doomed flights to freedom, where, in turn, mother and daughter are contained by the damage to their wings. Insects operate as shorthand for the thwarted dreams of the female and her bildungsroman when the weight of children and family responsibility puts an end to flight and she is returned to the home or, in the case of insects, dies. The butterfly and the flying ant therefore became signifiers for short lived and fragile female empowerment.

I wanted to suggest, that when Grace finally arrives at the house in Canberra and recognizes it as mirror image of her first home, she is able to remember the chain of events that lead up to the moment her mother is killed. The rain, the hulking shapes Grace sees through the mask, the weight of the baby, are the original points of trauma; the Thing which Grace's mind has protected her from seeing but which has played out in her body through the vomiting and aborted pregnancies. These link back to the night in London where the state of abjection is triggered, much like Cardinal's experience at the Louis Armstrong concert, by the rain, the hulking shapes of rubbish on the road, and Bette Midler's laugh on

television which, at a sub-conscious level, invokes the memory of the accident.

When I optimistically began the mother/daughter bildungsroman it was with a view to showing that regardless of social convention or decade, women are still defined by their mothering capabilities, good, bad or absent. It was always my intention to lead Grace to the house at the Wall Place where both bildungs would converge with a grand epiphany. However no epiphany was forthcoming which I thought more in keeping with reality and a re-affirmation of existing feminist scholarship that argues for a slow awakening to the limits of the bildung.

Jacques Derrida in *The Work of Mourning* makes the point that speaking of the dead requires tact, taste and ethical responsibility. He suggests that there is the danger of speaking of the dead and using them for one's own ends or purposes.[128] In addition to my mother, I also had a father who I wanted to write about. Derrida suggests that in representing the dead we should question our motives in order to 'avoid the insidious pathos of personal memory' which shifts the gaze from the person being mourned, in order to place it on ourselves to highlight our own self-pity.[129] This is difficult to do, particularly with parents. Since I spent less time with my father than I did with my mother (he died at forty three), I chose to represent him in small brush strokes to capture the moments of human frailty children notice and store in what amounts to matchboxes of memories.

Here was a man without any obvious skills who had lost both a wife and his children. His life was in disarray and he too, would have suffered some form of emotional trauma. This has haunted me all my life because he didn't live long enough for us to ever talk about it and rebuild our relationship as adults. Grace is

[128] Derrida, Jacques, *The Work of Mourning*, Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault. Chicago:London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. 5.
[129] Ibid. 8.

haunted by her father in dreams and also through tiny snapshots of memory such as the image of a man standing at a bus stop waiting for his children, his hair combed anxiously into place so as to create a good impression or sitting in a drab restaurants festooned with plastic grapes. Rather than avoid pathos, what I attempted with these small images was to invoke the vulnerability of the human condition in people who have all too often been reduced to stock characters in political narratives. For example, the caricature of Mrs Jarvis.

Bloom also seeks to link childlessness, trauma and the psychology of individual abjection with the abject place, namely the suburb of Hillbrow. In 1969, Athol Fugard, who is considered to be one of South Africa's greatest playwrights, wrote a play entitled *People are Living There.* The play, which sensitively portrayed the lives of those down on their luck, raises questions about the social role of women, particularly childless ones.

Fugard was one of the few white writers who wrote about the lives of marginalized white people, or, as a friend has suggested, those who found themselves on Apartheid's glass floor.[130] *People are Living There* concerns the lives of three washed up characters who live in a rundown boarding house on Hospital Hill, the hill where I was born. They are a far cry from the ponied gin and tonic set that frequent The High House in Gordimer's *A World of Strangers*. Fugard presents another side to South African life by acknowledging the existence of those beaten down by dreary, unfulfilled lives but unlike Gordimer,

[130] The logic of the glass floor is that white privilege protected poor whites from falling to the levels of poverty experienced by black people. Without access to the extended infrastructure of black communities, which, if nothing else, offered a degree of comfort in shared hardship, poor whites on the glass floor were forced to rely on their own limited resources. While it has been argued that, given white privilege, if white people still found themselves on the glass floor it was entirely due to their own stupidity or lack of initiative. My issue, and that of Schreiner's and McClintock, is the focus on race obscures the underlying gender inequalities that were part of the patriarchical system. To address only race is to address only part of the problem. Those who found themselves on the glass floor were, more often than not, women. South Africa does not have social security systems in place hence destitute women may have no options but to turn to prostitution.

he is more interested in their flawed humanity than their political expediency and manages to convey a sense of the tedious desperation of those thrown back onto their own resources. The characters include Shorty who works for the post office who keeps silkworms as pets and the nihilistic Don who is introduced with the lines:

> Purpose was dead in me. When I lay down at four o'clock there were a hundred reasons why I should have got up. When you saw me not one was left. I had systematically abandoned the lot. Sartre calls it Anguish.[131]

These no hopers, whom Don acknowledges are saved from destitution only by the privilege of their white skins, are arm wrestled into a dismal party at the boarding house they live in one Saturday night to celebrate landlady Milly's 50th birthday. It is an evening filled with pathos and broken dreams as each of the characters reveal in turn the poignant moment in their lives when they understood their youthful hopes and ambitions would not be fulfilled.

