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Short Story Collection:

Friend in the Woods

2010

Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies

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A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to: The MCW class of 2009, John Cranna, Elizabeth Smither, Rosser Johnson, Max Garmonsway, Jesse and Lee Bellingham and Kitt Foreman for their expertise, support and encouragement.

Exegesis

Introduction

Wilson has an idea of the aims of fiction which resonates with me. In general, he says, what writers are doing in the creation of fiction is performing thought experiments to work out and illustrate their attitude to life (Wilson, 1988). The essential nature of the human condition is that we are all in a state of becoming; we are working out what and who we are and what this means and we are always in the process of moving towards these. This means that in a major sense our energies and interests are projected forward in life; toward what might be. Logical thought is a poor guide to living as it is rooted in probabilities, determined through the experiences of the past and so cannot be about becoming, about what might be. For becoming we need a more imaginative, deeper, and more passionate kind of instinct for truth and freedom than logic, and this type of thinking is embodied in fiction. In general terms all writers are involved in the expression of their attitude to life; this deep instinct for truth and freedom.

In the process of writing this collection of ten stories, I have discovered that this idea of ‘becoming’ resonates not only as an idea about the aims of fiction, but also as an explicit theme within my fiction. I am drawn toward exploring the mysterious perimeters of human potential. Many of the characters in these stories have a dim but instinctive sense that they are capable of more than they know, that life is larger than we know. They scramble in a range of ways for a key within themselves to accessing the ‘beyond’.

This exegesis will explain how this interest in the notion of unlocking potential is reflected both in the themes of the stories and in their craft; in the genre techniques selected. The disadvantage of writing an exegesis about ten stories which experiment with different styles and genres is that the range of influences which might be identified is enormous. I have limited myself to discussing the three areas of influence which I see as the most revealing about what fascinates me in fiction. Perhaps the bodies of literature with the most significant philosophical and craft influences on the collection are gothic and existential literature. The collection also contains influences from the

sphere of fabulist literature. These three kinds of fiction explicitly question the nature of reality and thus create openings to explore different realities; different glimpses of human potential. The ideas and craft techniques discussed in this exegesis were not consciously chosen but emerged through the writing process.

Gothic literature

Gothic literature is the influence on my fiction which I became conscious of first. Every story in the collection can be interpreted from within a gothic context to some degree. In this exegesis I use the term ‘gothic literature’ to encompass both ‘old gothic’ which is less subtle and more supernatural, as exemplified in Poe (1908) and Stoker (1993/1897); and ‘new gothic’, which is a broader term more difficult to define (Heileman, cited in Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1986) but involving an acknowledgement of the non-rational in the world, events, and in the depths of human beings. Certain kinds of imagery are characteristic of gothic literature and assist in raising questions about the nature of reality and in heightening emotion and unease.

According to both Kosofsky Sedgwick (1986) and Spooner (2004) typical conventions of gothic literature include a number of standard images or symbols which are a means to explore inner and outer conflicts of self: Live burial, masks and veils, curtains, shrouds, cellars, dark brooding landscapes, the disappearance of the body, doubles or doppelgangers, infection, and the poisonous effects of guilt and shame.

I became aware of the recurrence of dark, uneasy imagery in many of the earlier stories, and early on was also unconsciously experimenting with more specifically ‘New Zealand gothic’ imagery in a vein similar to Janet Frame’s in *Owls do Cry* (1958), designed to evoke the unease of historical suburban repression or of the wild nature and elements in this country. New Zealand gothic images I have used include the dead car yard, the manicured front lawn, the iron fence, the pine forest, the home-kill truck with crane and shackles, the mud-coloured gated community, the roadside cross, the freezing works, the terraced hillside in deep bush and the abandoned orphanage.

Another characteristic of gothic literature is its stagey and theatrical nature, involving exaggerated characters, costumes and settings. Joyce Carol Oates in *High*

Lonesome (2007), Flannery O'Connor in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1980/1955) and Carson McCullers in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1951) all use a kind of gothic imagery depicting notions of freakishness or self-disgust towards the female role. An interpretation of this is that it illustrates an underlying sense of conflict between women and their physical selves, stemming in part from the social context in which women support an economy whose culture objectifies their bodies. The imagery of these authors includes excessive or grotesque depictions of hair, excrements and blood (Araujo, 2007). The characters fight against commodification and exploitation but usually do not undergo fantastic transformation by the end. They can 'only change their own plots by renegotiating their roles within the logic of the social world' (Araujo, 2007, p. 90).

This influence is detectable in the stories *Recreation* and *A Slow Blink* in this collection. The female characters are subject to use by men for sexual or power-related ends. The girl at the centre of *A Slow Blink* has excessively wild, matted hair, a characteristic which causes disgust in others, and is a symbol of her confusion when she begins to find herself a sexual object. Looking back at the range of female characters in the collection I am interested to find myself relieved that I have not made excessive use of this interpretation of female experience and that I have explored other female roles in other stories. In *Window* and *Mr. Pinkerton*, *Online* the female protagonists are more active in seeking the kinds of relationships they want, and in shaping their own futures.

At a deeper philosophical level, Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1986) analysis is that there are two ways to interpret 'gothic'. The first is the most common: That gothic explores inner depth, inner spaces, inner conflicts. This is based on the psychological model of the self where our outer surface is viewed as superficial, rational, and conceals and represses our primal and sexual self, which is irrational. This interpretation implies that what is surface is deception and what is underneath is truth. The interpretation tends to dismiss surface gothic depictions such as theatrical costumes and spooky settings as trappings designed as 'spectacle' or claptrap decor.

Like Kosofsky Sedgwick, I am more interested in a second view: That gothic literature deliberately points attention to surfaces. This view instead asks: Is there such a binary relationship between truth and deception? For example, concerning the

metaphors of masking, veils and disguise, the conventional response is that these indicate an 'authentic' self hidden beneath. But gothic literature may challenge this idea and suggest that authenticity should not be automatically associated with what is deep and hidden. The mask may not indicate the hidden truth but may itself reveal truth at the surface.

One of the key gothic symbols to question binaries and categories is ambiguity. Ambiguities and hybrids take a variety of common forms in gothic literature: The sexual ambiguity of dandies and cross-dressers, the human/nonhuman hybrid of vampires and zombies, good and evil ambiguity, sane and insane ambiguity, and ambiguity between self and environment, exemplified in vampire literature where skin is a surface to explore arbitrary boundaries which can be penetrated and manipulated (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1986).

Coming upon the discussion of ambiguity in Kosofsky Sedgwick's book was something of a revelation to me, as I recognised ambiguity in many forms in my own work and began to consider why this was. Ambiguity represents a deep questioning of perceptions and authenticity and this interests me because it challenges the notion of a single, objective reality and implies the possibility of multiple realities. For me the outcome of placing these ideas in fiction is to create a context in which possibilities which lie between the pre-determined categories are illuminated. For example, in *Recreation*, *Night City*, *Mirror-ball* and *The Bus* there is a recurrence of shadow figures, doubles and things seen from the corner of the eye. In hindsight, I was experimenting with doubles as ways to conjure a blurring of the line between the real and the unreal, the psychological or personal interpretation of the self and the objective interpretation, and perhaps suggesting that there are other in-between kinds of interpretations.

The stories *Recreation* and *Mirror-ball* develop the gothic concept of the disappearing person as central to their plots, and this is also a means to illuminate unknown possibilities through ambiguity. These stories are similar to the Joyce Carol Oates stories *Fish factory*, and *Spider boy* (2007) and Ian McEwan's *Butterflies* (1997) in the creation of unease through disappearance and the indication of the darker impulses of human nature. *Mirror-ball*, for example, suggests that the disappearance of the younger sister of the main character Paul induces shadows of guilt and denial through his ambiguous actions following this event and through the use of images of

mirrored reflections, mirrored eyes, opaque eyes and water. One of the satisfying aspects of writing this story was the sense of coherence gained as I recognised these recurring motifs, and then crafted them further to draw out the images and their possible meanings.

The effect of the disappearances in *Mirror-ball* and *Recreation* are complex in my mind. Initially I was interested in the psychology of selective remembering and unconscious motivations. But now on reflection I think that as the stories developed I began exploring the more profound effects of a total disappearance of a person on those left behind. Because in both stories the reason for the disappearance is unknown, ambiguous, this is unsettling and confusing for those left behind. This kind of disappearance is not in the natural order of things and leads people to grope for orientation, and perhaps opens a crack for people to consider things they had not thought of before, or had not thought possible. As the stories developed further and I tried to think of ways to resolve them I seemed to want to maintain ambiguity to the end, to suggest that perhaps there is not always a real reason for extreme actions such as violence or kidnapping. That these can emerge from very common origins and experiences and may be a matter of the way the cards have fallen.

In a more direct or obvious sense, three characters in this collection are particularly ambiguous. *The Fall* contains a teenage boy/angel hybrid. He is like Paul Klee's angels, held back by earthly connections, or perhaps like one of Rilke's; a meddler (Hirsch, 2002), although not so terrifying. His purpose and role in the story are deliberately undefined because I wanted the character to suggest a realm or a kind of existence which is not quite familiar to us. A second ambiguous character is the little dark woman seen by the young boy in *The Bus*. She might be a version of his memory of his mother, or she might be a witch, she might be terrifying or reassuring, or all at once. Both the stories are about death, but do not explicitly confront or name it. The protagonist's feelings about death are unconscious and for this reason I did not show the feelings in a realist sense, but made them solid and literal by embodying them within other characters. Perhaps the idea here is that we literally create our own reality, or perhaps it is that moments of vulnerability or intensity might expose us to new realities.

A third ambiguous character, Carlos in *Recreation*, embodies the ideas of latent potential and transformation; central themes in this collection. He has the instinctive

knowledge that human potential is great if utilised and he is attractive to others because of this knowledge. But in *Carlos*, the suspected cause of the girl Trace's disappearance, the story also explores surface and depth. In a similar way to Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, (2003) the story asks: What is evil and how do we know it when we see it? Is it shown at the surface, by actions, or do we need an understanding of psychology and motivation to determine it? In *Carlos* I wanted to present some of the unknowable complexity of a life, to explore the idea that lack of ability to categorise makes us uneasy, and to critique typical easy media narratives of 'evil' deeds and people. Ambiguity is extended in the disappeared character Trace, who embodies this. Her character is vague; she can 'fit any crowd', but what does this mean about her real nature?

Like Emily Perkins' (2009) *Novel About My Wife*, the construction of *Recreation* is intended to reinforce questions about the nature of truth and perception. Firstly *Recreation* is told from the omniscient point of view, but recounts events selectively in the form of short episodes. Then it presents the selective re-telling of a media version of the story through a television documentary, and thirdly, in the documentary, the viewpoints of minor characters are also indicated. It is intended that the ambiguities and structure will lead the reader to engage intellectually with the story, to question the authenticity of all of the viewpoints and to question what has been left out. This complexity proved to be challenging to craft and at this point this story is less polished than many of the other stories. Of particular challenge was finding the right viewpoint for the story. I eventually settled on the omniscient viewpoint and a somewhat ironic voice to convey authority yet leave doubt and to tie all of the viewpoints together, although the particular distant, knowing voice was difficult to maintain consistently throughout. Also difficult was intuiting how much of the story to fill in and how much to leave out in order to achieve the desired effects.

To get a glimpse of what we could become we need to hack a bit at the concreteness of our reality. Gothic literature, with its ambiguities and unease, does this questioning in a more direct or extreme sense than realism; it goes straight to the cracks in our sense of reality and prises them apart to see what might come out. The ambiguities in gothic

literature appeal to my sense that fiction is like a prism to help view the world and people from many angles and in doing so, captures some of the mystery in the world.

Existential literature

Perhaps mid-way through writing the collection I became aware that themes from existential philosophy and literature were showing up in many of my protagonists and their challenges. As I considered this further it became clear to me that the existential struggle was more crucial to many of the stories than I had realised.

Existential philosophy, for example that of Nietzsche (2005/1887), argues that experiencing danger and knowing our demons are important for deep creativity as discomfort is a necessary part of enlarging the sense of what is possible. Therefore like gothic literature, existential literature does not take the comfortable easy view of life that can be found in realism (Wilson, 1988).

Existential literature is characterised by ‘outsider’ anti-heroes who are confused, alienated and pushed into solitude, who see the facades in society’s rationality and appearance of civilisation. The classic examples of these outsiders are within the works of Dostoyevsky, Sartre and Camus. The outsider wants to escape triviality and access more life through vividness of sense-perception and through finding out how to express himself, because this is the means to get to know himself and his possibilities (Wilson, 1956). In this collection, many of the central characters fit this description, but this most particularly describes Smithy in *Night City* and Carlos in *Recreation*.

Like other outsider anti-heroes, Smithy is made uneasy by the unreality of his life and of ordinary world values. And like Hemingway’s central character in *A Farewell to Arms* (1993/1929), Smithy senses that danger and crisis arouse our vitality and in this state we function well. He knows instinctively that the path to more life, more reality, is through action, and so he acts by going out at night and gaining visceral and sensory understanding of the city he lives in, and so, gains a glimpse of what he might become through his relationship with the city. This action is his attempt to gain control. He is blocked in this but the story does not climax in a violent act like Raskolnikov’s in *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoyevsky, 1963/1866) (which solves none

of his problems), but in a return to passivity. He retreats to his computer game and searches for life and meaning there, however the authenticity of the vitality accessible within the game is ambiguous and confuses him. In the ending I wanted to suggest that his inaction was temporary. He is too young to be defeated. He still senses the shadow figure representing his active self, over his shoulder.

Recreation is also an existential struggle. Carlos is conscious that for him the values of the ordinary world are trivial and misguided. He tries to take control by speaking from his heart and aiming high, attempting to lead others to learn to live a new kind of life. However the complicating factors of his troubled past seem to limit his self-knowledge. In addition, once others have accepted him as a spiritual leader this also seems to limit his self-knowledge. This is a common paradoxical effect of visionary leadership, and is also as Wilson (1956) says, a common existential theme: That the world and the spirit are at eternal, irresolvable loggerheads. Thus Carlos's capacity to transform himself is compromised by his humanness. The story questions whether he is merely living out a reaction to his damaging childhood, or whether he is onto something more profound.

In many cases the 'outsider' novel is characterised by a certain tone created by a degree of psychic distance and formal language (Gardner, 1991), as in for example the works of Camus and Kafka. A discontinuous structure also often assists this distant tone. While both gothic and existential literature tend toward the discontinuous in structure, gothic discontinuity suggests the convoluted, veiled and perverse, but the disconnected scenes and scraps in the structure of existential literature suggest a concentration of the fragmentary, meaningless nature of human existence, as exemplified in Camus' *The Outsider* (2000/1942). The existential style and structure are an influence on other stories in this collection, aside from *Night City* and *Recreation*. These others include *A Slow Blink* and *Mirror-ball*. Their scenes are strung together out of sequence like images recalled from memory and gaps are left. The structure and tone of these stories suggest that the characters have reached a plateau of alienation which has brought numbness and which will require a crisis to transcend.

Several stories in the collection end with a glimpse of liberation in the form of a fleeting epiphany about the relationship of the protagonist with the world. This is also a feature characteristic of existential literature. In *Night City*, *A Slow Blink*, *Shared Office*,

The Bus, Window and *The Fall* I have tried to suggest the possibility of transformation without the delineation of an outcome. Explorations of human potential should be left open-ended in this way, maintaining the sense of mystery and undefined possibility. *Mr. Pinkerton, Online*, has a slightly different kind of ending. The disaffected central character, an astrologer, undergoes a transition which suggests that she has renewed her interest in humanity in spite of its flaws by taking her own authority as an expert less seriously. Her resolution is a literal response to the outsider's sense of a divided-self: She creates an online persona and begins to interact with other online personas. This epiphany is a relatively realistic response but seems too tidy and is thus less than convincing as a deep or long term solution. The astrologer's experience contrasts with Smithy's in *Night City*. While he too experiments with online identities as a way back to himself, he does not find the experience so satisfying.