Don, in trying to draw out what happened to Milly reflects:

> … life is peaceful. You are happy. Until suddenly like a bolt from the blue, it happens. The dream is shattered and you are set on your hopeless journey through dark and dusty rooms. How's that? … Whatever happened to the young girl in the white dress; happened slowly.[132]

What he in fact reflects on is Milly's gradual awareness of the limits of her

[131] Fugard, Athol. *People are Living There.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970. 3. Print.
[132] Ibid. 29.

bildungsroman which have, over time, taken their toll on her. Milly has recently been dumped by her German lover, the lodger who lives upstairs, because Milly, as he puts it, 'is not a woman anymore.' She is too old to produce children and he has decided that he wants to start a family.

Milly explains:

> It sounded logical the way he put it. To do with function. The function of a thing, and being a woman, that meant babies …. so you see its gone. Or just about. A little left but mostly in the way of the time. The rest just Gone. Not broken, or stolen or violated – which might make it sound like there's been no crime, I know. But I did have it and now it's gone and nobody ever gets it back. So don't tell me that doesn't make us victims.[133]

In this description Fugard acknowledges that woman's social worth, is defined in and through motherhood. Childless and aged fifty, Milly is socially redundant. Milly is determined to show the lover that she can have a good time with half a bottle of Muscatel fished out from the bottom of the wardrobe, and a few packets of chips and fruit cake. She refuses to go to bed until 'someone makes me laugh' and positions herself at the door in order to demand a fake round of hilarity the moment the lodger returns from his night on the town.

The play ends with Milly, aware of her isolation, marginalisation and social invisibility, commenting on the lives that stream past the window of the boarding house where they sit. She wonders where everyone is going and assumes it must

[133] Ibid. 60.

be somewhere exciting. She realizes that she has been cloistered in the kitchen all day and is still in her dressing gown. Milly turns to Don and says:

> There must be something we can do! Make a noise! … lest they forget, as the monument says. I can still do that. I'll make it loud, make them stop in the street, make them say: People are living there! [134]

I'm sure Mpe would agree, since we were the people who were living there, that making a noise is a good thing.

[134] Ibid. 71.

Things Fall Apart

'Hectic!' It was the grounded good woman emailing from Johannesburg. She'd just read a draft of *Bloom.*

'What do you mean 'hectic?'

'Your story is clearly tough, and jumps around across locations and through time a lot so I felt quite drained by the end of it.'

Drained? D.R.A.I.N.E.D. *Draaaainnneeedd*.

I sat on my hands. I gave myself a pep-talk. Walk away from the computer. Do not hit caps lock. Do not yell 'I am sorry if the untidy mess of my life is too draining for you. Here, quick, let me re-script it.' Trouble is, lives, countries and political regimes can't be re-scripted. Mostly regimes can't even be voted out of power so what was I to do?

I wondered what the grounded good woman would make of Kim Scott's *Benang*, a hectic tale of history's capacity to shatter, erase and fragment and told in a manner that leaves one dizzy with disorientation. Scott, an Aboriginal writer, and descendant of the Western Australian Noongar people deliberately writes back in a textual attack that reclaims culture but also provides a voice for those who have been written out of history. *Benang* was one of the set readings for a unit I took called *Culture and Difference*. At the end of term the tutor announced extra marks for anyone brave enough to write an essay on *Benang* and make a foray into Aboriginal culture. Foolishly I thought 'not a problem.' *Benang* turned out to be a very big problem. *Benang* resists interpretation. What interests me

now, when I look back at that essay, is that *Benang's* central concerns are about emotional, physical and historical trauma. These have been collapsed into the protagonist Harley, the 'first-born-successfully-bred-white-man-in-the-family-line' who suffers from a form of madness.[135] Harley has been bred white through the systematic rape of Aboriginal women and, as a result, his Aboriginal identity has been erased. His grandfather has, he says, figuratively and literally 'fuck[ed] me white' and this has led to a newly discovered ability to float, or elevate himself. [136]

The metaphor of elevation pokes fun at the superior assumptions of the civilizing mission which were 'to uplift and elevate these people to our own plane.' [137] Harley floats about the room, unable to tie himself down and, as a textual strategy, Scott resorts to surrealism to resist the real. Harley has also been castrated as a result of a motorbike accident and therefore, ironically, he cannot reproduce his newfound whiteness. Whiteness, as it has been produced in him, is therefore redundant. Harley's castration and the discourse of reproduction it invokes, reframes the presumption that women alone produce children. Harley's castration is subversive. It is a resistance to reproducing whiteness and Grace's childlessness could, when viewed through this prism, be read in the same way – although this was not my initial intent.

When I wrote my essay on *Benang* I didn't realise how its themes of trauma, rape, reproduction, a fissured racial identity resulting in madness through loss would resonate through my own work. As literary strategies, Scott adopts bricolage and pastiche to destabilize the boundary between fact and fiction. He

[135] Scott, Kim. *Benang:From the Heart.* Fremantle Arts Centre Press: Perth, 1999. 11. Print.
[136] Ibid. 29.
[137] Ibid. 29.

uses press clippings, official documents and actual letters to provide the historical facts of Australia's Aboriginal policy which attempted to erase the Aboriginal people through the gradual absorption of the native Australian black race by the white. The bricolage of historical material woven in and through a fictional narrative provides unflinching historical evidence of Australia's Aboriginal policy intent and at the same time adopts an anti-historical approach. Scott uses postmodern narrative as a deliberate strategy of non-conformism. Its being 'hectic' is a political statement, a literary rebellion, and its interruption of linear time, fragmentation and use of pastiche works laterally to subvert the monolithic imposition of order underpinning the colonial mission. But I hadn't reached that point yet. Things with me were still hectic.[138]

I visited Canberra on a research trip. I felt, as Umberto Eco has written, that I needed to be in the place at the exact time that things began to fall apart in order to be able to describe it and add sensory elements to what otherwise had solidified in my mind into a hostile one-dimensional memory. I wanted to understand why Canberra loomed over my early Australian experience as if it were a monster devouring and reshaping all other memories until everything was tinged with it. I wanted to understand Canberra much the same way Mpe wanted to understand the monstrosity of Hillbrow or the power of place in shaping memories and defining identity.

[138] On the way to the Canberra I attended a master class in Adelaide hosted by Brian Castro from the University of Adelaide. His book *Shanghai Dancing* is a fictionalised autobiography that traces his family's travels and traumas across not only decades but also centuries. It was a book that greatly influenced the structure I eventually adopted for *Bloom*. *Shanghai Dancing* too is a fractured narrative that weaves together fact and fiction and relies upon small stories and images to invoke entire histories. Castro also makes use of photographs in an *Austerlitz* styled search of self-discovery following a mental breakdown. As I am a reader who does not require linear narratives in order to enjoy a book, I was drawn into the quality of the prose and the cameo stories and hoped a similar approach would work well for *Bloom.* See Castro, Brian. *Shanghai Dancing*. Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company. 2003. Print. Another Australian author who helped me shape the friendship between Grace and Barbara was Gail Jones. When I wrote my infamous essay on *Benang* I became paralysed around writing race or inter-racial relationships. In a South African context I thought a friendship would seem trite or propitiatory and *Sorry* gave me permission in a sense, to pursue the friendship. See Jones, Gail. *Sorry.* Sydney: Vintage Books. 2007. Print.

I hoped that when I arrived the monster would reveal itself and promptly. Perhaps announce itself at the airport where I could recognize it and step quickly back on the plane. Instead all I found was the same drab space I'd left twenty years before, looking slightly the worse for wear.

Before I left for the trip my supervisor suggested that I begin to think about the structure of *Bloom*. I knew she was referring to the linear narrative, which clearly wasn't working, but she also wanted to me to think about the meaning behind linear narratives, what they represented, what they upheld given they are linked to European classical realism and what they normalized in terms of easy assumptions and neat endings.

On the first morning I ran around the river. I was thinking about *Bloom* and I realized that the story resisted the easy framework of the bildungsroman. Therefore, instead, of trying to gloss over the book's faults, I would point them out and make the unwriteability of the story the main focus. I would have Grace desperately trying to write her book, while I wrote mine through her memories in what amounted to a writerly version of reality TV. I wanted to invest the book with a consciousness about its own construction. This proved useful in allowing me to draw from actual descriptions of the countryside as I wandered about in real time without having to remember or fantasise about them. I had forgotten Canberra and I knew that vague descriptions would not only be lazy but apparent to the reader.

I broke each training day into specific areas of Grace's life. I hoped that by containing the story within a four-day trip the reader would be located in one spot in much the same way as Cardinal remained within the small boundaries of

her psychiatrist's office. Each time Cardinal entered the office signalled something new would be divulged which would lead, ultimately, to the unveiling of the Thing that haunted her.

Because I had no memory to draw on and no real emotional connection to Canberra, I decided to make the present work for me through the use of street names and maps as a way of getting into the Canberra of the past. As a strategy, and a means of trying to come to grips with the city and hopefully remember my other half-remembered self, I walked or ran the roads and tracks I used to run in the neighbourhood in which I lived. I literally mapped the suburb in an attempt to unlock Grace and find a way forward for the book.

By mapping Canberra and finding things that would consolidate Grace into an Australian presence, I also sought to avoid obvious Australian stereotypes and clichés and include a migrant presence.[139] The line 'big gums, small gums, twisted gums, straggly bush gums, unidentifiable gums – what more can be said about gums' was deliberately provocative and an allusion to the gum-treed Outback trope that seems to permeate Australian literature. I knew that a lot could be said about gums as evidenced by Murray Bail's Scheherazade styled love story *Eucalypt* woven in and through the myriad species of Eucalypt trees to be found in Australia. With *Eucalypt* Bail appears to paradoxically parody the gum tree trope at the same time as he elevates it to new levels of mythology. *Eucalypt* gave me the idea to map Canberra through small details, particularly trees, and I spent an entire day reading the Belconnen Town Planning Minutes in order to establish the variety of trees around Lake Ginninderra. I was rewarded with 'Chinese

[139] The character Mrs Li for instance actually exists. Mrs Li is her real name and she did attempt to teach me to cook. Our meeting did not happen over a dog salivating out of a car. For that scene I transferred an experience I had in Perth to Canberra.

Pistachio Trees.'

I studied the topography of the area around Bruce Ridge to get a clearer view of the trails I ran through when I lived there and I was surprised at how small the area actually was and how unreliable my memory had been in representing it. In my mind Canberra, and my life there, seemed to stretch across vast distances but I discovered to my shock, that for three years I lived within a radius of 5kms.