In reflection on these existential themes, one of the questions which have arisen for me is an issue of gender. In literary commentary the figure of the 'outsider' is almost always identified as male. My own protagonists most resembling outsiders are also male. This leads me to ask: What of the female outsider? My observation is that in female characters, alienation coupled with an intense search to know the possibilities of the self have historically been framed as a struggle to separate the self from relationships. Isadora Wing, in Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1974) is an example. An alternative type is the creative woman who is in a major sense defined by her lack of relationship, her intention not to marry. Examples are Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf, 2004/1927) and Sheila Trask in *Solstice* (Oates, 2000). Neither of these characters are the main protagonists in their respective novels, but appear to serve as a contrast to the protagonist. While my female protagonists can be said to embody elements of the existential struggle, in certain telling ways they differ from their male counterparts. In *A Slow Blink* and *Window*, the primary struggles and obstacles of the female protagonists concern human interaction and issues of independence. Perhaps it is through these that they hope to get to vivid sense-perception or self-expression, but these existential aims are not at the forefront. The female protagonist in *Mr. Pinkerton, Online*, is the exception. Her obstacle is the difficulty of rejuvenating her sense of fulfillment through occupation, historically a more male concern. However, her problem

does not seem as profoundly disturbing as that of Smithy's or Carlos's and her search for answers does not seem as intense.

In an existential analysis these literary figures might seem to indicate that women are more preoccupied with the material, trivial world of domesticity and relationships and are thus less capable of deep or metaphysical insight, of profound transformation. Having limited space to critique this idea fully I will only point out that the notion that relationships exist at a mundane level in the universe is an individualistic and patriarchal analysis and is therefore not universally shared. It might be said that the male outsider views his own self-expression and escape from triviality as his overriding moral imperative and does not appear to believe that relationships should significantly distract him from his goals. Female characters who demonstrate the same qualities appear to be few, and are perhaps not viewed as sympathetically by readers. A provisional conclusion is that the female outsider takes a different path to her goals. With more time and space I would have liked to have been able to investigate these ideas a little further by surveying more contemporary fiction by female authors.

In general terms, existential themes have emerged as central to this collection. These serve to put a spotlight on the deep question of how life should be lived. They explore, through the outsider character, the implications of attempting to invent another kind of life, outside of the norms of ordinary existence.

Fabulist literature

Towards the end of writing this collection I identified fabulist leanings. Some stories seemed to require an element which verged on the fantastic. Once I began to more fully develop a sense of my underlying approach I saw that the connection between gothic, existential and fabulist literature is that they present realities alternative to the comfortable norms.

A common view of the fable is that it is an entertaining expression of a universal lesson, moral or truth; a 'narrative device, to provoke and aid concrete thinking,

focusing on some general matter of concern' (Blackham, cited in Ingham, 1992, pp. 32, 33). By this view, examples of fabulists include Kafka, Orwell, and H.G. Wells. My notion of fabulist literature is shaped more specifically from Keegan (2006) and partly from Gardner's (1991) idea of 'tales'. Keegan extends the concerns of fables from morals to human values; a broader term which suggests to me lessons of more ambiguity and complexity. He also emphasises that fables reach 'beyond the confines of realism'. Some of Gardner's thoughts on tales relevant to fabulist literature and to this collection of stories are that: They are told in third person; they contain a structure or plot with 'poetic truth' rather than realistic truth; and use a somewhat dignified or solemn tone. An additional characteristic of Gardner's tales is that they contain indistinct and remote settings creating distancing of author and reader from time and place. This feature is not characteristic of many well known fabulist novels (for example *The Tin Drum* (Grass, 1965), which is clear about aspects of setting) and is perhaps one of the things which sets the tale apart from fabulist writing. However, I have utilised the non-specific setting in all of my own stories which lean toward the fabulist and/or the tale. These stories are *Night City*, *The Fall*, *Shared Office* and *Friend in the Woods*. All four stories contain events verging on the magical or fantastic. All four stories are told in third person, assisting as Gardner says, in the creation of psychic distance.

The unity of good writing is created out of a tension of opposing forces. Two forces pulling in opposite directions unite to create a third force at right angles. Because of its imaginative capacity, fabulist literature can illustrate extreme scenarios, and thereby create a clear picture of opposing forces. For example Tolkein's (2002/1955) fantasy tales gave him a vehicle to provide strong symbols of his opposing values. Medieval times and nostalgia, embodied in the symbol of the Shire; contrasted with lust for absolute power, embodied in Mordor (Wilson, 1988).

On reflection I see that *Night City* contains symbols embodying two views of reality. These are: An external world of experience, action, sensation and instinct, symbolised in the city at night; contrasted with an internal world of ineffectuality, inaction, shelter, passivity, symbolised in Smithy's bedroom and computer. In the fabulist style I have drawn a sharp contrast between these settings. The city is not quite fantastic, but Smithy's depth of feeling for it suggests a verging upon something magical. As I have said, Smithy himself embodies the instinct for exploring potential,

he wants to test himself and to know what he might become. His physical and social environment make his internal desires and conflicts extreme and visible, like the conflicts demonstrated in Kafka's fabulist tale *Metamorphosis* (1961).

The landscapes in *Friend in the Woods* also make internal desire and conflict visual. Typical of a tale, these landscapes include a dark forest, shining dunes, a desolate seacoast, depicted through a mixture of vague remoteness and generality on one hand with precise detail on the other. The conflict at the heart of *Friend in the Woods* is something to do with having the strength to act with instinct, faith, persistence and hope, although this is left open to interpretation, as in a dream.

Like La Farge (n.d.), I am attracted to fabulist fiction because I believe that it is important to recollect the fear and confusion the world inspires and the doubts it raises about our own coherent existence. On his website about fabulist literature he explains his belief that fabulist fiction is guided by a different process to normal (realist) fiction. He states that the process of fabulist fiction is the experience of its unfolding and in order to write in this way it is necessary to release control. The writing is guided 'not by will seeking order but by the instructions and directions inherent in the matter, which must be followed and must be followed out rather than in, to a centre' (La Farge, n.d. para. 17).

I am not convinced by this argument. I am aware myself of the need to relax control, and to utilise instinct and imagination as well as intellect. But art needs form and order so as to be coherent, communicable and aesthetically enjoyable, so if my writing is to be successful, it must have form. Forms of order used in fabulist fiction may be more imaginative, new or unusual, but still, form must be present, and the writer's will and intellect must have something to do with the form the writing takes. The 'matter' of fiction which La Farge discusses is presumably what goes into the story, the author's observations and ideas, all arrived at by an interaction between what is inside the author's head and the outside world. Meaning and form come from this interaction, they do not have an inherent existence.

Rather than stemming solely from within the matter, it is more plausible that the order which the fabulist writer seeks comes from a less realistic but more poetic truth. Gardner terms a fictional structure which is developed intuitively and appeals to both intellect and emotions, an *energeic* plot. 'Energeic' comes from Aristotle's *energeia*:

‘The actualisation of the potential that exists in character and situation’ (Gardner, 1991, p. 47). Again, the actualisation of this potential depends upon and is shaped by the writer. The *energeic* plot is common in all kinds of literature. Perhaps, rather than utilising a whole new approach to form, some fabulist literature merely exploits *energeia* more fully or differently.

Friend in the Woods arose from experimenting with a method of more intuitive writing, perhaps a means to develop *energeia*. I wrote not more than 250 words per day, without thinking until my fingers touched the keyboard, without planning in between times. The aim is to suspend rational thought and access a more subconscious or intuitive source of ideas. This was an extremely satisfying method of writing which I would like to cultivate, although the discipline of just 250 words a day is limiting and difficult to fit into my lifestyle. The instinct which emerged was to create a dream-like story, and to this end the result was a quiet style with a comparatively great degree of psychic distance, created via language leaning toward the formal and a nameless central character of a certain remoteness. Once the essence of the story had been set down intuitively I went over it many times, fiddling with wording and developing tension and structure, giving it order. The traditional ‘story-shape’ does not quite come intuitively to me and is an aspect I need to craft very consciously.

In tales, the character’s actions and the plot ‘may or may not obey the laws of cause and effect operative in the actual world, but even when they do not, they seem natural because of their psychological or poetic truth.....What ought to happen, possible or not, does happen’ (Gardner, 1991, p. 73). In *Friend in the Woods* my instinct was to follow a poetically rather than a realistically true plot line, and not to explain motivations and events, but to use an economy of expression to present the basic elements of the story. When the central character finds an alien creature in a forest cabin, there are a number of things that he knows without external, rational evidence, and his actions proceed from this knowledge. The creature needs his help or will die, he must remove it from the cabin and has an ultimate responsibility to fulfill. It seems unlikely to be a co-incidence that this more poetic plot arose from a more intuitive method of writing.

The tale writer wins our suspension of disbelief by authenticating detail and by a simplifying, authoritative tone and confident voice. Jane Gardam’s laconic style is an

example and her collections *Missing the Midnight* (1997) and *The People on Privilege Hill* (2007) contain a similar fabulist style visible in this collection in *The Fall* and *Shared Office*.

In *Shared Office* the fabulist aspects evolved slowly. Initially it was a more realistic story about open-plan office dynamics, but I was unhappy with its lack of vitality. It contained the metaphors of teachers as wolves and students as zombies but these were not at that point literal. While on a long car journey I was listening to an audio book; a short story about vampires, and it occurred to me to place actual wolverines and zombies at the centre of the story. This was huge fun to write and I wonder now why it took me so long to make this poetic leap. This suggests to me that it would be fruitful to continue to develop confidence in my intuition.

Calvino (1996) describes the technique used in tales as recounting outlandish features while keeping an eye fixed on the bare essentials. Thus, in *Shared Office*, I used specific and realistic detail to advance the plot and draw the characters and the university setting, and then mentioned in passing aspects specific to the physical and behavioural aspects of wolverines and zombies where these were important to the story. For Calvino, one aim of this approach is to achieve a lightness which is counter to much other literature. The majority of literature tries to replicate the weight, density and concreteness of the world itself. A second kind, which Calvino strives for, tries to make language into a weightless element in order to make sudden agile leaps and raise the writer above the weight of the world. This search for lightness is not a replication of but a reaction to the weight of the world and of living. Calvino's description has a strong appeal for me. In *Shared Office* and more especially in *Friend in the Woods* I wanted to aim for lightness. The value of lightness, the subtraction of weight, economy of expression and leaps out of realism, are a means to project works into the future and to consider what might be, rather than what is.

Conclusion

An underlying theme in these stories is that to get a glimpse of our potential we need to remind ourselves of the mystery in the world and to hack a bit at the concreteness of our

reality. In order to allow a sense of mystery into fiction there is a need for a degree of suspension of the rational mind. Alongside shaping the stories to give them an order that is coherent, I have been fascinated by the ways the intuition and the subconscious contribute to story elements.

The emerging influences of gothic, existential and fabulist literature on this collection of stories have assisted me to develop themes related to the vague unknowns of human potential. All three forms acknowledge the non-rational in the world and in people.

The approach of gothic literature is to prise apart the cracks in the reader's sense of coherence and to allow uncategorised creatures, ambiguous feelings, monsters and hybrids to enter the world. Existential literature also questions our sense of coherence but its method is to suggest that values and meanings ascribed in the ordinary world might be a lie and to lead the reader to consider the implications if this is the case. Both gothic and existential literatures are a double-edged sword; while uncomfortable or even terrifying, their implications also liberate possibilities.

The power of fabulist literature is that it uses a high degree of imagination and speculation to overtly challenge and to perform light-footed leaps out of realism. The effect of these leaps is often to pose new possibilities and to help the reader to re-access some of the mystery and wonder in the world which often leaves us after childhood.

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Night City

He was not a child but was not yet a man, and he wanted something from the world but was unable to know or say what it was. He had reached an age from which he could look backward and discern former versions of himself, left behind. He spent little time consciously doing this, but still, he was aware of another particular blurred self, present a way back over his shoulder.

He looked out at the world from his computer. On a website he had seen people who cut themselves. Young people. The site was all shadows, grey and black, and there were thin trickles of cobalt blue branched through the background like veins. A boy had written - '*the knife knows*'. A girl had written - '*it gives me the sense of being cool and clear inside myself*'.¹ She did it '*easily and naturally*'. This made him think. Feeling cool and clear inside himself, he would like that too, but he did not think he would feel this by cutting. Slicing into his own flesh was too introverted, too small an action, too personal and isolated an impact. The same girl had written '*I am the arrow, at one with the drive, into the red eye, the cauldron of morning*'.² Smithy did not know what exactly she meant by this but it rang and rang in his head.

Years ago. How many: Two? Three? The first time, anyway, he had been walking home, reluctant, taking his time. He had been for cigarettes from the store twenty minutes away which would sell them to him. The cigarettes and the trip to buy them were to kill time; because life contains momentum and activity. He liked to find different routes and take in the variations they offered. He let his mind wander while the

¹ Adapted from Hemingway, E. (1936). *The snows of Kilimanjaro and other stories*. Easton Press: Norwalk, CT

² Adapted from Plath, S. (1965). *Ariel*. Harper & Row: San Francisco

alleys, apartments, the old shops flashed him glimpses of grimy mystery, threw out at him lives lived outside of his own.

That night in a side-street in the dark, from his car across the road, a man had called to him. Smithy went to the middle of the street and stopped. Feet squared, arms a distance from his body, he felt light, a little faint. A jowled face was in the window. Softly shadowed, slow eyed.

‘Smoke,’ the man said, holding a flat cigarette a little way out of the window. Its tip glowed dimly.

‘No thanks,’ said Smithy, and held up an open palm, and smiled. There was a pause and the man mumbled something. The word *party* rose with a question.

‘Tsh,’ Smithy said; a noise to mask uncertainty. He stood and looked in at the man, tried to see his face. The man stayed in shadow and made no further comment. Smithy eyes slid over the car and into the back seat where a bulky shape crouched. It might have been a pile of blankets or clothing. The pause became weighty. Smithy’s body turned for him. He walked on, not straight to the curb but angled toward it, up the road.

Still a distance from the curb, hard light sprang out from behind him and silvered the street. High, flat-faced fencing became distinct, cold and solid on both sides. Smithy’s heart skipped and he surged forward but he did not run. He stepped on, rigid, senses waiting.

The headlights shut off and warm dark closed in again.

Smithy maintained his pace through the dark, sharp-tuned to sounds behind him. There had been nothing more, as though the man had acted on impulse and then thought better of it.

But in the second before the white lights went out, Smithy had seen something which made the planes in his mind slide apart. His heart still hammered and this compounded the sudden, startling effect of the image. On the wall facing him like a block of smooth grey ice, was his own shadow picked out dense black, rangy, angular. The shock seemed a revelation of something personal but unfamiliar; a dreamt caricature.

In the second before darkness the image imprinted itself at the back of his brain.

Once home Smithy turned it over in his mind, examining it from tentative angles. It was made up of points and uneasy shapes, it appeared cloaked, stilt-walking. It loomed emblematic over his sleep and he woke with the sense of something broken loose which had been hanging for some time.

‘What? What were you doing?’

Not from the stillness of his empty bedroom, but from talk, his mother had found out. It came back to her that he had more than once been seen; lingering in darkness in the brick-paved stairwell between two alleys nearby; loitering on an iron fire-escape and once again, skulking further away on a construction site. He had been seen removing something from his head and replacing it again. The strangeness of this in his mother’s eyes reached Smithy, but he didn’t care much for the strangeness. He felt he had given it a brush or two over already in his mind and moved on. Smithy closed his eyes and breathed. He didn’t particularly want to speak of any of it, but he felt a sinking resignation that he would have to. To make his mother feel better.

He told her, thinking – She guesses anyway. She already had all the essential points. If you put it together it was exactly as it looked.

But she hadn’t guessed.

‘Zorro? What d’you mean Zorro?’

Her eyes iced over. He groped to explain and while he talked he saw her turn her fear into something quiet and powerful and indignant and then turn the thing he had been doing for himself into a thing done to her.

‘I don’t know where this is coming from, but its selfishness. Is this a game for you, acting out at me?’

He felt the uselessness of it. More talk would not help, it would be pushed this way and that, interminably, as if across the slippery surface of a bubble. What he had done had not needed a meaning before. But now that people knew and it was being talked about he didn’t like that it would be misunderstood. He clenched his hands, pushed his finger-nails into his palms.

She seemed then to find her footing, and to make a new thing of it entirely, something other than what the facts added up to and which he could no longer recognise.

‘You know I’m starting to feel a little afraid of you, so for my sake as much as yours....’

Smithy’s mind reached to understand this and felt only that the space between them had become wider and darker.

He had said that it wasn’t a game. But was it, or not?

He had not stopped the *game* when told to. He had been more careful. But he was watched and was seen again, and then again.

The psychiatrist asked a little about his life, his childhood, drugs. She tipped her head to one side and asked what he wanted to do with his future. Smithy slouched. This was what they always asked and you were meant to have an answer; any answer. He told her he did not know. She had a strange accent; Polish his mother said, and asked a number of other irrelevant questions. Smithy had no idea whether his answers were good or not, but he thought not from the way she smiled and because she did not say:

‘Well! There’s nothing wrong with you,’ as he waited for her to say.

She also asked did someone tell him to go out at night, to wear the mask? Someone who? Like a person or a voice, she said. It seemed to be a thing with her, these voices. Smithy was interested in the voices. What did she mean? Whose? Did he hear voices he wondered? If voices were commanding you was it more or less crazy than keeping the company of a stilted shadow? Occasionally before he had thought he heard his father, a male voice with a light touch, mocking. But nothing to do with going out at night. The psychiatrist saw the light of interest in his eyes.

She asked to see him two more times. Smithy could see that nothing was achieved by this, she asked most of the same questions over again. Finally she set her mouth in a line and became brisk, as if to imply that Smithy was not as interesting as he might think. She prescribed pills. He knew that this was not what he needed and knowing this and being told to take them made him dislike the psychiatrist with an intensity which gave him some pleasure, for its strength. But even before he had experienced their deadness he did not want to take them.

He knew what they demonstrated. The pills brought into relief and made hard and irrevocable the distance between himself and his mother. A son of hers *needing to*

take pills was a very bad state of affairs. A line had been crossed which would not be forgotten. He lay in bed at night and saw these things as sharply as if they were written on the bedroom ceiling.

He had walked in the city, that was all. He could not explain why. That he felt a shift inside himself, and covered as much of its juicy darkness and full, gritty extension as he could. It was refreshing and abrasive to feel himself a component of the city, sure-footed, driving outward on its streets, upward to its jagged heights. He began himself to feel he was extending outwards and upwards inside and through the night, the grime and the concrete. The city was living rock like giant black coral and he was a micro-organism plugged into it, living off of it, hard-wired to it. It made you move deliberately, using your senses, like walking a jagged knife edge. Take big slow lungfuls of filthy air and feel it roughen you inside and be glad of it.

He did it for weeks. It gave him access; to places, sights, knowledge. He loved it for itself, its littered, lawless parts, the smells of certain alleys, rotting vegetation, and acrid ammonia and spew. He felt out the homeless people. He left them alone, but he liked the knowing where they were and he circled their hang-outs quietly, with a sense of kinship. He admired the way they kept their lives on the pavement, slept flat to it and balled into alcoves like limpets. Knew the city like family, tolerated it and saw it in all lights and woke each day to cruise it, be knocked down, buffeted and surprised by it. He felt out forbidden places where you hung over crevices of absurd depths and felt the warm oil and acid vapours below rush up at you. From stairs and balconies, grabbing thin, ridged wrought iron which burnt his hands, propelling himself onward with a momentum which built as he poured, swift, smooth, down sculpted brownstone surfaces, using for handholds the wingtips of griffins, the humped back and claws of gargoyles, the hands of Icarus reaching for the flames of the sun, ledge to ledge, down vertical drops and then across asphalt cracked like skin, like hot rock.

It was a city of secret innards. He went underfoot where men worked on fat tubing by white fluorescent light. He slept for an hour or two sometimes in the old red railway carriages left to sit at the north end of the rail-yard. From the windows of a carriage one night, he saw other night dwellers. They scaled the fences as he had done and danced over the yard and gathered in the dirty amber light. They were strangers to

each other, but meetings, trade and seductions were conducted as he watched. He went home washed in dawn, in stale sweat, heavy-headed, cleansed, the map of the city residing in his body.

One time he leaped down from a fire-escape, landed with a flourish and woke an old guy, scaring him straight to his feet like a puppet jerked to life. The guy stared, war-like, dangling puppet arms to steady or defend himself, muttered and sat down again, fumbling and lighting a cigarette. Said –

‘What the hell you up to fuckin Zorro?’, squinting up from under a trucker cap at Smithy who stood with hands on hips, for some reason defiant, wanting to make an impact.

‘I hang out here.’ Childish, not meaning to emphasise the *I*.

‘Yeah well, you respect people’s personal space fella, they’ll respect yours.’

Smithy looked and said nothing. Then, ‘It’s a free world. Isn’t it.’

The old guy sucked on his cigarette and tugged repeatedly on his cap, stared at a spot across the street. ‘*Ha. Ha, ha.* Free world.’

He looked up, eyebrows raised, nodded.

‘That’s it fella. Free world.’

A smell of wood-smoke came from the old guy. It was strong, like he had been in a fire. The lower storey of a building some blocks away, low-rent housing, burnt-out, boarded and left for months came into Smithy’s mind. It was easy access; a boarded up back door levered open a gap to slip through sideways. It was gutted, but parts of the concrete floor were roughly swept. Smithy went among the black rubble and ash and exposed beams roughened to charcoal and inhaled the hot bitterness several times to feel his nostrils pinch. It seemed that the heat from the fire lingered. It was a floating place, like the eye of a volcano which rises from a rotting swamp.

The thought that he had this place in common with the old guy interested him. That their paths had crossed then without their knowledge, and now, again, interested him.

After that he took to wearing the eye mask. He made it himself and liked the soft leather on his skin. It unhooked another part of him, let him leave it behind when he went out.

It added fluidity to the movements of the gangly, sharp-edged shadow figure who moved through the city, like running water.

A crazy person was a loose-unit, a maniac. Someone who believed wrong things. Smithy didn't think he believed wrong things. He didn't believe anything. He took ownership of the city in the way that you own a knife edge that you walk on. Lovingly, respectfully, with control. That was all.

With the pills, he had given away his city, and what was left? He took the fat blue ones at night. *Zopiclone*. Zombie word, word tasting of poison in his mouth. They didn't put him to sleep but they made him feel slow, they made him feel okay. Okay was only okay, never anything more. His mother said he seemed just like his old self.

On a Saturday night three months after he began the pills he returned to the burnt out flats. He took a torch and spent some time searching the rooms. He stumbled and slipped now where he would not have before. There were a few personal items here and there; plastic toys, a filthy towel used for wiping up. He continued through the rooms until he came to a stairwell obstructed by four planks nailed across at uneven angles. He wedged a foot against the wall and pulled one at a time at the lower two until they came away with brief shrieks, and then crawled through the gap.

Climbing the stairs, his heart began to tap like a finger in his chest.

His torch began to weaken and at the top of the stairs it dimmed and then snuffed out abruptly. He switched it off and on and shook it and nothing happened. Smithy began his exploration again in the darkness, up where the fire had not reached. He moved with increased caution and a trickle of something remembered which ran cold down his shoulder blades and made him hold himself erect. The light came in silvery from the stairwell windows and then in every other room he entered it seemed to get brighter and colder.

He felt something like hope in his chest and looked for shadows on every wall bathed in light. The walls remained stark. He moved onward into other rooms, through a hallway and back again, until he had made a circuit of the place. The walls on all sides were blank, the air stagnant. He stood a long time and his eyes went to the window, through which he could see a big half moon hanging in the sky lopsided as though

dangled from its flat edge by a string. He looked at the big still moon, its brightness, its crazy angle.

He waited and grew tired, and he sank to the floor with his back to a wall and sat in shadow. He felt a hard projection against his thigh and felt in his pocket and pulled out a lighter.

From the floor he could see through the window, across to a tall block of flats on the other side of the road. He saw movement inside the curtains and kept his eyes fixed there for some time.

Still nothing happened and the dark sat fat and thick on the walls, not sharp. He sat with his knees up and spread wide and flicked his lighter so that the flame sprang up, and then went out. He did this again and again. He adjusted the flame until it shone beautifully with a yellow shell and a blue heart and a core at the very centre of nothing. He felt along his palm where once had been calluses from hanging and swinging from rusty iron palings. He passed a minutely shaking finger through the yellow part and then the blue, and then the palm of his hand.

He held the flame up level with his forehead and gazed into its core. Relaxing his focus he just sat, looking into the empty centre of the flame. From this centre, from beyond it, from a black square hole a girl stepped. The girl was in white, a loose fitting coat or dressing gown. Smithy closed one eye and focused through the flame, at the window in the building across the street and on the girl as she went to her balcony railing and looked down. She moved like a sleepwalker. She climbed onto the thin silver railing and did a graceful step or two up and down it in her bare feet. She looked about Smithy's age or a little older. Smithy could not see her face but he could see her long hair swinging down her back, tinged green in the light, and her pale feet curved around the railing and he remembered what this felt like, the way feet can learn to grip and to gauge. The girl paused and looked out at the lights of the city and bounced gently back on her feet. Smithy watched through the middle of the flame and thought for a second that she would flap her dressing gown and fly up into the crazy half-moon. She belonged up there, her silver-grey gown with its shadowed, textured folds, echoed that moon's surface. She would shoot up for it, swallow it whole, be given a mind-blowing view of the universe. She would watch what happened here on earth where people were nameless like ants and the contours of cities fell away into mirrored

lakes. It came to him for a second that this was possible, that it or something else which would deliver up new worlds of possibility, was absolutely imminent.

He saw her chest fill and she crouched a little and leaped up into the air, whirled upside down like a slow windmill. She came down, plummeting down straight, like a diver, like an arrow.

Slowly, Smithy moved to the window and looked down.

Older.

Two or three years had passed and he had waited for the masked shadow and it had not returned. Now, Smithy did not glide through the city at night, Smithy made his way stealthily around inside the glowing, beautiful landscapes on the computer screen. Here were missions and vendettas to lose yourself in. You chose your role, your weapons, your allies. You tested yourself, created a highly efficient creature which was you, and more. A great brain wasn't required, your brain was melded to the game, your attention was total, and you moved around responsively, like a fish or an insect. It was good, because the pills made him slow anyway. Even now that he had stopped the pills, he felt he maybe wasn't as sharp as he had been before. His thoughts wandered. The game was a good way to focus. You were absorbed in the game and you felt the decisiveness of killing, of beating. Of walking away afterward, leaving the remains of those you had slain lying behind you on the ground. Re-grouping and sharing out the spoils. These were solid achievements, deserved rewards.

But the sense remained that the shadow was not gone for good. Smithy felt sometimes that it did not show itself, but might be just sitting back there over his left shoulder, with long pointy arms and legs folded, head at a tilt, eyes narrow, not exactly watchful, but present, patient.

Smithy was patient now too. He was good at the roles that demanded patience, and at those in which you worked solo mostly. His method for strategising and fraternising was cool and languid. He had all day, all night. He would stay seated at his computer until late, and his mother would look in on him sometimes. If he was in the middle of some melee or other, he would keep his eyes fixed to the screen, mouth-breathing, red-brown lower lip slung slack. She would close the door softly. He would

flick a look at the closing door and return to the screen. He knew how to watch his marks and to close distances quickly when the time was right.

But his attention was at times difficult to fix and control. Sometimes his mind slipped beyond the raids and journeys on the screen and rolled more negligently over the landscapes. Vaguely he wondered; whose cities and villages were his priests and soldiers wandering over? At times at the computer his body seemed wrapped with a heavy blanket, like a thick grey layer of carpet felt, which would not tear open no matter how you tugged at it, smothering and soft, unpliable.

Smithy consulted the map of the terrain. He saw foothills to the north and moved without thinking towards these. He stepped quickly. He saw up ahead a shroud of shimmering pale, luminous green coating a wide expanse of the landscape and reaching up to the lower foothills. He went toward this. Aside from the dull rhythmic crunch of his own footfalls it was quiet and still.

The green was a rice paddy-field. It was enormous, beautiful. His footfalls turned slushy, he was paddling ankle deep through water, and aside from this there was still no sound, as nothing moved, no wind rustled the whole wide mass of thin point-tipped leaves. Smithy looked in all directions and saw the same green gently glowing blanket of tall grass. Moving fluidly, respectfully, he waded around. The grasses parted accommodating his shape wherever he went and then closed back in behind, leaving no trampled track, no trace of his path.

Slowly, he sat, surrounded by rice plants as thin, yielding and phantom-like as himself and took the place in. He sat and looked, and breathed. Whose was this world? How was it co-ordinated, the way you go in the world and the people whose paths you cross and the places you live and fight and die in? The questions seemed not quite the right ones, but maybe they were close.

He tried to feel rather than see himself, in the rice field. It was hard to do. To feel himself sat amongst the still, pale green grass, arse deep in water, or perhaps over his own shoulder, hovering, watchful, in the cape and the mask, or in his chair, stooped in front of his screen, in his room. It seemed that he could be in any place, but he was not able feel that this was so with any certainty. It struck him that if he were to begin to drift upward and then perhaps to dissolve into the walls, there would be no witnesses, and no particular consequence.

He did not want to try too hard to feel something solid and to fail to do it, so he sat and waited for the future to open itself to him, sat and observed the ripples on the screen flowing across the green-black water, eddying outward, away from him.

Recreation

Since the age of twelve she has been under the spell of a succession of brown-skinned boys who look and act like aristocrats. All with that colouring through which a faint red flush of heat radiates, all with fine bones, all with hooded eyes. Their movements hold an indelible heritage, subtleties of protocol passed down through generations. They wear loose, layered clothing; work-shirts and black seamen's jackets, and their collarbones shine wickedly under street lighting and bare kitchen bulbs and their skin runs glowing and smooth over the bones and under their clothing and disappears. Trace is drawn without fear to that quiet shine.

She meets Tony under a street awning as they shelter from the rain, waiting to cross the street. Ginger-haired, not chocolate-skinned. He gives her a copy of the Bhagavad-Gita and says, 'Come to our place,' and she goes, expecting perhaps gold and crimson hangings, incense. Up narrow, battered wooden stairs he leads her, from the top of which spread big, old, cavernous rooms with high ceilings, electrical wiring strung all over, cords and sockets dangling everywhere. Plastic coated cords; dirty yellow, black socket heads hanging, prong holes ready to transmit current. She looks at the ceilings and wires and wonders if the place has been a sewing factory, or a torture chamber. Stained wallpaper is speckled black with mould and books lie in untidy piles. The flat is cold, equally as icy as the street outside.

'It's Carlos's place, but heaps of us live here. My name's Tony.'

She sits on a sofa, soft green with grime, and the flatmates drift in and out. The women smell like a pub carpet, say 'Hi,' with unified tight friendliness. An obese girl, a gold bangle around her puffy upper arm, black fluffy boots, grease stiffened hair. A thin girl, short worn leather jacket, pale thigh length T-shirt; a style Trace will absorb and adapt for her own within weeks. A guy in a black T-shirt on which a staring eye is

stretched open by four thin metal prongs; one in a blue hooded sweatshirt who raises his eyebrows in minute acknowledgement; a third who overtly sniffs her over.