It was always going to be difficult writing about child loss and childlessness. The connection of the topography of Bruce Ridges with Calvary Hospital allowed me to gently ease myself into the issue of child loss by having Grace see that part of her life sweeping past her either in the car or as she lay on the trolley. Witnessing her former self allowed the story of the miscarriage to be told but also signalled that Grace had recovered. Layering the story with several different issues was partly driven by my own insistent memories and partly to give the narrative levels of complexity that reacted to and with the child-loss story. I felt on its own, child loss would be too difficult for me to write about in a compelling way without recourse to other narratives as a support. This is probably why few women writers do write about it.

In her book *Bearing Life: Women's Writings on Childlessness* Rochelle Ratner writes that in women's literature there is no shortage of authors who questioned or rebelled against the equation of motherhood with female destiny but none that made the issue of childlessness a central theme. She concludes that in the future she hoped 'many more full-length creative works – memoirs and novels … will break down the 'walls of silence' that surround childlessness.'[140] The question

[140] Ratner, Rochelle. ed. *Bearing Life.* New York: Feminist Press, 2011. 7. Print. The silence around perinatal death and childlessness is what prompted this project in the first place An example of the absence of representation in studies of the

was: how to give form and shape to a difficult medical narrative along with all the other themes I was trying to weave together?

Childlessness, argues Ratner, has frequently been linked to dysfunctional childhoods to the extent that this has become somewhat of a cliché. She writes that in writing about childlessness, usually the act of putting the words on paper and having to harness and pace the thought process, helps the writer better understand her own situation. 'Surprisingly,' she writes, 'two of the strongest pieces about dysfunctional childhoods were withdrawn from inclusion [in her book] by writers who perhaps recognised they no longer feel the anger that their writing revealed a few years ago.'[141] Losing my own anger was a key component in allowing me to begin to fictionalise Grace and separate her from my life. Regardless of the cliché, I decided to make dysfunction work for me and made the decision to explain child loss through abjection. A state of abjection would be implied to exist and cause Grace's spontaneous abortions as a result of the fictitious and traumatic car accident where Grace as a child would witness the death of her mother.

Two books influenced my decision to turn what was the monotonous and futile activity of running around a frozen lake mid-winter into a type of living organism driven by unpredictable memory. One was Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. I remembered the book at some point as I

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emotional effects of perinatal death on women can be found in Fettling and Tunes study of women who suffered post-natal depression. Despite the fact that these studies showed a marked link between post-natal depression and complications in the pregnancy followed by the separation of baby and mother for a short period, out of the approximately 24 interviews Fettling and Tunes, none was with a woman who had experienced child loss through stillbirth or other complications. I found this to be an oversight which affirms the labeling of perinatal death as 'the forgotten grief.' See Fettling, Lisa and Tune, Belinda. *Women's Experience of Post Natal Depression:Kitchen Table Conversations*. Australia: IP Publications, 2005. Print. Also 'Management of Patient for Emotional Trauma of Perinatal Death.' *Collected Letters of the International Correspondence Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists*, 23. 10 1982). Web. <http://www.theforgottengrief.com>. See also Gold, Irma, ed. *The Sound of Silence*, QLD, Mostlyformothers, 2011 for a collection of testimonies on the experience of childlessness and the silencing of it.

[141] Ratner. *Bearing Life*. 7.

ran around the lake on my first morning in Canberra thinking that it was cold enough to be in Siberia.

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich is a novel about life in one of Stalin's Gulags. It begins at dawn when his peasant protagonist Shukhov, sets off on a long trudge through the Siberian snow along with other members of his work gang to build something at a new site called the Sotsgorodok. There are few props with which to build the story yet Solzhenitsyn manages to critique Stalin's enslavement of his own people during the USSR's industrialisation campaign. The monotonous trudge through the snow beset by swirling winds and the sudden changes of direction disorientate the reader. Through self-reflection and exchanges with the other prisoners, Solzhenitsyn is able to characterise his protagonists and tell their histories in what amounts to a critique of Stalin's Russia. Grace didn't need to build a nameless something in Sotsgorodok. However, I thought the strategy of using weather to invoke Grace's inner alienation and turmoil and the activity of running would be a useful way to allow her memory to resurface. Similarly, in *What I talk about when I talk about running* Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, who is a runner, uses running as a form of narrative self-reflection to discuss aspects of his life.[142] By fusing Solzhenitsyn with Murakami, I came up with the idea to have Grace 'think' about her life as she ran.

[142] Haruki Murakami. *Things I talk about when I talk about Running.* London: Vintage, 2009.
Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *One Day In The Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Trans. H.T. Willetts. London: The Harvill Press, 1996 (1991).

View of Hillbrow and the old Fort (left) at the turn from the top of Hospital Hill. [143]

A Small Alamo

It's a Saturday evening mid-winter. I am about eight; my brother is six. My mother has dropped us off at Boswell Willkie's circus for the afternoon show. She is late collecting us. We huddle in the dust in the dark outside the gates. The rush of cars disappears to wherever it is they are heading. Within a year my mother will leave our childhood forever and we will be left with our grandmother. We don't know this yet. In the meantime, we sit and wait.

The circus is held in a vacant lot at the top of Hospital Hill. Across the road is the Old Fort prison. It is one year away from the Rivonia Trial that will send Nelson Mandela to Robben Island and the bildung of country will begin. We don't know this either as we sit and wait. Neither do we know what the Old Fort represents or that there is a population crowded inside in small cells. It is simply the Old Fort. An odd shaped grass mound with thick wooden doors. It has always been there. With childhood there is no ability to critically analyse or deconstruct. It comes at face value, unquestioning, trusting, accepting that the world around us

[143] From personal collection. Taken from the dashboard of a car. April 2012.

is in firm hands. Because we can't contextualize the memories we forge they are pliable and vulnerable to blind spots. Even so, with the benefit of years, the circus and the Old Fort seem a strange juxtaposition.