Trace flicks through the books on the floor, raising dust and the smell of mildew. There are many she hasn't heard of, black covered and gold lettered. With intense unblinking eyes, Tony ushers her out onto the balcony and they lean on the peeling wooden railing. She learns that he is not a Krishna devotee, is just out on the street making friends and this strikes her as quite beautiful. They watch the street move below and the sea bash itself against the black rocks in the distance. The dirt in the corners, the harsh edges, sit fuzzy and insignificant in the background.

Returning from the surf, dark curls glinting with droplets, comes Carlos. The top half of his wetsuit dangles from his waist and around his dark navel a sun radiates wavy rays out toward the rest of his body. It seems intentionally hypnotic; more a natural part of the person than any tattoo she has seen. They go to the corner for beer, return and she stays into the night, watching him move, speak. She has a train to catch home for work the next day. He kisses her casually on the cheek when she leaves, an icy imprint of the sea, smiling a slow, lion smile.

From the corner of the room Tony watches the kiss and the smile and watches Trace evaporate around the doorway; her pale dry hair disappearing before her white hand slides from the handle. He returns his gaze to Carlos.

Tony, the youngest in the flat by several years, finds it a place where nothing seems expected of anyone, a place where he can please by doing almost anything conscientiously and thoughtfully. The first up, the first to make coffee, the one who identifies that the household needs toilet cleaner, or sugar. He throws his whole being into these attentions because of the beauty and grace of Carlos. Carlos, like a magnet, throws Tony a little off balance, makes him unsure of which way he is polarised.

Trace returns to the flat and is welcomed as though she belongs. In the flat, she begins to notice, they defer to Carlos as if he is the only adult in a house full of children: Provider. For one thing, he has money and they do not. He manages this with delicacy. Their expressions of gratitude are serene, like profound realisations.

‘Carlos fixed me up. I owe him man.’

‘Why’s Dean always sniffing me?’ Trace asks Tony in her south London accent.

‘He’s sussing you out. Cause he’s a wolf.’

‘A wolf.’

‘Yeah. No, reincarnated from a wolf I think he said.’

Tony placidly washes dishes and Trace can think of nothing more to say about this.

‘You don’t have a computer here?’ she asks.

‘No TV, no computer. I took the computer out and gave it to my sister.’

‘Why’s that?’ she says.

‘They make people into junkies, the world is too full of information, it’s replacing sense.’

One freezing night Trace bleeds in Tony’s bed. In the morning she leans against the balcony railings, smokes as she watches Tony scrub the sheets in an old outdoor tub. He is thorough, examining the stippled smears and scrubbing vigorously, with concentration.

Carlos shuffles out for his first smoke and Trace flicks ash at the ground and looks up at him, raises her chin and gazes at him steadily. He looks at what Tony is doing and he looks at Trace. They mirror each other.

On a milder evening Tony puts some music on, a noise like someone rolling down a hill in a steel drum. James, of the blue hooded sweatshirt, appears in the doorway of the lounge with bulging bags and stands for a few seconds and no one speaks above the music. He looks around the room at the faces turned toward him, ridges straining forth in his neck. Then with a shake of his head, he lugs the bags across the floor to the stairs. As he reaches them his boot nudges a heavy glass ashtray on the floor. Without hesitation he swings his foot again and sends the ashtray clack-clacking down the stairs. He follows it, boots thumping.

There is a pause and then the front door slams twice in quick succession sending quivers through the dangling cords.

‘He’s leaving?’ Someone turns the music down.

‘What was that about?’ And there is another pause between them.

‘He had some deal about a friend of his, was in a crisis or something,’ says Trace.

From the centre of the room Carlos clears his throat and then there is a hush. The quality of the air becomes keener.

‘You know why he left. Is he like us?’

And then there is a long pause and everyone waits to hear what the answer is. No answer comes, and Trace watches them smile and sit back again, take another drink. She watches them nod into the hazy air.

Here is another episode from that winter in the flat. They hang like little beads on a string; delicate, frozen and timeless in the chilly air.

‘What are you looking at?’ says Angelique in a pink nightdress tight like a sausage skin, as the wind does a death-rattle at the windows and she makes a morning cup of tea.

‘I wasn’t looking,’ says Tony. But his feelings about Angelique are mixed. He takes his turn after her in the toilet with trepidation, unable to prevent himself from picturing her on the seat, flesh spilling around her, panties at her ankles.

‘Why would I be looking at you?’ he says.

Trace, entering the kitchen in time to see a coffee cup thrown, instinctively sides with Tony. Carlos appears and his quizzical brow and curled lip silence them. With irritation he pushes them all into the car and carts them down to the beach.

In the howling gale he lifts them one by one, high and gentle; Angelique, Tony, Trace, and then removes his arms and they drop into the freezing water. It closes over Trace like a ton of hissing icy sand and she stands up, shocked. He laughs at them in the rear-view mirror all the way home, mocking their screams and wet plastered looks, but Trace hasn’t screamed. She is collected; as though she fell to pieces in the air and then put herself all together again at the bottom.

Back at the flat after changes of clothes, he tells them that for years he had a teacher.

His teacher said: ‘Before you embark on a path you ask the question: Does this path have a heart?’

Trace takes this in and waits for someone to ask: *What kind of teacher?*

Carlos sits and smokes, lost in thought. Trace thinks of the poster in the kitchen, a psychedelic raven with a long piece of string tied to one leg, feeding a man in the desert. The dunking, the teacher's words, have the feeling of a lesson. But what is the lesson? She thinks of teachers on pedestals and of lessons and falls asleep on the sofa, exhausted in the early afternoon.

Now picture this: Trace and Carlos, one night in the house alone. Winter is ending, and she sits up on the sill of the open window. Carlos in a shirt the blue-green-black of tui feathers, sits on the ripped old couch like a throne, blows smoke into the middle of the room and says:

'You know about my inheritance?'

She has heard a few things, and she understands this as an explanation of how he supports the household but she says no, she does not know.

'My old man left me the house. I sold it.'

'When did he die?'

'Four years ago. He was an alky. Sick. He had a heart attack and I found him on the floor. I tried to give him mouth to mouth for an hour until the ambulance came.'

'That's hard,' Trace says. 'My Dad was an alky too.'

'I know, I can tell.'

'What about your old lady? Is she dead too?'

'She's in the psych hospital. She doesn't know who I am. That's why I got the house.'

'No brothers and sisters?'

He shrugs.

He lifts the cigarette to his mouth with graceful fingers. Elegant, long slim fingers; hard, smooth hands. He blows more smoke out.

'My old man was a good guy, but he could've done a lot more with himself. Wasted himself.'

A one-sided smile. Flicks his cigarette ash into a cup.

'But my mother. She was a psycho. She had these ideas about us, said we weren't what we seemed like.'

He pauses.

‘We were sitting watching TV once when I was really little, me and my old man. She stood in the door and looked at us. Dad says ‘What’s up?’

‘She doesn’t say anything, but she kind of growls. Then she comes across and I see this silver thing in her hand at her side. It’s a fishing gaff. She kept coming and it took me a second to get it. She went for the old man. You could see it in her eyes she wasn’t stopping, but he backed up on the couch first. She kept coming, didn’t stop. He woke up then, and he pushed her off and stood up.

‘But she turned to me. I was sitting there frozen and she pushes me in the chest, back down on the couch and then leans on me, puts her whole weight on. In the corner of my eye I can see this big glinting hook. Dad’s got his hand wrapped around her wrist holding her back and she’s growling and struggling like an animal. She’s flicking, flicking her big hook at my eyes.’

His hand makes the motion in the air.

‘Dad threw her across the room.’

Trace moves across from the window to the sofa and sits, wordless, waiting. She lights herself a cigarette.

‘In the hospital she’s under control, but she doesn’t recognise me. She hates me.’

Trace sees the curved steely gaff, the gouging, the righteous belief in the eye of the banisher. She thinks of the wasted, dead father and the hateful mother and a few tears escape down her cheeks and he smiles and kisses them away.

‘I moved away. I hardly think about her now. We got to leave that shit behind us, it’s meaningless. Same with your old man.’

Trace thinks she is a match for Carlos, thinks she is familiar with the damaged and the dangerous. Her own mother brought her to New Zealand when she was nine and found a bloke soon after. Lloyd was occasionally violent, a man who spoke little. He parked his ute in their driveway on the nights he was around. The streetlight shone on the crane, its dangling chains, its large rusty hook and the empty shackles. It cast shadows on the weatherboards of the house. The cab door of the ute bore the message ‘*Home-kill*’.

Trace knows that the difference between Carlos and Tony is suffering.

‘We need to get away from all the shit in the city. It’s a sacred place.’

As spring creeps in the flatmates are bonded by an extended period in their own exclusive company, by a collective anticipation of something unnamed but nourished through a life in which the norms of the outside world have dropped away one by one. The sea turns green, the odd tree comes into blossom, the cafes leave their street-front windows open all day and the flatmates move to a place the other side of the fat, brown, winding river. Turn off at the freezing works and keep going for an hour; a flat topped hill, circled with terraces. At its foot, the site of burning babies: An orphanage, says Carlos. Parts of it burnt out, abandoned. Galilee.

In the TV documentary it is said that there was one road in, one road out. It is said that they spent nights outside in the bush. Doing what? Sitting cross legged on the ground in a circle, Carlos holding court. The documentary shows an image of him: He watches a likeness of himself shadowing the sky, leaping high above Trace, Tony, all of their heads.

Or perhaps it was more like this: They sit at the breakfast table. They look at each other and then turn their eyes to the line of rusty sinks, or the large ovens on the wall, and listen.

‘The education system. Pathetic. Telling the poor kids how to get a good job, how to make software, how is that going to be useful when they’re in the middle of a desert blowing each other’s brains out over food and water?’

‘All the time, that voice in our heads: *Are you successful enough?* There’s other things we should be worried about.’

They nod.

‘We need to get that voice out of our heads.’

He looks across the table at each of them.

‘Yeah, you know it. But until we’re free from it we’re as bad as they are.’ He gestures vaguely at the window.

He picks up a knife and spreads butter onto two pieces of toast.

‘What should we do?’ asks Tony.

Carlos looks away, out at the watery sun raising itself over the trees clustered outside the window.

‘How do we get free?’

He clenches his jaw and they see the strength and strain in its muscles.

‘What the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve.’

They twitch awkwardly in their seats, unsure whether or not to laugh. He looks at their faces and laughs himself.

‘You guys are smart, you already know how. Create space.’

He puts the knife up to his temple, presses it to his skin and begins to turn it as though screwing it into his head. They watch for several seconds until he lowers the knife and puts it down on the table, leaving a pale greasy spot at his temple which slowly darkens.

Another scene, recreated for the documentary. A pretty girl, Trace’s fair colouring and slight build. Two other women stand-ins: Nondescript, dingy haired. And Carlos; a beefy Carlos, a chiseled model’s face, skin a shade or two too pale, lacking in shine. Trace and Carlos and two others, sitting on the back steps at Galilee, passing a bottle of something back and forth, looking out at the bush and the stars.

In the background from many trees hang mobiles shining whitely. At first they look to be made from bones; small, thin, curved bones dangled from the trees, but the camera re-focuses. They are made from cutlery; knives and forks and spoons, bent and misshapen. Many, many mobiles hang everywhere, still, in half-shadow and in moonlight, all around the yard and stretching further away into the bush.

‘There are babies in those hills,’ says Carlos.

‘Babies?’ They all squint toward the black hills across the valley.

‘Mmm. See a head and a body? That one’s sleeping on its side.’

‘No. I can’t see. Show me.’

‘Yeah.’ He shifts around behind Trace, he sits close, his silhouette is shaggy haired, wide shouldered. He is dressed in black, the V of his shirt shows a gleam of

collarbone in the moonlight. He stretches an arm over her shoulder, points. 'See the head there, and the body, and the fist.'

Trace looks and can't see it. She sees black in soft folds like curtains which might have been night, or hills, and here and there a silver-grey curved horizon. Her eyes range wide across the slopes and she sees terraces like fingers, like cupped hands. Viewers see through the camera, through Trace's eyes.

Then the hills, the cupped hands, the significance she has given them vanishes, and she can see it, the knotty mass, a beastly dormant thing, the outline of a sleeping baby. The folds, horizons, fall away and it is hard, dry, more scorching, its colours are red hot and black rock. It loses abstractness and becomes real.

'It looks... It's not right, like its dead, or hurt.'

'Mmm. You can see that? What are you on drugs or something?'

She turns her head and leans back so she can see his expression. Under his heavy lids his eyes slide to their corners and glint. His teeth flash.

'I'm just joking,' he says. '*I* can see it. Them. Soon as I saw them I knew this was the place. You can see them too. Impressive.'

This is of course not likely to be accurate, but some credit is due for the dramatisation. Lean back, see what he sees, worship the sun. The cutlery mobiles are perhaps a fabrication too, but here again maybe the director unwittingly hits a good note; there seems a strange aptness to the image.

In the heat of summer in the wee hours the wind stills and the surrounding bush slides a little further over the landscape and the moon shines over the terraces like a kitchen bulb over collarbones. They lie in the surviving wing of the burnt orphanage. Tony sleeps damp and light, Angelique tosses on the mattress trying not to bruise her large breasts with her arms, the others are involved in their separate dreams. Carlos sleeps as though involved in a transaction, an ambiguous smile in the corners of his eyes. Trace, in Carlos's arms, is awake and full of the present. It is golden but hazy. She and Carlos are always together, and time apart is needed to think and wonder, in the way she did once.

A trip up the river. Three of them take kayaks to the jetty and then sit in the car and light up one joint after another. They launch the kayaks and make their way up against the current and the sun shines down on them as they begin but moist heavy cloud floats over and hangs low by the time they've got around the first bend. Trace stays close to the bank, staring into the weedy water. They float past wide paddocks of long yellow grass sloping up to a ridge and a high fence. Lined along the fence are young deer, pushed to the edge of the pen. The deer turn as one toward the orange and red kayaks and watch motionless until they round the next bend out of sight.

The river narrows and the dark bush presses up to its sides. Trace is hot and woozy. When she looks deep into the bush it seethes with movement and comes out to meet her, swallows her up. With her inside this pit of bush, green-grey wax-eyes rush frantically to and fro against black sinewy trunks and vines. Above her head silent hunched black stags roost. Carlos talks a little now and then.

'This is regenerating,' he says. 'See how these stands are smaller than those ones across on the other side?'

Trace is tired of looking at bush and thinks of returning to the orphanage and lying down. She stops looking at the shags and the gnarled and serrated bush and begins splashing Tony, ahead of her, with her paddle.

Carlos calls them to stop and they turn and look back. He levels his gaze at the other bank and flips his kayak upside down.

'Whoa,' they say and grin down at the water.

It begins to feel like a long time to stay under, and Trace automatically looks about her as though he might appear magically on a bank somewhere.

'Hey. Hey,' Tony says and starts toward the upturned kayak.

He grabs the end of the kayak and heaves it over, empty. They stare into the brown water. Ripples flow away from the rocking kayak and then the water returns to its drifting current. A line of tiny bubbles lies on the surface.

Carlos emerges on the far side of the kayak and grabs it with one hand.

'Your turn,' he says.

They look at him. His eyes meet Trace's and she thinks of the day at the beach. She sees the three of them from high overhead, small figures on the water, the wooly bush stretched out for miles.

‘Prove it to yourself. That you’re alive,’ he says and she hears an edge or a crack in the voice.

They are quiet.

There is a sudden desperate splash and Tony’s kayak is over. Trace looks at the orange bottom and thinks she sees a swirling dark shape beneath. She moves over and beats on the plastic.

‘Tony, get out!’

She is about to push herself into the water when Tony surfaces, gasping.

Carlos looks from one to the other, his eyes blank, dead. He swims across to the bank and drags his kayak up after him and starts off like a deer up the slope through the trees, alongside a small tributary stream. The faithful Tony follows, then Trace, scrambling, grabbing at grasses and vines. The bush springs up and entangles and sucks at her and she wonders at how the others are moving so quickly. She stops for breath and the bush stays silent.