Down the hill, perhaps Milly sits in her boarding house and wonders where the stream of cars is coming from and going to. Perhaps it is these cars of which she says,

> 'But there's street outside there Don! All the people! Rush hour traffic. Right outside the front door!
>
> 'Yes, but you've got to open it Milly' says Don. [144]

Perhaps this is the night they plan for a birthday party with Muscatel and fruitcake. Or perhaps it is a few years before and she is out on the town with the German lodger for the weekly two bottles of beer and two sausages at the Phoenix. If this is the case, Milly will not know either that soon she will be dumped for a younger woman; one that can produce children. Just the like those sitting outside the locked gates at the circus.

Further away, but no more than an easy jog, there is another world. It is filled with birds, trees and scholarly silences. In that world Gordimer might be furiously banging away at her typewriter on the winter side of her verandah. What is she writing about? Does she even know that we are up there; Milly, Shorty, the silkworms and us. When I read Fugard's play recently I was stunned by the intersection of fiction with my own life as it is revealed in an exchange between Shorty and Milly. They were discussing what they should do on a Saturday night.

[144] Fugard. *People*. 70.

Milly: The movies?

Shorty: At the Roxy ….

Milly: Seen it.

Shorty. What about the Plaza. They is showing…..

Milly: Seen that too.

Shorty: I'll get the paper.

Milly: I've seen them all. The movies! Who the hell wants to go to the movies?[145]

Why bother with fantasy when real life is so much more disconcerting; so much more far-fetched? My father finally found a job at The Plaza – only it was in Pretoria. When he pulled six-gun chocolates out of his pockets he lived in a boarding house room above the Opera House but would deposit us for the day at the Roxy. He was another Milly's lodger. We keep alive and warm inside each other's stories.

Richard Russo, in speaking about his blue-collar background and the way in which this has shaped his work writes:

> Despite the fact that I have more degrees than anybody should, I've never been able to shake off my sense at being an interloper in the Colby Colleges of the world. … I know what real work is. The sense that these people and their lives trail behind me is always a factor in my imagination. As a younger man, I equated success with putting that

[145] Ibid. 23.

> world behind me. In terms of my writing, in terms of my heart, it took me a long time to discover that it meant more than anything else. [146]

When I discovered Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, I was struck not by how much the suburb had changed since the revolution when the demographic shifted from white to black, but how much it has remained the same. True, it is a lot seedier now, thanks to the collusion between government and white capital, which caused the banks to redline the area and set the scene for urban rot which is a feature of the suburb today.[147]

Hillbrow is a liminal place where identities are in a state of flux. It questions the fixed identities of both the white middle-class suburbs and the black predominantly working-class townships. I personally don't like the term 'melting pot' or 'East End' which has been used to describe the suburb although both of them are useful approaches to understanding its fluid mix of race and culture.[148]

The reason for this is that a 'melting pot' suggests a swirl of leftovers mixed together which turn into something featureless, like a pot of stew containing offal or cheap cuts to be eaten only as a last resort. The term East End invokes London's working class and while Hillbrow has always been home to a high concentration of people on the lower end of the wage scale for whatever reason, it has never been class specific. Rather, I see Hillbrow as being the closest thing Johannesburg has to the living embodiment of the Towers of Babel. Instead of

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[146] Smith, Wendy. 'Richard Russo: The Novelist Again Explores the Crucial Impact of Place on Individual Destinies.' *Publishers Weekly* 240. 23 7 June 1993. 43. Web.

[147] The practice of redlining an area meant that banks will not lend money to potential buyers because they consider an area to be a bad investment. A consequence of this is that investors can't sell their properties to purchasers who would hopefully stabilise and maintain the area. This sets up a stagnant situation where investors seek to maximise their return at the expense of those desperate to rent. They charge exploitative rents precipitating over-crowding as renters try to pay the rent through sharing. Because properties can't be sold, investors are reluctant to throw good money after bad by spending on maintenance and upkeep. This is what happened in Hillbrow.

[148] Green. Translating the Nation: Phaswane Mpe and the Fiction of Post Apartheid. 6.

being smote down with changed tongues and scattered to the four corners of the earth, the Babelites have been returned to the fortress to figure things out. A study of the political and social forces behind the migrating patterns of the refugees who find themselves there would make interesting reading and would not go astray. Jews, Czechs, Eastern Europeans, Portuguese from Mozambique, Zimbabweans, Congolese, Nigerians to name a few. The detritus of modernity, broken families, broken bodies and the convolutions of the body politic intermix. I prefer to think of Hillbrow as a space of small stories squashed between dominant discourses, a place that resists the easy romance of South African narratives, a grey area or a small Alamo.

Johannesburg did, after all, begin as a fort. The Old fort was built by the Boers high on the hill as a vantage point where they could monitor and defend themselves from the encroaching British led by Rhodes with his eye on the prize. Gold. When the Boers were defeated they were imprisoned inside their own fort. In 1948 when the Nationalists won government and began to implement the policies of Apartheid, the Old Fort was used to imprison activists along with common criminals. Ghandi and Mandela both spent time there. After the 1994 elections the Old Fort was transformed into the Constitutional Court, a living monument to the Rainbow Constitution apportioning each man, woman and child equal representation, a voice, and, on paper at least, human rights. That the Old Fort was transformed into the Constitutional Court and located in the centre of the symbolic (and expedient) beating heart of 'the people' was considered by its architects to be entirely appropriate and significant.

Recently I watched a video called *Hillbrow: Between Heaven and Hell*. The narrator, in affirming for me what Hillbrow meant in terms of my own life,

defined its inhabitants as marked by their absolute faith in the dream of transformation:

> … the future of the people I have come to know, depends on whether Hillbrow stays the way it is – somewhere between heaven and hell. They have the courage to allow themselves dreams that are great, if not impossible. And when the late sun chases the deep angular shadows out of Hillbrow, these are dreams, which seem just within reach. [149]

I think of my mother, of Grace, of worms that spin for themselves cocoons of fine yellow silk, of the potential, or not, that exists in a pair of butterfly wings.

But what do these dreamers 'the people,' think about the dream of the Rainbow Nation and their close proximity to its monument?

> 'People of Hillbrow should know that Hillbrow is not just a place of drugs, crime and prostitution. The history of this country started in Hillbrow – not Rivonia or on the island.'
>
> 'I'd like to see a shopping centre, a crèche, a hair salon and a cinema.'
>
> 'We need a study space, newspaper, magazines and an information desk where people can find out about jobs and accommodation. The architectural marvels can come later on. '[150]

Hillbrow's bildung has been brutal and ugly and its representation even

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[149] *Between Heaven and Hell.* Dir. Clifford Bestall. 2012. *Witness.* Aljzeera Episode 10. Youtube. 2012. Film.
[150] *Number Four:The Making of Constitution Hill*, Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2006. 141-142. Print.

uglier. To the north the pristine suburbs have not significantly changed demographic although there is a shift. If the search for grey areas to probe is the de facto mission for writers seeking to disturb dominant discourses, then Hillbrow is a good place to start. Here fact and fiction swirl around each other like leaves. It is the border town where fixed identities come undone. It is McClintock's abject space where ironically, the modernity it encoded through its skyline and tower blocks signifying the Caliban Afrikaners' coming of age, now offers a haunting reminder of the utter failure of Apartheid. Perhaps that's why both Mpe and Grace resorted to ghosts to tell unfinished stories about a suburb constantly being remade.

To describe the suburb and settle the question of truth about the Rainbow Nation I like what Rian Malan has to say:

> The facts might be correct, but the truth they embody is always a lie to someone else. My truths strike some people as racist heresies. Nadine Gordimer's strike me as distortions calculated to appeal to gormless liberals on the far side of the planet. … We live in a country where mutually annihilating truths coexist entirely amicably.[151]

What happened after my mother collected us from the circus? Well, my brother and I came down with flu for one thing. Shortly after that my mother left the country to join Scientology's infamous Sea Org, a quasi-military elite group commissioned with maintaining law and order within the cult. She never saw the irony. We survived childhood as best we could. For entertainment we played

[151] Twidle. In a Country where You couldn't Make this Shit up. 15.

cowboys and Indians and piled cushions in the centre of small lounges and pretended they were horses. Our favourite game was a gun battle that took place in a small fort in Texas where Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie died side by side in a hail of bullets, guts and glory.

In *The Lost Brother, the Twin: Women Novelists and Male-Female Double Bildungsroman*, Charlotte Goodman argues that while the male bildung is linear in structure, a female-male double bildungsroman is circular with the female placing equal emphasis on the male protagonist. She argues that the psychological wholeness experienced as children between brothers and sisters or male relatives becomes impossible in gender divided patriarchal cultures. The divisiveness, which determines the scope of options available to women in the search for selfhood, drives the female protagonist to various stages of depression and lunacy. Or, as Dalziell has argued, gestures towards a female rite of passage narrative in post-colonial societies that is inadequate to express a state of mourning.

I couldn't agree more. Goodman's argument is that women writers seek to return to the androgynous wholeness they experienced as children; a time of innocence and hope when siblings were comrades or twins 'whose palms would bear a lifeline like our own.'[152] Goodman suggests that there is a longing or mourning for a lost state. I propose that this longing for a lost state is not a women writer's prerogative. The bildung for men too has changed. Gone, as Marquard put it, are 'confident European assumptions.' Although my brother's book follows a linear structure and offers a redemptive family ending, this has not

[152] Goodman quotes this line from the Adrienne Rich poem *Natural Resources* found in Rich, Adrienne. *The Dreams of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977.* New York: W.W. Norton, 1978. 62. Goodman, Charlotte 'The Lost Brother, the Twin:Women Novelists and the Male-Female Double Bildungsroman.' *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Durham: Duke University Press. 17. 1 (1983) : 49. Print.

come without disillusionment. He reflects on his life as a stay-at-home-father, a role he has fallen into as a consequence of not being able to find work in the new South Africa:

> At fifty-four years of age, I find that reality has settled in like soft rain. The life I envisioned is not going to happen. I know that now. I will never make that first cut, or compose the music for the man who will make the first cut, or write the poem that inspired the man to compose the music for the man who makes the first cut. I will not be an engineer. I will not be a pilot, astronomer, biologist or lawyer. My lifelong dreams seem – like the fading deck of sexy playing cards that is found in the hobo's pocket – slightly comical in their audacity.[153]

When my brother's book was published he was given three free copies. He mailed one to me and I received it the day I was recovering in bed after knee surgery. When I opened the book I found pasted to the inside cover the yellowed front page of a book I had given him the Christmas before I left for London. It was *Oscar Wilde: De Profundis and Other Writings*. The page was torn and had been taped into the original spine with canoeing duct tape. My twenty one year old handwriting in fountain pen was upright and clear. There was an oversupply of exclamation marks.