Near the top of the slope, a deep rocky pool. Carlos is cross-legged on flat rocks; Tony stands nearby. A baby wax-eye looks down upon them, its soft little body blends with the leaves but its shiny black eye outlined in chalk grows large and bold. A lot of pale stones are piled up, high and cone-shaped, by the side of the pool. Trace looks at Carlos who looks at Tony; a taut little triangle of unknown dimensions. Tony silently reaches into his pack and hands over a large plastic box.

Carlos begins to take items from the box and to arrange them one by one on the rock like a surgical tray.

‘Eels,’ he says.

In the flat inertia of the late summer Trace’s mother comes to Galilee, pulls up as long shadows grow on the drive and the cicadas make a deafening racket, looks at them uncertainly, looks past them through the doorway into the yellow lit kitchen.

‘No, we haven’t seen her. We thought she had gone home, to you.’

A pause in which she stands and looks at them.

‘Trace will pop up somewhere, she’s good at adaptation.’

She turns.

‘Wait a second,’ says Tony and he hears his voice shake.

In his room he finds the photograph. He brings it back and presses it into Trace's mother's hand. Her eyes drop to it and skim away. In black and white Trace swims naked in the pool up the river. On the high shiny-black rocky sides of the pool sprout baby ferns. She crouches in the water, it ripples from her breasts, she gazes downwards. Under her eyes are thick dark circles, her lids are grainy and darkened and her skin is pale: Sallow beauty.

Trace's mother stuffs the photograph into her purse turns and looks at Tony, a look of bewilderment, and of fear. She turns and walks back to her car. Tony watches her move away down the drive, the small white hatchback overshadowed by dense black pines.

This is not America, the land not large enough to nourish a million odd tales of charismatic drifters, of evil, so details are eked out over a period of weeks; the story forms and feeds itself. The setting, the history, the characters, a burnt out car in a field.

The documentary is aired. A montage of photographs of Trace, snub-nosed, wide eyes turned to the camera. Her hair is white-blond, brown, red, showing her many forms, and last among them is the photograph in the pool, the stark image is held for several seconds and the viewer's gaze is drawn to her hollow eyes.

Perceptions of Trace: Sweet, good at drama and geography, a little hard to read. Of Carlos, fragments of the past. A previous girlfriend is dredged up. Hints of violence. The documentary develops spindly foundations, implications: Nature or nurture? The disaffected, the culturally marginalised.

Trace's mother, large round glasses, blow-waved hair, is persuaded to speak in the documentary. What inducement is she given to sit in her own tired lounge before a camera and to have her grief smeared over the lens, to make the country intimate with her daughter's last days? This is a story, she is told.

'Oh, she got on with anyone, fitted any crowd. You couldn't put a label on her you see,' she says with a small smile.

The Los Angeles based psychiatrist, advisor to American crime shows, in a burnt orange shirt and tie of the same shade, is cautionary.

'If one is not able to recognise the face of evil, the potential for evil, then one places oneself in a vulnerable position.'

Sociopath, he says. Dabbler in the occult, delusional cult leader. Childhood wounds, unearned wealth, moral decline.

They cut to a young man. His hair is short, his face is pale and freckled, he wears a plain black T-shirt. The presenter, in soft bright-white shirt and trim beard, leans back in his chair.

‘What was your relationship with Carlos like?’

The young man looks at him. ‘Eventful,’ he says.

‘Unpredictable?’

‘Unpredictable. But you have to understand,’

‘Understand what?’

‘We all want to transform ourselves. He was just a guy getting on with it.’

‘Can you give us an example?’

‘Sure. Like there were some occasions when he was different. It was a bit like meeting an alien. It wasn’t Carlos.’

He stopped.

‘What do mean, it wasn’t Carlos?’

‘It wasn’t him. He was a, he like had a bit contact with other energies. Like a conduit.’

The presenter looks blank.

‘He explained it to me.’

‘But,’ says the presenter, ‘you left didn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he says.

‘Why did you leave? Did something happen?’

‘I went to see my family down south, my mother was sick.’

‘And,’ says the presenter, ‘during this time you make a phone call to Carlos and he tells you he can no longer trust you. He tells you to get *a job at McDonalds*.’

‘No,’ the boy laughs. He looks at the presenter. ‘Where’d you hear that? I came back. It was all sweet.’

The presenter looks at him steadily.

‘What do you think happened to Trace?’

The boy looks troubled.

‘Yeah I wish I knew that. An accident maybe.’

‘And Carlos? What happened to him?’

At this Tony smiles. ‘He followed his heart.’

Trace’s mother, framed for the nation against a blank wall with a space at the right of her face for the viewer to psychologically inhabit, looks though blurred grey eyes and speaks as naturally, as brightly as she can. She doesn’t want people to think she is doing this for sympathy. This is what follows an event of interest, an accidental decapitation, a train wreck. How are they supposed to make the news if they cannot speak to the people to whom the event has occurred? They will resort to speculation, and everyone knows that this is not right. News should represent the truth.

Trace’s mother on camera, speaks to the country, speaks thick-throated to the floor. What is it all about? Cycles of suffering, or evil, disconnection from identity, how people are corrupted, drawn into violence, into madness? No, she says, this is not a good example for these purposes. They have told her this is a story, but she cannot make a story of it. It is a derailment, she says, things do get derailed.

What of generosity and grace and dignity? What of human potential? This is the part which makes no sense, which is nonsense. This is what happened.

A Slow Blink

Ruby and I crouched in the brick courtyard, picked up thin slivers of glass with blood-sticky fingers and put them into bottles one by one. Once in a while I stopped and pressed the sides of my fingertips to see the sparkly glass dust lying deep in the slits. The floor-boards creaked in the house now and then and footsteps hovered in the dark doorway and I knew by the pace and pause who went past.

Ruby was my cousin, but when I was twelve she was sometimes my friend. The bottles we found were old, or might have been old. Small and squarish; elixir bottles. Ruby and I toiled away, working magic on them using ordinary things; broken glass, colouring, water. Before, they were quaint and curious, their skins dull from sitting in the ground for a long time. After, holding them up to the sun the colours were strong, glinting and winking. I raised my arm solemnly like a winner, shook a bottle hugely as though I would dash it to the bricks, and then held it up again to the sun to see the soft blasts of light go everywhere, the jagged glass settle, shot through with shafts of golden light like the bold iris of Ruby's eye.

I smashed glass and put it in the bottles, sank into the rhythm: Swing the hammer, smash, smash, smash and then crush. Lean on it. Grind it down a little harder. The courtyard was enclosed by banks and on the banks grew small clumps of agapanthus, and long dry grasses ripe with seed which would spill if you touched them. The banks held the sun and I kept wiping my wet hairline with the back of my arm.

Later in the day, I slowly washed the heaps of dirty dishes left from dinner while the black window over the sink reflected dreamy people shapes moving through the kitchen and their burbling talk dangled in the air behind me. In the window I glimpsed myself; dark shiny circles under eyes, pale face punctuated by black oval nostrils and a matted cloud of hair swirling around it all like dishwater as you pull the plug. Busy with scum stuck on a dinner plate I glanced again at the window. I saw him cruise through

the people-shapes behind me, lean against the table, watch me scrubbing, and I turned and he asked how old I was. Eleven, I said, I don't know why. As the word came out I heard a tense silly rise in it: 'eeeleven?'

He smiled. I leaned backward into the bench. His old pale blue T-shirt was saggy, tiny holes at the shoulders. Red satiny short-short runner's shorts. His legs were shiny; hard, runner's legs, their skin like leather worn thin, like my father's skin. In his eyes were thin stalky veins, grey with twinkles like the sea, but smudgy and a shadow of myself flitted between the smudges. Between us on the table sat a half-bowl of rice, tiles of carrot and celery shining in the small sweating heaps, greasy wooden serving spoons which I had yet to wash.

Later again I stood with my back to the living room wall and across the room spied my bottles along the window-sill, the black window behind them, the people in front in their thin beach clothes, talking, drinking, moving past.

The yellow and blue ones were quiet, pretty-pale, having lost their sparkle and richness in the indoor light, and they were lined up along the window with stiff shoulders, square blank faces toward the room full of people. Watchers. The ones which I bled into, mixed with water had been different shades of blood. They looked dirty now, tinged with oil and I had a soft spring of heart thinking of taking them back into the sun tomorrow to see how their colours would come out new and unusual and wink at me. I rested my eyes in the places where they stood along the window sill as the people-shapes flowed over them and the bottles surfaced and disappeared like knowledge; there, but moving in and out, just showing itself now and then.

Ruby and I shut the stiff French-doors, shut the noise of the house inside and sat on cane seats on the front porch overlooking the strip of road and the wide sea. Beyond the first white breakers the ocean dropped away into darkness with the night. The hum of the sea filled and came out of me, I held onto the hum and after a time noted that Ruby had gone.

At school Ruby pretended not to know me.

'Carla Kite' the kids used to say, 'Why doesn't your mother brush your hair?', 'Why're you so ugly?' 'Why's your family all retards?' The taunts were questions, and

I heard real curiosity, repelled fascination, and I anxiously pondered these questions too. They made animal sounds. ‘Why does your brother look like a pig *and* he’s a retard?’ Sometimes said with a sharp twist to the skin on my forearm, twist and hold, one, two, before letting go. All done with such routine that I learned to take a slow blink and then it would be over and I would walk away. Sometimes a twist to my hair, a clump pulled hard between a finger and thumb and then the hand would let go, shake, be wiped on someone’s back because of cooties. Freed, I would pull on the blue sunhat which flattened and covered my knotty hair and walk to the furthest corner of the playground, and would poke grasses through the high wire fence and watch the distant games from under my hat the long time until the bell rang. As we got older we no longer wore sunhats, I learned to push my hair, sticky like old cobwebs, back with a thick band, the kids no longer touched me but the boys now whispered and smirked and the girls stepped back and watched me walk past. As Ruby did too. My brother John stopped going to school.

I got up from the cane seat and he was there.

I waited; one other time I had been given wine from his glass. This time nothing happened so I smiled and went forward. I looked down as I went past and he grabbed my arm, catching my hair with his palm. He drew a slow smile back, and drew his head back with the smile; like to look at me. He brought me up close to him and kissed me on the mouth and his mouth was closed and I stood waiting. I waited, pressed flat, like a wet paper cut-out doll, stuck along his body, his face.

He said words in a low voice and with the same drawn-back smile, but the smile was up close up to my face now and the words were idiotic and improbable, like a bad sleazy movie. ‘Sexy. I think you *know* that.’ I looked for an expression on his face to see what this would turn into, looked for a sneer, for laughing foxy eyes, but it was all in shadow. For a second the words hung and sent a chill through me and then they disappeared like air. There was a pause which meant that I was supposed to reply but now the words were gone and I had nothing to say, and I stared back at the shadows of his face and the shining white of his eyes and there was long moment of nothing.

Voices floated, shapes moved through the trees and came along the brick path toward the house, and he stepped back and smiled, nodded, smiled, and backed away

and drifted inside. My skin prickled with sweat and I was just eyes; bodiless like the white froth floating on the empty sea out there.

Ruby and I sat on the velvety sofa at the edge of the room and watched Ruby's mother laughing and talking loudly. Ruby sneered about the people in her house and I laughed a small laugh at her guts, at how mean she was as well as at what she said. We went across the road to the beach where I stared at the fine trickles of froth lying scalloped along the shore like clean white lace on a little girl's dress.

'How come you didn't eat?' Ruby said, kicking her toe into the sand so it plumed around her.

'I wasn't hungry.'

'You never eat.'

'I do eat, what're you talking about.'

'You never eat in front of people,' Ruby said. 'You're a moron.' Her eye shapes were black and her face was flat grey, duller than the lacy foam but I knew her expression.

In Ruby's big old-fashioned iron bed I was not asleep. A soft movement made me still and tense and there was a quiet weight behind me, a hot hand light on the covers, over my thigh. 'Are you awake?'

The quilt was bunched over Ruby and I could not see if she was facing toward or away from me, awake or asleep. A blunt stabbing began in my chest. Next, the cautious, tiny lift of the covers, the slide of a leg and slow shift of weight which would not make the bed move or creak. I knew I would do nothing, but the thought maintained a vibrating echo inside: what will I do? Lie there still, blood pounding and see, keep facing away, and watch what happens to you.

I felt ridiculous, my chest compressed and my breath like a dying bird. Saw the eyes which went dreamy and slow, then glassy, then cruel, and then empty; this not new to me, but a thin knowledge with nothing to stand behind it. Saw the sky, silver between the branches, so high, high and great and far away it made me struggle for breath and

become dizzy. Felt the ground hard and cold under my shoulders and hips, dirt forced into the gashes on my fingertips. The slits were packed with dirt, they stung and buzzed.

I remembered the bottles on the sill, their smooth straight shoulders and their quiet watching, their winking eyes streaked with my blood, their skin dull from being underground, and forgot about the sky.

‘What’s wrong?’

I smelled the cold dirt and leaves. I had all my clothes on again and Ruby’s mother had not heard, or come out and seen anything and I felt light and still.

I thought about his question.

‘Nothing’s wrong,’ I said.

‘There wa-as,’ he said, low, lilting. ‘I can tell. There was something wro-ong.’ Like a sing-song.

Probably he was right, something was probably wrong but I didn’t know what it was and I didn’t know how he knew.

‘You’re a good girl. Quiet, I like that.’

Quiet. It made me see myself sat there. My legs stuck straight out wide like tree trunks and my blank little head, hair streaming like a kicked-over rats nest. I wondered why he was still there, leaning back on his hands in the leaves in the dark, whispering away to me in his lilting voice and I wanted to laugh.

He grabbed my face in his hands and looked into my eyes. He stayed that way for a long time and I looked back, having nowhere else to look. His palms held my jaw, his fingers spread up my cheeks pulling my eyes to slits and blurring my vision.

‘Oh wow. Did we just have a conversation?’

‘What?’

‘Our eyes. We just had a conversation with our eyes.’

I blinked rapidly, and small twitches crossed my face. He watched this and his brow furrowed slightly, and his watery eyes dropped away. His hands shook my head minutely, jarring my brains in their socket, and then he let me go. He sat for a second and then reached over again, this time grabbing my hair and jerking my head around.

‘You little slut. Whoever lets you keep your hair like that should be shot.’

In early evening I sat on the beach and waited for Ruby.

In my head I saw the Cheshire cat smile hanging in the dark, heard the sing-songy 'There wa-as.'

He'd said he was around after eight any night. His place across town, back a few blocks from the beach. Come up the alley and in the back door. Was it a joke?

'You don't smoke do you?' he'd said. 'No,' I said, and he said, 'Good.'

I tried to picture myself at his door, in his house, moving around amongst his furniture and his stuff, and managed an image of a rodent, thick stiff hair, creeping and sniffing at brown sofas and chairs in a room darkened by drawn curtains. I could not think of any conversation we would have together; in the dream in my head I was a shadow-flicker, rat-shaped, dead-eyed. I closed my eyes tight to create a better scene. I wore silver eye-shadow, my hair turbulent, I had bags, dropped them to the floor, lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the air between us. I looked him in his watery blue eye, got a fix on him, through the soft haze of smoke and said, 'What's wrong?' At the sound of my own voice in my head the scene fell apart.

It had been a grey heavy day and a salt wind now dampened my T-shirt and made me itch. The dusk thickened. I leaned against giant sea-worn driftwood, its knobs pushing like hard thumbs into my back, and watched the waves and the thick foam and thought of spit. I examined the cuts in my fingertips, quickly healing, and looked then at the inside of my arm, its traces of veins like a faint net, a fragile string bag. I waited. Behind me a row of new beige houses sat smooth and stupid. Their shiny blank windows faced, like me, to the horizon. Into the corner of my eye came a flash of orange and I turned to it.