Next year in England!!!!!! Christmas 1976.

Beneath it his words: *Remember the Alamo. June 2012.*

[153] Clark, *Love*. 191.

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

I am fourteen. I sit in the bath daydreaming. My grandmother, whose energies have sagged over the years in keeping us going, is shrewish through the door.

'You'd better make up your mind what you want to be young lady. Soon you need to go out and work.' In a very Kincaid moment of heartily wishing my grandmother dead, I snap back.[154]

'I want to be wise.'

'You'd better be careful what you wish for young lady, you might just get it.'

Of course when my grandmother dies in an old age home that smells of cabbages and lost hope I am consumed by guilt. Nor do I ever forget the words that arrive as small spears through a bathroom door.

In my darker moments with my mother too, when there is no escape from Scientology and I am pressed in from all sides by it emissaries urging me to join the cause, I threaten that one day when I save enough money I am going to the furtherest, most under the world place I can think of. Australia. No one will find me there. I will leave forever and *then* they'll be sorry.

It occurred to me how many times during my candidature I have travelled up what seemed to be promising avenues of research only to find myself boxed into a blind alley. Many times I have had to back out and abandon ideas that did not fit and take on new ones I hadn't even considered only to find myself back at the

[154] In the short story *My Mother* Kincaid's opening line is that wished her mother dead. Jamaica, Kincaid. *At the Bottom of the River.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983. 53. Print.

beginning again, where it all started, as if I were playing a game of snakes and ladders. The title of this exegesis is a case in point. It's been changed several times as I focused on areas of interest only to become bored or disillusioned or to find, staring back at me, aspects of myself that I didn't particularly like and quickly tried to sweep under the carpet. Perhaps that is what the act of writing does for us and to us as readers. It penetrates the glossy images we construct for and about ourselves.

As this exegesis approached its end, I found my original PhD proposal stuffed among mountains of research and saw the title I'd given it in a spur of panic when all I had to give the scholarship office was a loose idea. I didn't really think about it. Nor did I know if I'm completely honest, what a bildungsroman was. But it sounded intelligent.

The reason I chose the title was the result of a story a friend told me which indirectly led back to my grandmother. In telling a friend how guilty I felt about my grandmother's last days she told me about an old lady she came across in an old age home where she worked and an incident that upset her so much she resigned. One day my friend watched an elderly lady and an elderly man as they sat on a bench in the gardens of the home. A romance developed between them. It happened that shortly afterwards, the nursing staff, along with my friend, discovered the elderly couple lying entwined in his room. South Africa is a culture that has never been at a loose end when it comes to female morality, the nursing staff burst into the room to put an end to it. Startled the old lady leapt up, grabbed her belongings and stood to attention looking fixedly ahead. 'So where to now?' she said. It was a good question.

Bloom was a way of telling my own story and to bring back to life people who've been lost. I wanted to draw faces on the hard lines of history by showing that beneath those heavy plates people struggled to live, breathe and solve the puzzles of life. However, the question 'So where to now?' also implies a journey and that is what a bildungroman is. It's a journey from a position of loss, through the struggles of life in order to acquire some sort of wisdom about the world, what we're doing here, how we've been changed by it and what it means for our relationships with others. Throughout this project I have tried to interweave the body with the body politic and here I suggest another sort of bildungsroman. The bildung of country, culture and perceptions about each other, which are explained in the stories we tell. Achebe points out that our journeys as human beings are shaped by the storyteller and the power of narrative to create or destabilize the fixed identities of groups of people. He writes:

> If I were writing about plants, and seeds and propagation, I would say cross-pollination has taken place. This is a new world that needs to let go of the old paradigms. They are icebergs dragging us down. Whites no longer wield power; blacks are no longer in chains. We both emerge from the long dark journey in the hold blinking in the bright light. We cannot define ourselves according to the past because we would simply rehash old history. We need to make history using the knowledge we have gained from the nightmare days

where, in turn, we have all been in exile.[155]

So where to now?

One way, as Green suggests in Translating the Nation, is through sport. It's been frequently suggested that the Rainbow Nation, which glimmered at the end of South Africa's, own long struggle is, as is the case with rainbows, an illusion or a trick of the light. Perhaps this is true. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* Mpe makes no bones about savagely critiquing its empty promises and glaring contradictions. However, because I am a runner and since unwellness has been under the spotlight in this exegesis, in the spirit of Green's suggestion, I offer a reading of the rainbow that links together themes of displacement, illness and journeys in terms of the distance travelled and the way still to go through the idea of sport as a new way of translating old paradigms. It also offers a neat allegory for my journey through this PhD.

In April this year I travelled to Cape Town for what has become an annual event. The Clark family, or what remains of it, congregate to run the 56km Two Oceans Ultra Marathon held each year on Easter Saturday. This year, carrying a knee injury I didn't know about and severely undertrained as a result of long hours working on this exegesis and getting nowhere, I lined up at the start apprehensive to say the least. Noting my obvious consternation at what lay ahead, my brother, who was soon to vanish into the crowds, pointed to a pole looming above the heads of the runners. 'If you get into trouble,' he said 'jump on a bus.'

A bus in running terms is a group of runners organized around a designated

[155] Achebe. *Home*. 28.

pace setter and identified by a pole, or totem, bearing the sponsor's logo and showing the time that particular bus is aiming to achieve. In this image I see a new, healthier form of community. The idea is that people work together to achieve a common purpose. The success or failure of this purpose is not measured in monuments, political speeches or standing armies but in time. Clicking on my Ipod and mistakenly thinking that I didn't need a rain jacket, I, along with 7,000 others, surged when the gun went off into what was to become the most inclement weather in the history of the race. Shit.

At 16kms the rain arrived. At 19kms my knees hurt and my bottom lip began to tremble. I wondered how the hell I was supposed to cover another 37kms over the hardest part of the course. Cape Town is, after all, famous for mountains. Above my Ipod I heard the strong voice of a woman singing. I clicked off my Ipod and peered through what can only be described as sleet. Not far ahead was the pole my brother had pointed out to me at the start of the race and I remembered his words. Thank god! A bus!

Drawing closer I saw this was not an ordinary bus. The pole was not a sponsored pole. It was a rather tattered pole, more like a stick or a broom with the brush removed. Wrapped around the top of the pole and fluttering like a wet flag was a bright yellow vest and it held aloft a sagging hand written cardboard sign. It read 6:30. Six hours and thirty minutes. Perfect. I figured I could hold that pace. The woman was still singing with the men tuning in for the chorus. They were singing *Shosholoza*. They all wore the same bright yellow vests and I looked closer to see what club they represented. Emblazoned on their backs in red were the words HIV POSITIVE.

Suddenly my knees didn't seem to be such a big deal. The person carrying the pole shouted out to me 'come and join us.' Perhaps I looked like I needed all the help I could get or perhaps they did. It didn't matter. Together we crossed the mountains singing *Shosholoza*.

At 30kms, on Chapman's Peak we were hit hard by the wind coming in from the ocean and we tucked into each other. I'd love to say that we ran like gazelles but really we were all shuffling. Under my peak I studied my fellow passengers while the woman kept singing. Serious looking young Indians; coloured women; black women; portly white accountant types; young black men with beads in their dreadlocks; old black men with flecks of grey. This in a race which in 1975, a year before the riots began, required that the organizers obtain special permission from the Minister for Sport Dr. P.G.J. Koornhof for blacks to participate in what had previously been a white male only race.

Women were luckier, they'd been allowed to run the year before, all one of them - and she did not finish. Koornhof gave his official approval for a team of eight black runners to compete on condition that the 'different race groups would not mix unnecessarily.' As Grace might have said at the time, '*believe* me, sticking close to the singing at the top of Chappie's in a howling gale is *extremely* necessary.' In addition to the team of 8 black runners, it was also the year the first woman finished the race.

To the international runners casting bemused glances at our odd group of singing runners, we might have presented as a comic illusion or a coincidental gathering of people embedded with no particular meaning. Instead what they witnessed was a small miracle. The power and potential of small miracles was

not lost on Helen Zille, who, at that time, was still leader of the opposition Democratic Party. Her sodden supporters dressed in matching blue t-shirts handed out refreshments and ghetto blasted encouragement as we dropped into Hout Bay while Zille herself, armed with an umbrella, waited ankle deep in mud at the finish. There was no sign of the ruling African National Congress who had produced the large miracle of a revolution. Perhaps, in the effort, they'd paused to rest on their laurels, or the directions they'd been given as to where to find the new nation had been lost in translation.

At the foot of Constantia Nek, an arduous 3km climb which winds into the clouds before dropping down to the finish, I stepped off the bus. I could no longer hold the pace. I had time in hand and I knew I would make it. Running in close formation, all that was left of the bus that had crossed the mountains together were the people in yellow vests led by a man blowing a whistle. They gathered themselves for the last climb and disappeared up the hill singing. The pole with the yellow flag wobbled above them as they slowly vanished into an ocean of bobbing heads. Spectators in this elite part of town stepped from behind the high walls of their homes and lined the course to applaud. A coloured band wrapped in clear plastic to protect their green and white satin outfits and stiff boater hats played on. A frozen group of blonde girls in gold bikinis shook pom poms around one of the bends. The sleet was back. 8kms to go. This was going to be a slog. I clicked on my Ipod. A South African group I'd only recently discovered:

Try predict the future by inventing my tomorrow
It's not a destination; it's a creation I desire
With my back against the past, seeing my future in my grasp
Believe the beauty of my dreams is my, my one, supreme

So I tell myself, don't, look back … don't, look back

Don't get tied up in that twisted trap,

Save, your best bits for tomorrow

Feel my life is incomplete, without my missin' puzzle piece

Searching for a soul-mate, as I dance the song of heartache

Inquire to the guards, is romance just a facade

Is there really someone, somehow, somewhere, out there?

So I tell myself, don't, look back … don't, look back

Don't get tied up in that twisted trap,

Save, your best bits for tomorrow. [156]

This is how it happened that with *The Parlotones* for company, I glimpsed the rainbow on the mountain as I trudged along and wept.

[156] The Parlotones. 'Best Bits.' *Eavesdropping on the Songs of Whales.* Deluxe Edition. Universal Music. 2011. CD.

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