Within one of the beach houses leapt orange flames. A whirling mess of heat and colour, gold, blue and orange. Huge flames on the lower storey and the top hurled themselves up against all the blackened front facing windows. I got to my feet and drew breath and my chest expanded sharply. The heat built. The glass would explode, shatter and shower me with hot splinters. Still, clear eyed, I waited for flakes of glass to spray across the road in a million beautiful arced trajectories.

Body poised for the beginning I took an unconscious step, and sank. The slight change of angle showed it was the sun. Reflected in the windows, the cast of the sun, orange-gold, smoky-red, from sky and cloud, bounced back with theatrical and luminous intensity. The sun had moved from under the shawl of heavy cloud and was at

its most potent, and mirrored along the line of houses it left an orange brand on my brain but no culmination, no shattering. In a little while it would hit the water-line; diffuse, sink. It rendered everything silent.

In the distance I saw the thin form of Ruby approach and I stood. I walked up the sand, off the beach to the road and kept walking. I walked between the beige houses, away from the beach and then broke into a run. I ran two blocks, another block, ran until I came to the railway bridge, and then pounded across, the steel ringing dully under my sneakers on the cracked asphalt, over into the far side of town. Reaching a gravel path running alongside the rusted railway tracks I had no breath, and slowed to a walk. Up ahead walking away from me was a grey, skinny girl in black singlet, black jeans to the middle of her calves and jandals. She pushed a buggy. To my left, across the railway line and across a road, was a man in a similar dark uniform, T-shirt and jeans, long hair and sunglasses. He looked at the skinny girl and across at me. Once; twice. On my other side, at the edge of the gravel path ran a long fence of guttering iron painted white in patches, the shadows of graffiti showing through the white like giant flattened insects plastered there. Branches of tall lupin hung over the fence and drew my attention to the other side. I tiptoed along, craning my neck. More giant lupin, tall brown grass, thin dried pampas leaves curled like wood shavings, a large yard full of dead cars, all of it yellow tinged in the twilight. I reached a narrow gap in the fence and slid through.

Amidst the car wrecks an old rusty-white campervan sat ruined, browned curtains hanging stiff in the windows. In faded brown over the cab was lettered: 'Whare Haere'. I shuffled through the dry grass to the far side where a door hung open. Inside, the floor was coated with an inch of sand and leaves. Junk was piled in shadowy heaps along one side and towards the back windows. Two bench seats sat side by side behind the cab, yellow foam showing through long rips in their vinyl. I swept the sand and a large empty whiskey bottle from one of the seats and sat in it.

Through the smeared window, I saw a dark spidery figure move. It went quickly across the uneven ground, pushing through the long grass in an odd jerky fast motion and rushed right up to the camper. In less than seconds it was at the door and its thin limbs were reaching in. In the dim light a lanky shape. Hair to its shoulders, straggly thin, dirty blond, sunglasses pushed up on the head showing grease darkened strands close to the scalp.

‘Hey there, in my bus are you?’ he swung himself as if across a web, right in beside me on the seat and sat with his crotch opened wide, spindly knees in jeans touching my bare leg.

He slouched, puffed out his cheeks and then exhaled loudly as if home after a difficult day. Abruptly he twisted and jabbed his fingers into the tight front pocket of his jeans. Dragged out some papers and tobacco, crouched over these, began to roll himself a cigarette on his knee, humming quietly. I kept my head lowered and still, the humming buzzing in my ears, and just moved my eyes. First I moved them to the right, taking in the amount of space he filled between myself and the aisle between the seats, and then I moved them to the left to the narrow window next to me.

I reached down and grasped the neck of the whiskey bottle and brought it up and smashed its square end into the window beside me. The bottle broke with a crack that echoed from one side of the yard to the other and the man looked in shock at my bloodied hand. I turned and kicked at him with my feet, hammering again at the window with my elbow and the jarring went up my arm and through my shoulder and tore at my neck. Turning back to push myself at the window, I felt hands clamp to my waist, stretch and burn the flesh under my T-shirt. I reached with my eyes. The cracked window was a watery mosaic, like staring from under a frozen lake or through the binding mesh of my own silver-blue veins.

I watched and I saw myself on the dirt ground in the dark, between the black branches of trees on a bank of agapanthus and dry grasses drooping with seed. I rose up from the dirt and walked off with tiny seed and the moonlit skeletons of dead leaves stuck to my pants. I swayed away, moving quite gracefully, slipped long and light between bent tree shapes and vanished, like an eye closing, a slow blink. My fingers brushed the floor and the neck of the broken bottle.

Shared Office

Neville Serle, university lecturer, wolverine, had come to his current post via a job as head of Media Studies at a mid-sized, undistinguished high school and before that via an editorial position on *Vida Lobos*, a small magazine which had not reached its potential and had sunk. Now at the university, he suspected that his colleagues thought he was out of his depth; his advanced qualifications were thin in comparison to others. From the wider population he disguised this by various means; ignoring requests for a biography for the department website and speaking in vague terms of a background in education and communications.

One autumn he was a participant at a conference at a university in a foreign city. The university was situated on the edge of the ancient stone city, with dense black-green pine-forest to the east and plains and tundra to the north. In an intimate room he chose a seat near the back, took out his spiral-bound notepad, crossed his legs and inclined his head suitably. The female presenter caught his imagination. She was dog-like in size and proportion, muscular, with silvery fur and a thick, harsh accent. She talked about her work in a multipurpose entity. It was for research and conservation and education of the public and tourism and business. One of its tangential aspects was a venture in HR. The she-wolf shuffled workplace teams around historical exhibits and analysed aspects of wolf behaviour and then she took the workplace teams to a little room to help them to identify their own dynamics and conflicts, and to brainstorm strategies to manage these.

‘Everyone is aware of pack roles of course, but I give them food for thought,’ she said in her hard accent.

‘I tell them, remember, the alpha wolf or alpha pair can get themselves into sticky messes with too much heavy-handedness.’ Here, the wolverines in the audience sat around and covertly caught each other’s eye and nodded.

‘But,’ she went on, ‘you know, if they are too much bullying, the others, they will not tolerate it. Old alpha will be in for a surprise.’

Similarly, she reminded them about the policing done by the beta wolf, and how this fellow might go about a takeover for alpha position.

‘Old beta, he is the protector, always on the watch for danger if he does his job well.’

She spoke of the fun injected by the pack juveniles, and then of ‘the omega wolf with his high exposure to risk, on the front-line, bearing the brunt, taking it for the team.’

Pop-psychology, thought Serle. But he was put sharply in mind of his own parents. His mother, a wolf with aspirations, had for years berated his father for his lack of balls. At the sheep-station, his father had moved downward through the ranks as he’d aged: Scape-wolf through to serving-and-dishes-bitch. Once retired he had lived out his days lying at the mouth of his cave with his coarse grey fur pressed to the bare dry earth, his nose angled toward the rolling hills and his eyes disdainful and pale like the light which he blinked against. Alone with the horizon.

Serle left the city and its cold dry stonework and returned to the country where he lived and played Gheorghe Zamfir on the drive to work along country highways lined with poplars and oaks ablaze in golden colours. The pan-flute gave the drive an extra tinge of pathos. He looked from the window and pictured wild wolves in the soft green hills, streaking across the golden grass under the sun. He parked at his own provincial university; a formless mass encroaching on the suburban blocks around it. Once in the door he found a remodeled environment in the form of an open-plan office, a converted classroom, where converted meant that student tables and chairs had been removed, and lecturer’s desks and chairs and bookcases had been put in, and where the seating plan had been pre-determined.

It was over-lit, exposed. There were places at the windows with a view of the snaking motorway and beyond that, the glassy tower blocks of hotels, and beyond those, flecked grey sea; who had been allotted these? His own desk-space was along the blank inner wall which separated the room from the wide linoleum covered student hallway, and next to the open door. Past this door a day-long trickle of students walked. They

were the undead and their responses were uniform; their eyes panned from Serle, to the flickering computer screens and other bright and moving features around the room. Because of his position by the door wandering students often assumed Serle was a receptionist. His work was interrupted frequently to respond to ponderously hissed questions it was not his job to know the answers to: How do I top-up my Internet account? My lecturer's name is Paul something, where can I leave this plasticine model of brain degeneration for him? When is someone going to fix the smashed glass plate on the photocopier? He paused and eyed their scuffed and scrawled assignments and let the visitors run their blood-filled eyes over his desk and the work on his computer screen. He was patient. He treated students with respect and courtesy, was careful not to snarl at them, to arouse any bloodlust. The staff were quick and an easy match for the students, it was only on the occasion of them coming at you from behind that you might be in trouble. When they left he worked on at the front-line. He had an inner dignity.

Prior to this he had been accustomed to inhabiting a small private office of his own, a fourth floor room, also converted, once a tiny student bedroom. It had shabby beige paint and a view of the west end of the campus. Now that he had left it behind it stood in his memory as a glowing beacon of nostalgia. It was the place where he'd proved himself through discipline, long hours grappling with programme policy wording, culling the content of papers. There, he became known as a wordsmith – he could edit, could write in clear comprehensive language. The more time he spent considering this, the more the old office expanded in its gifts. It became as multi-faceted as a jewel; a place which nurtured both freedom and discipline, fostered individuality and unity, allowed expansion and containment.

Serle examined his new cramped and exposed position. Could this be the seed-bed of new growth? Of transformation? Collaboration was the abstract notion put up as the rationale for the shared office. Serle looked about and considered its potential for collaboration. Seated to his immediate right was a wolverine named Christine, who worked with her back to him.

'How are you finding the new space?' he asked Christine.

She swiveled briskly toward him, her lip curled high over yellow teeth. ‘You won’t see much of me. I can’t think with so much noise around. I’ll work from home if necessary. If I’m not here, it doesn’t mean I’m not working.’

Serle was unimpressed with this speech, delivered without heed for the excessive saliva flung about. It was his policy that the extent of one’s defensiveness should be disguised at all costs; it was a sign of weakness. Further along the wall, past Christine there was another round-haunched female named Pam. On first entering the room Serle had had a brief look around and seen a small square grey and pink book called ‘*Meditations for Wolves Who Do Too Much*’ sitting propped on Pam’s desk. Now, from his chair he could look beyond Christine and see over the top of the low partition to Pam’s rust-coloured hair showing grey roots along a side parting. She spoke into the phone in what seemed an extreme parody of the low, measured tones necessary when speaking with the students. Serle stretched and raised his head a little to see her better and Pam smiled at him across the partition, showing shreds of blackened meat in her teeth. Serle, embarrassed, smiled back.

Turning to his computer Serle concluded that these two; Pam who did too much, and the hostile Christine, could with a careless shove go up or down in the hierarchy, and ought to be watching their position carefully.

Opposite, in a stream of clear sunlight on the window side and in the position which afforded the best view, sat a female with shining grey fur and a thick white ruff at the neck. A barricade had been set between her and the room, made up of a sound-deadening bookcase and a file cupboard. Serle could only catch glimpses of her between the sides of the barricade at a certain point in his route from the door to his chair. It was known about the university that her research interests were cyber-identities and computer-mediated-communication. She was the media contact for these issues, a straight talker, not a sufferer of fools.

Next to her and opposite Serle in a position which had a vantage-point view, but the disadvantage of centrality to the room, was a skinny wolverine named Gerald. Serle watched Gerald saunter into the room and press a button on his phone. An unintelligible voice erupted and went on for some time, while all around in the room people pretended they were able to get on with their work.

This became routine. Twice daily, first thing in the morning and again after lunch, Gerald put his messages on speaker phone to hear droned apologies, proposed details of future meetings, the itemisation of options for calling or emailing back. Gerald got away with this because he was the juvenile. Gerald himself reinforced this idea explicitly. He threw up his hands in surrender: 'Sorry everyone, I don't take life too seriously. I've got a bit of a reputation as the clown around here.' But Gerald also liked them to know that he was no intellectual lightweight. He was a dogmatic follower of Lyotard and at the mention of the name Gerald's eyes would glow. But as the usual state of affairs was that Lyotard went unmentioned in the course of a day, he would work the name incoherently into the conversation himself. As far as Serle could make out, Gerald's PhD had been some sort of re-working of Lyotard into his own theory on the nature of leadership. 'The leader as post-modern anti-hero,' or some such idea.

After a week they began to settle. They circulated rumours about departmental cutbacks and complained to one another about the décor, the lack of air-conditioning, the promised but unforthcoming ear-plugs, and Serle made a conscious effort to enter into these trifles. They were also coming to terms with one another's phone conversations, casual visitors, throat-clearing, page flicking, Internet video watching, chicken-bone crunching and the leaving of little sordid piles of leftovers in corners. Snarls and growls were occasionally flung out into the air when the pressure was on. The main offenders in this were Pam and Christine.

Serle was forming a careful response to an email from a student, a certain Salena, who had spent a semester hovering near him, presenting him with scantily covered swollen grey breasts, making her red eyes round and resting her large belly filled with child on his desk, all the while scratching and clawing at it and giving it jerky caresses like a magic lamp.

The email read thus:

mr serle. i am going to name my baby son neville after you if thats ok. you are my favourite lecturer. i hope you have got my assignment it was only a bit late. can i come and see you about it tho in case it is not ok?

Serle thought ahead to this meeting and the dead child rotting away inside her. She gave off a harsher and more pungent reek than the other students. He hesitated over

the phrasing of his reply. Gerald strolled out to the middle of the room with his hands in his pockets and stared at a mark on the ceiling.

‘I’ve found a new thread, a new lead,’ he announced, his eyes fixed to the spot.

Some in the room looked up politely.

‘The sublime is a crisis where we realise the inadequacy of the imagination and reason to each other.’

There was a pause which Serle drew out a while before saying, ‘Yes?’

‘It’s a disturbance, you know, the leader is the one who is disturbed by the...by the...straining of the mind at the edges of itself..... he’s the ..unorthodox, the...’

‘The lone wolf?’ Serle suggested.

‘The lone wolf, the realist, the ...unorthodox....the....’ Spots of foam appeared at the corners of his black lips.

Serle laughed. Gerald flicked a yellow glare at him and walked back to his seat. He stared vacantly at his computer.

‘Now that I’ve read social contract theory as well, I can really see why I.....why I did,’ he trailed off wistfully.

Serle snickered again and looked at the others, but their eyes were fixed to their screens.

There was a certain amount of careful observation of movement and ranking on the important tables of measurement: Who had what published; who had the ear of whom; who worked the longest hours; was picking up the slack; was the weariest veteran of the bureaucratic machine.

‘Some folks are not here often enough to warrant desk space,’ said Pam, her tongue lolling out in an ingratiating pant, and people stopped themselves from glancing at Christine’s desk.

‘Some folks do so little work that it doesn’t matter if they’re here or not,’ said Gerald.

‘It’s probably better that we don’t talk about others when they’re not here I think,’ said Serle.

Pam stopped panting and shut her jaws with a snap.

The following day he sniffed something different on the breeze, a cheesy, faecal, spiteful odour. Having lost some notes, he was late in the day trying to complete a lecture for that evening while Pam and Gerald had a conversation which was about nothing as far as Serle could tell, but which was barked back and forth abruptly and which continued intermittently for some time.

On Friday in the late afternoon he entered the room and bumped into the female from the corner desk with the grey fur and white ruff. Her name was Maria.

‘And how are you getting on in the new collaborative space?’ Serle asked Maria, feeling his spine curl. Saliva ran between his teeth and dripped onto his chest fur.

‘There’s nothing collaborative about being squashed together with colleagues you have nothing in common with. A cost-cutting exercise,’ she said.

Her eyes and face shape looked to be of a slightly different species. Serle remarked that he had not witnessed anything collaborative in their shared office either, which was the truth. They were of a similar age, but she was not yet at the peak of her career success. She had plans. A research centre for Internet-based psychological testing and services at the university; for wolverines with addictions, obsessions, personality disorders. She had had a commitment to this from the Deans, had had interest from staff at other universities. Serle pictured her with a building to herself, locked in, windowless, sitting up in a high chair at a desk and digitally identifying compulsive personalities. She was, quick, ambitious and a little exotic. She was, in short, the kind of she-wolf Serle found attractive, but had never had quite within his orbit. He made a comment about the democratic nature of Internet-based services which he had read somewhere. Later in the conversation he made a suggestion about the advantages of anonymity in mange research on the Internet, a subject on which he had a degree of sensitivity to himself.

‘Oh,’ said Maria. ‘You’re very insightful.’

In the days that followed Serle was surprised to observe that Maria found reasons to pause at his desk. While chatting to Maria he was aware of Gerald across the room feigning a lack of interest. As she stood at his desk Serle leaned casually back in his chair, stretched his legs and smiled up at her. He began to feel that the current had shifted a little. He could smell respect. The future was opening up to him.

Maria and Serle went for a drink.

‘Do you usually have drinks with colleagues?’ asked Serle.

‘No,’ she said. ‘You’re very insightful.’

He was not in her league, but he thought about her a lot, both in and out of work. He was well aware of the nature of his thoughts. They involved hypothesising about her lifestyle, her future, and imagining himself beside her and sharing materially and emotionally in her success as she climbed her ladder. They would be a formidable alpha pair. His thoughts involved imagining himself calling on Maria in the new dark, cosy office, and the shining potential of this not yet existing space called to him.

Then on a Monday morning he read an email advising that Gerald and Maria were to be co-directors of the new research centre for psychological Internet services. He looked around. Gerald and Maria could not be seen in her bracketed-off office space, but their low voices could be heard.

Events seemed to gather a momentum of their own. On Tuesday he returned from the clatter and motion of a tutorial to the quiet office, where a group email had come through from Gerald, already exercising a predictably conventional manner of leadership. The message was a compulsory call for staff of the new centre to send an update of their biographies, including qualifications, background and research interests, to Web-services for the new centre website scheduled to go live that evening.

Later that night before he poured his measure of bourbon he checked the new website, a glossy black and white to convey noble tradition alongside vigour and innovation, and there he found a blank space next to his name. It did not even say ‘Lecturer’. Without the job title it looked as if he were in some kind of low-order role. Perhaps teaching assistant, or administration support.

On Wednesday morning Serle had agreed to meet with Salena. There was a chill presence, a tang of infection and body odour, and there she was at his side, bloated and rotting and moony red eyes and dirty dreadlocks pulled back with a band.

‘Salena, I have looked over your assignment,’ he said trying not to look at the scabrous tattoo over her breast. Was it a fly?

She nodded slowly and opened her mouth causing further fetid waves to come forth. She took her time in answering.

‘Is it okay? Do I need to do more to it?’ she asked in a high whispery rasp. She shifted a little from one foot to the other, making her breasts roll inside the thin tatty singlet. Her features were leaden and she opened her eyes wider and gawped at him, causing a watery red fluid to seep down her cheeks. She rested her hands on her stomach, tight like a huge boil.

Serle took a breath. ‘Frankly, it’s not ‘okay’ Salena. Frankly it’s trash, and I’m tired of the trash that gets presented at this university by you and people like you, and I’m tired of pretending that its good enough and I’m tired of giving second chances and pretending that those are good enough.’

Salena looked at him vacantly, swaying backwards and forwards a little. There was a long pause.

‘Do you get me Salena?’ said Serle, looking her in the eye for as long as he dared.

There was another pause.

‘Is it okay? Do I need to do more to it?’ she croaked again.

There was a departmental meeting that afternoon to discuss the new cyber/addictions centre. At the meeting, Gerald raised the insightful suggestions Serle had made in his conversation with Maria. Serle, noting that Gerald had made no mention of where the ideas had come from, tried to add a few clarifications to show that he was up with the play but Gerald cut him off. Serle glanced at Maria, but she was involved in a whispered conversation with the Dean. He looked around the boardroom table once at the scratching, the muzzle tics and twitches, the grey whiskers, and then sat in silence for the rest of the meeting. Serle returned to the office and pissed brown waving arcs into Gerald’s corner, splashing dark, seeping shapes on the carpet.

The next day was hot and the office was filled with the piss-fumes rising from Gerald’s corner, and hackles were high all over the room. Christine was absent, but Pam could be heard quietly panting behind the partition. Serle ignored Gerald as he entered and then noted with satisfaction that Gerald left again quickly. Crouched low, he trotted a wide circle around Serle’s desk, his testicles swinging from side to side.

It was the end of the semester and the examination that morning had not gone well. Three students had been caught cheating. Students all cheated, it was difficult to catch them. In a sea of dead faces and jerky, juddering movements, awkward behaviour was hard to spot. It was preferable not to catch them, because once caught there was the problem of how to deal with them. And Serle, at the bottom of the heap, with no important meetings to be at, was the one to have to deal with them. He slumped at the desk and thought of the new bottle of scotch at home that he had saved for the end of semester. He looked for a container to hold the 302 unmarked exams. A stack of cardboard recycling boxes sat by the door. He thought of the scotch again, and grabbed the boxes. He attached sheets of paper to the tops and sides and in black vivid pen, he scrawled: 'NOT RUBBISH. PLEASE LEAVE'. It wasn't the night the cleaner was due anyway, but just in case he spoke to Maria, working late, about the boxes, and then he left. Of course in the morning the exams were gone.

It took him almost two hours in a twelve foot square cage of rubbish to find most of the exams. In the end there were just eighteen students whom he would have to recall, apologise to and persuade to sit the exam once again. It surprised him what was put into paper recycling bins. Several large rat carcasses, offal, bits of fur. Some of these remains were smeared on the exams but he thought he could still read them well enough.

Returning home in the late morning, his skin tingled and he had a lightening energy he needed to spend. He showered and nurtured his boiling blood for the rest of the day. Shortly after six that evening he went to the office. He found Gerald at work.

'Son of a rabid rat,' said Serle pleasantly from the doorway.

Gerald looked up from his hunch and gave a low growl but did not look otherwise surprised. This resigned gesture put Serle so exactly in mind of his father that his body stiffened involuntarily. Gerald's snivelling, sunken posture sharpened in his vision. The room faded and with fur raised and nose low to the ground he slunk forward.

There was not much left when he had finished. He felt that disposing of the remains wrapped in paper in several recycling bins was a nice touch of symmetry. He wiped down Gerald's desk, and moved a chair and a pot plant to cover the stains on the carpet.

His blood had settled a little but was still slowly rumbling through his veins the following night, when this time it was Maria working late. Gerald's absence had been noted, but seemed to have had no impact on anything so far and Serle felt that it was likely that it would continue to have no real impact on anything for some time to come.

He strolled to Maria's corner and suggested he make them both a cup of coffee. She paused in her writing to smile at him over her glasses. While waiting for the jug to boil he hummed.

He returned with the coffee and she glanced up. Her stern brows and twitching whiskers made his blood leap and sting. He took her paw and led her blinking and removing her glasses, across the diagonal to his space and she smiled with a certain amount of surprise but with understanding and not with mockery or disbelief, and he executed his scenario from behind.

Underneath the luxurious fur she was a troubling mixture; angular bone and slippery, liquid flesh. He dove into the waters and rocked swiftly along on a current in his favour. There was a small square mirror on his desk. He watched her, her spine arched, its ridge of fur bristling and her jaw slung open, panting. He saw her glance at herself in the mirror. Behind them, in between strokes, he saw the office, its multifaceted, jewel-like brilliance glowing through the dull surface. He saw that it was only by the understanding of this paradox that space can be properly utilised. He saw himself, by turns omega, beta, alpha and he saw that it was only those who could see these facets at work in themselves who had a proper command over their lives.

Underneath him, Maria snarled and shivered, and he glanced again in the mirror. Over his shoulder was a round face, the flesh at the lips stiff, blackened and eaten away, the eyes deep wet sockets. The face moved closer, larger in the mirror, the jaw stretched open and the honed stumps sank confidently into his shoulder to the bone. Tossing her head, her jaws pulled him from Maria and sent him in a heap to the floor, tearing his shoulder so that it hung from a ligament. She lunged for Maria's throat and then again for a better grip at its underside and Maria's howls were lost – they bounced from wall to wall and then flew off into limitless space. She ripped the throat open. Maria slumped on the desk and Salena shoved her to the floor with a scabby forearm. Leaning over, she hooked Serle's hind-leg and dragged him onto the desk on his back and then crept up

herself like a brainless, loaded tarantula. She rammed the monitor and keyboard over the edge and knelt beside him on the desk, pinned him there, her belly a dead-weight on his chest, above its horizon her nipples showing through the T-shirt like blue alien suns. He fought not to let himself sink. As each wave closed over, it brought the possibility that at the final moment he might rise up, jewel-like, illuminated.

The meat of baby Neville oozed darkly through her stomach wall and onto Serle's fur, inches from his muzzle.

'I took out the trash for you,' she whispered.

Mirror-ball

At mid-morning on a Sunday two young women stood on the pavement, thumbs and skinny hips angled out at the traffic. The street was flat and wide and lined with a real estate agent's, a pharmacy, a tiny shop that sold beads, a glass-fronted café. Up and down thrummed cars and small trucks. At around 11.30 a dark green Jeep grumbled past on the other side and did a smooth quick u-turn and stopped a few metres from them. The girls looked at each other and picked up their bags. They moved to the window and leaned in. One wore a heavy silver chain which swung and knocked against her chest as she leaned. In Drayton the two girls, the green four-wheel drive, the u-turn, the leaning, were things that a number were able to state that they were witness to.

Tee's brother Paul went south looking for Tee and Connie. His instincts said they'd headed to the city, at first anyway. He arrived in the early evening, parked his dusky blue Holden down on the street outside Jimmy's, and stayed on Jimmy's fold-out sofa a few nights. At night Paul and Jimmy played X-Box, watched TV movies or went out and drank and in the daytime while Jimmy was at work Paul walked the streets and parks, asking about Tee and Connie and showing a photograph taken a year ago, Tee's dark hair up in a scruffy ponytail, sitting with her bony knees tight close to her chest on their mother's couch, Connie next to her, her wide mouth open, smiling gamely.

As he tramped the city he tried to see it through Tee's eyes and asked her to guide him. He walked slowly without a plan, speaking to people who caught his eye. He gave his phone number and they promised to keep a look out. He looked like a worried brother, a smart young man, did not look like a murderous boyfriend. He suspected Tee would have liked the city's size and anonymity, the idea of lives pushed up together. He liked it himself. In the early morning disheveled men sat smoking on steps next to

entrances sluiced with soapy water. These men were alone or in pairs, they looked like Paul might look should he find himself still in the city in twenty years time.

When he got tired he stopped and sat and watched people like the men did, on the wide steps of a library or on the grass in front of a coffee shop.

Tee was six years younger and was like a cousin rather than a sister in that there was a distance between them. She'd used his place on a Sunday when the hair salon was closed and she had nothing else to do. He came home to find Tee and Connie lounging in his flat with the TV on, stoned and glassy. They smiled at him, and did not ask but expected that he would say nothing about it. They didn't try to make conversation with him. Their eyes were empty, opaque, curtained by their thick swinging hair. Paul busied himself in the kitchen. He cooked efficiently, quick Chinese stir-fries, and was conscious of the thin impassive bodies behind him.

The city contained unfamiliar types; a man with a wide brimmed hat trimmed with peacock feathers who watched him in the park; a crowd of young Asian men and women, dressed in tuxedos and ball-gowns in the early evening, gabbling loudly. It had a repressed, alien feel on still dry days that was like a deep unnameable itch. He got himself a small apartment in the city and rang his mother every week.

'No, no sign yet,' he told her. 'I got a job though, so I can stay on a bit longer. In a bookshop.'

He and Jimmy went out often to small quiet bars close to one or the other of their apartments. Paul liked the darkest, seediest places, he liked the transition from the hard open street to the brown, close fug, liked the dark shapes crouched in front of the pokie machines and the coloured twinkles of the machines in the dim room like sad Christmas lights. He liked to sit in a corner with Jimmy and have the dark close in around them. They sat and talked about work, and Jimmy talked about women. After the first couple of nights Jimmy didn't ask Paul about Tee; what he thought had happened, what he planned to do.

One of the places was a small second-floor strip club named Rolo's. In the club men sat on stools in the dark and drank and watched the girls. Some of the men's eyes were vacant and the girls up on the stage were reflected in them like celluloid laid over

the eyeballs. Other eyes said - *yeah, I know, come on baby, come over here, you like me baby, I know you do*. The girl's acts lacked the polish and theatre of old-school strippers, they were young, comfortable with their nakedness, had no need for defiance or brazenness. Their eyes simply reflected whatever was in front of them: They were cold; they were hot, whatever the men's eyes said, the girls looked back and mirrored it.

Paul and Jimmy were on stools near the back wall. The stage ran narrow down the centre, closely flanked by round stools on both sides so that the front row were sometimes in danger of being kicked in the head as the girls tipped upside down on the pole. A dusky-skinned girl with a cheese-cutter hat and a pipe finished her act and was followed by a tiny girl wearing two shiny silver strips. The strips were made of little mirrored squares so that her backside and her breasts swirled like disco balls. There was something jerky about the way she moved. It was irritating but magnetic, she seemed to be always on the verge of doing something peculiar and Paul watched to see what it would be. In the shiny top strip Paul could see miniatures of the guys up at the front. Her breasts deflected their tiny, blurry yellow faces back out at the room. Her tits were a like a fly's eyes, and in each tiny silver eye was a face with two more eyes, infinitely inscrutable.

She fumbled at the back of the top and as the sparkling strip fell away Paul held his breath, forgetting for a moment that this was supposed to happen. She seemed to be confused herself, as she made an abrupt snatch at it before it fell to the floor. Then, recovering, she dangled it between a finger and thumb, and trailed it around. Moving right to the centre of the stage she dropped it and left it lying there like a reptile skin. She began to work on the skirt piece, but hesitantly, with little tugs which didn't amount to anything, and which were followed by more strange jerky dancing which together put Paul in mind of a clown whose act is to be continually distracted and forget what he is doing. With each tug, the sparkly strip undulated and rose up her thigh, only to drift back down again as she left off. Paul half-expected her to make her eyes round and put her finger to her cheek in exaggerated puzzlement. A guy at the front with a wide black moustache was sitting side-on to the stage. He pushed a hand up in a stiff gesture of exasperation, and he yelled something at her, something which sounded above the hip-hop beat like:

'Yo mama, we ain't waiting all night.'

She looked at him with clear astonishment. There was a second's pause and then he put the hairy hand up again, it might have been to try to grab the skirt and give it a yank, or it might have been a joke, but he missed. His hand shot up her skirt. Her eyes leaped out and she swiveled her head this way and that. The hand stayed up in the front of her skirt for a second, giving him the look of a puppeteer. The girl's eyes and head were wild, but from the shoulders down she was tame, inert. Then two big guys waded through from the far end of the room and lifted the man, an arm each, and disappeared with him.

'Yeah,' Jimmy said, 'I can see where he was coming from. Fair enough about drawing out the anticipation or whatever, but don't make it go on and on like that.'

Paul nodded.

'Reckon she's an amateur,' said Jimmy.

Paul said nothing. He had sometimes seen the girls come out into the bar for a drink after they finished work. They came out in jeans or short dresses, in two's, and they sat at an out of the way table and leaned their heads together and talked non-stop until they left. Paul looked up and down for a while to see if the girl might show up again, but she didn't.

Because of their difference in age, he had a perspective on Tee's life which he did not have on his own and which he was uncomfortable bearing. As a boy of fourteen he had one weekend morning been looking for his neighbour Jerome to skateboard downtown with and had gone to Jerome's fort in the crawl space under his house. The space was reachable by a small hatch on the side of the house and Paul had opened it and poked his head in to discover Tee cross-legged and cozy inside the dirt cubby-hole, enveloped in brown, stuffy damp-smelling air. A couple of torches lay on the ground, switched on, shining on crumpled blankets and on white skinned, spread images torn from porn magazines.

At home she pulled the corners of her mouth down in an unreadable expression.

'Sometimes its fun. Sometimes Jerome lets my friends in too. We laugh.'

He stared at her, trying to find something in her eyes. She tilted her head and looked at him. 'I can get out you know.'

Paul had an image of the sliding bolt on the outside of the hatch. He shut out the image and turned away, to get out, get his skateboard and go.

He worked at the bookshop Tuesday to Saturday and put the photograph of Tee and Connie in a dark, varnished frame and kept it on the counter. The shop routine was repetitive. There was always a rush at opening, mid morning and lunch, and a trickle from then until the end of the day. Regulars in the shop took an interest in his search.

‘Maybe you should look somewhere else.’

‘Girls are strange at that age. Fickle, impulsive. Don’t you worry, they’ll just look after each other.’

Or: ‘She might be in front of your nose. One day you’ll just notice her.’

Paul smiled and nodded. ‘Anything’s possible.’

He walked to the dock after work and watched the containers come off the boats. The ships sat massive in their berths while the grey-brown water lapped far below in tiny and unceasing bids for their attention. In this world of open space, large objects and machinery Paul felt an easing. Things happened with a surety, and in their own time. Culpability withdrew with the light as the sea went from opaque, smeared with brown, cloudy dust, to a solid block of restful darkness. In the dark Paul walked again until he found a hole-in-the-wall restaurant a few blocks back from the docks and ordered a Lebanese dish of marinated meat and rice. He had a beer and then ordered a bottle of red wine with the meal and sat until he had drunk it all. Then he went out again into the crisp air and walked until he saw a street-girl. She was tall and blond and her face was indistinct because of the booze and he took her into an alley and swept shattered brown glass from the lower three steps of a fire-escape and lay her there.

In the morning his knees were red and weeping. He went to breakfast with Jimmy in a sparse lunch-bar in an unpretentious, down-market street. They split the paper half-each and spread it on the red Formica table as they ate. Paul looked up as Jimmy shot him a glance and closed his section.

‘What’s in there?’

Jimmy scratched his neck and unfolded the paper, found the page. Paul leaned across. On the bottom right were a line of small headshots, three young women. The headline was trite: *Gone but not forgotten*. Paul scrutinised the photos and then scanned

the columns. 78% of women over 16 missing for more than six weeks are never seen alive again.

Jimmy looked at him evenly. 'What a thing to publish. Hey, reckon they just don't want to be found.'

Paul kept his eyes on the paper. 'I don't see why that should stop me.'

He had a couple of beers before he rang home on Monday nights, sometimes vodka. When his mother answered he often suspected she had been drinking too. For a few minutes their conversation was a little breathless and then it meandered its way to a finish. There was no unpleasantness. She was becoming more forgetful, Paul noted. He stayed on the line until she had talked enough; listening over again about his father's back and tablets, Auntie Myrna's divorce.

She hung up with the same words: 'You're a good boy, Paul.'

Once, less than a year ago he had come home with a girlfriend to find Tee and Connie lying on his bed, their feet up on the headboard. They lay looking at him upside down from the foot of the bed. They smirked. Their pale thin bare feet splayed at the ceiling.

The next time Paul and Jimmy went to Rolo's it was with Jack and Ferris, the sales guys from Jimmy's work. Paul had turned twenty-two the Tuesday before and as they went up the narrow steps he leaned over at Jimmy and said: 'Don't mention the birthday, right?'

The girl was on stage as they walked in and this time she was in a strange white outfit with emblems and domes on it and towering high white boots. The last time her hair was all over her face but this time it was up tight and high on her head, so tight her eyes were slanted. Paul took his beer from Jimmy and watched her. She was useless with the moves again, possibly even clunkier this time, with the high white boots.

The four of them sat at a high round table and spoke intermittently to each other over the music. After three hours Paul was a little blurry. A ruddy colour had swept over Jack's broad-nose and cheeks, and Ferris and Jimmy were jittery legged, jiving their heads back and forth to the music and picking fights with each other.

'A lapdance for yer birthday mate?' Jimmy nudged Paul.

‘Birthday?’ said the other two. ‘It’s my birthday too.’

Paul’s face felt droopy. He smiled and focused through heavy lids on the top-heavy girl now on stage, the men, the club, his friends. When Jimmy asked: ‘Which one do you want?’ Paul asked for the one he could remember.

He sat in a fat leather armchair in a room with nothing else in it but a yellow-ochre carpet and a long hall-stand on which stood an oval mirror with a plastic looking ornate bronze surround. In the mirror he could see his small skinny frame in the big chair. She came clacking in through a beaded curtain behind him, making him startle. For some reason he’d imagined she’d have something on, a thong perhaps, maybe because he had the idea that she was new at stripping, but she was naked. He focused to make sure she was the right girl. She sat on him, blocking his reflection in the mirror. She shifted and moved and he asked her things; how she found the job, where she was from.

She was forthcoming. ‘I’m in this old flat at the moment? It needs redecorating. Got these seventies colours and stuff. These disgusting orange cupboards,’ she said.

‘Me and Cilla, she’s my best friend, we’re gonna get a place on the harbour. You know, where you can see the lights on the water at night?’

Paul thought of the lights on the water and nodded.

She went on. ‘My little girl, Patria? I want her to go to a decent Catholic school.’

Paul was beginning to slide down the chair. He hoisted himself a little. ‘Is being a Catholic any kind of a problem in your job?’ he asked.

‘No,’ she said.

‘Is it some kind of reason for your job?’

‘No,’ she said.

She moved around a bit strangely, like her dancing, but he thought it was fine. It probably wasn’t as hard, just sitting there on somebody and squirming and doing that rocking horse thing. A lot of girls seemed to be alright at that, Paul felt that maybe they were born with a natural quality for it.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked.

‘Angel.’

‘No your real name.’

She looked at him and said ‘Angel.’

‘Are you Australian?’ said Paul.

‘Why?’

‘Because you said *Cathleec*, you sound like you’re Australian.’

‘No, Filipino. And so is Cilla. Music and dancing are in our blood.’

Paul smiled and floated in her eyes. Although the skin was pulled taught, the eyes were beautiful, self-deluded, simple. He asked if he could kiss her.

She said ‘I can’t, it’s against the rules.’ She hesitated and looked around and said: ‘There’s cameras.’

Paul looked around too and moving his head to the right caught sight of her back in the mirror. Her black ponytail sat up very pert and very high on her head and he could see the white skin behind her ears. Dizzying brown clouds smeared his vision and he closed his eyes.

When next he opened them she seemed quite happy wriggling around, making little funky shifts of the shoulders. He thought he heard her humming to herself. He looked up into her face and their eyes locked. After a few seconds Paul said ‘Are you new at this?’

‘No,’ she said and looked at him doubtfully.

‘Come on.....’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Why?’

‘You’re too real, too sincere.’

She frowned. ‘Ok, yes then. And I’m not gonna be in it that long either.’

She shot a glance at him and then looked up at the wall behind his head and began talking to it. ‘I want to get into real estate. My brother’s going to help me.’ She went on for a while like this, staring at the wall and talking a little stiffly and moving around in her funny jerky way. Paul lost concentration for a while. Her voice went on chirruping in the background, and then after a bit he heard her say:

‘Is this how it’s gonna be?’

‘What?’ he said.

‘That’s what he said to me. He says aw baby is this how it’s gonna be? And then he says ‘Aw you’re still my baby-girl. And I said no I *ain’t* your baby-girl. And he says baby, you better be my baby-girl, or I ain’t taking you to work tonight. And I said

That's ok I'll find my own way, and I slammed the door. And that's why. Cause he like knows where I work.'

Paul considered this dimly.

He looked up at her. She hovered there, snaking around. He was a sniveling scrawny rat waiting for the cobra to strike. A thrill surfaced through the alcohol.

He asked her if she would take her hair down. She looked at him for a few seconds and then she smiled and looked into his eyes. Her eyes were slitty and they steamed heat. She pulled out the band which tied back her hair and the hair fell down all over her like a black sheet. Her eyes went normal-shaped and then dimness closed over him like diving into a thick brown sea.

Two girls leaned down at the window of a car, hair swinging, shiny.

'We're going south.'

'Yep, jump in.'

'Is that the way you're going?'

'I can go that way.'

The girls looked at him and at each other. They climbed in.

'Whereabouts?'

'To the city.'

Tee sat in front. She turned sideways and hooked her loose hair behind her ear so that she could talk to Connie in the backseat. The driver sat very erect, large dark glasses reflecting Tee's face. Short dark wiry hair, a tanned smooth neck disappearing into a polo shirt.

'You nearly done or what?'

Paul blinked and turned to Jimmy in the doorway.

'Angel and I are in the middle of a conversation. Hang on a bit, yeah?'

Jimmy went away again. Paul looked at Angel and she looked back. He felt a zinging around his head. He felt a bit of a current zapping backwards and forwards.

'Give me your number and I'll text you later, yeah?' he said.

She looked around again as though she'd just woken up in an unfamiliar bedroom.

‘I can’t. They’ll know.’

Paul thought. She didn’t have a phone on her because she didn’t have anywhere to put it, but his own phone was in his jacket pocket.

He said ‘If you give me your number I’ll put it in my phone without them seeing’.

Her mouth scrunched up.

‘It’s ok, I won’t let them see, you can trust me. Me and Rolo understand each other pretty well, it’ll be fine.’

She smiled at him and began breathing hot, vaporous numbers in his ear.

Shapes appeared in the doorway. ‘Paul. The show’s finished ages ago.’ The three guys stood there like gaping apes.

‘Look just hold your fucking horses, ok? Just wait,’ said Paul.

He shoved his hand in his jacket pocket and it took a while, he usually needed to see what he was doing. He looked for the cameras because it would have looked like he was getting something he wasn’t paying for, her wriggling around breathing in his ear and him with a stiff arm jammed in his pocket and a concentrating look on his face, saying ‘Slower baby, slow down.’ It was a breach of conduct as it was. He looked at the places on the wall where the cameras might be and waited for a big guy to burst in and pick him up by an arm. He hoped a little that they would. He thought of what they’d do; maybe kick him down the stairs, maybe worse.

Paul sat in the Holden and looked across the dock yard. It was Sunday morning and almost deserted now, the giant cranes hung in front of the horizon and container slabs sat stacked in giant rows on the concrete. He hadn’t tried to text. He knew the number was a fake, to get rid of him and he was glad. What kind of girl ended up a stripper? Fumbling Angel and her impervious, shiny-eyed mates at Rolo’s; Angel and Cilla, Angel and Patria.

A woman stood at the edge near the white bollards, a cellphone to her ear, watching a young child run at a pile of concrete rubble, scrambling up the grey chunks which were as tall as the child herself. The woman was tall dark and thin. She strode around in the dust, one hand on her hip. She looked out at the horizon as she finished her call. She turned back to the child and moved forward slowly, her shoulders loose,

swinging her hands forwards and backwards in unison. Paul heard her call something to the child who looked up with a start. The little girl stood still on the rubble pile, her own hands loose at her sides, and stared at the woman. She turned and climbed carefully backwards down the concrete to the bottom and walked with the woman to a station wagon parked nearby.

Paul watched the car move away. The girl sat in the front next to her mother, just the top of her head visible. The woman's elbow was out on the sill. Paul glimpsed the back of the wagon piled with stuff, clothing and coloured quilts, jumbled together. Inside the car, the woman turned to the girl and grinned and then back to look out through the windscreen at the washed out colours of the industrial neighbourhood. Paul watched the car gather speed, flash bright white, cut a thin line along the dockside and out of town under the wide pale sky curved overhead like a snow-globe.

He looked back towards the water and saw a couple of girls come off a ship. They picked their way across the concrete towards the car-park, dressed for last night, shoes in hand. He watched them cling to each other, help each other avoid the broken glass. He started the engine and kept pace with the girls, back a hundred feet or so skirting the far edge of the car-park.

The Bus

I'll tell you what happened. First of all, I couldn't stop pressing the buzzer. I couldn't stop myself, I dunno why. Coming home and talking to my mates and that I was OK but then they all got off at the station and I was sitting there and it was so boring. Just looking at the backs of people's heads, looking at those goons from in the city with their green jackets and ties. And the bus smelled like someone's yuck old ham sandwiches and you couldn't open the window. I hummed like one of my mean guitar solos and I sat on my hands and tried to stop myself. But I kept seeing the buzzer button. It was fat and it looked back at me. It was like, red and ridgy. It was a googley eye staring. It was a red googley cyclops eye and you just wanted to stab it. You want to make the ding sound. You want to make the square light go on: 'BUS STOPPING'. The buzzer just got wider and wider like it was totally staring me down and I'm looking at this psycho big ridgy thing getting humungous in front of me and its all grey and fuzzy around it. Weird eh?

So next, I was coming home and it was dark and pretty late and I was down the back sitting on my hands. Not on the back seat, that's for goons and you always get some goon come down and sit there too and make pop-eyes at you like they think they're giving you evils. But I sit up near the back and if it's pretty empty no one else comes and sits near you, they look at you and then they stay up the front.

So a few people get on at some stops and I wasn't paying attention to them. I was watching how slow we were going. You know how the bus goes slow up the hills and he has to change gear where it's really steep and it's practically stopped and you always think man this bus is gonna roll over and die before it makes it up this hill? And its dark up that street, you can't see anything. I put my feet up on the seat, having a rest, and I was looking outside at how slow the bus was going, and then in the corner of my eye I saw this black thing. It's a thing, sitting behind me. And it seemed like it was real

close behind me, it was a big surprise cause I didn't know there was anyone there. I didn't see anyone get on and go sit there. So I saw this thing in the corner of my eye and it seems like it was kind of low down in the seat and kind of little and it's got this black hair, like a witch, all coming down all over the face and the shoulders, like all ugly, all straggly, like real witchy hair.

It was freaky, and so then I turned back to the front and I go oh, ok, there's someone behind me, cool. But I was sitting there and I kept getting these freaky chills from sitting up the back of the bus with a thing behind me, like it was all black outside and in the bus it was this creepy yellow light and there was another one or two other people on there up the front, and I was down the back with a scary freakin thing behind just sitting there saying nothing, like hiding, or like waiting, or something.

And I started feeling all jumpy in my seat. I was waiting for some cold fingers to touch the back of my neck, and I was like I WANNA GET OFF THIS BUS but it wasn't my stop yet and I didn't want to walk all the way so I kept sitting there.

And I thought, I gotta have another look. And so I turned around real quick and back again, and yep, this thing's still sitting there, and I was like jeez a freaking ugly witch, but at the same time I turned my head too quickly and I didn't see it very well, just the black hair all over and this kind of little brown face. It could have been a guy or a girl maybe, or an old lady. But, nah probably not a guy. A girl or an old lady.

I looked up at the people at the front, this bald man and this lady with a brown coat and they were like reading a book or whatever, and I started to get highly freaked, cause I was floating along in this lit up bus in the dark with a black monstery thing who's decided to sit on my ass. I was thinking it could be a ghost or something, like it could be one of my aunties. I thought a bit about that cause I always thought my aunties kind of liked me, not that they were gonna come and haunt my ass and scare me on the buses so I packed my pants.

But true, there was a couple who maybe didn't like me I suppose. Two skinny ones on my Mum's side. Or I was wondering if it could be like a random spirit, like a thing which was just wandering the earth, just looking for a human being to feed on which had the mojo that it needed for going on cruising around in the afterlife.

And so I was like, gotta protect my mojo, and when the bus stopped to let someone off the front the back door opened too and I just jumped out of my seat and I

went flying off the bus so I landed on the concrete and I bent my ankle over, and man it hurt like knives stabbing me. But I was off, I didn't worry about, it, I was hopping away down the road fast as. And it wasn't even my stop.

So it was alright, it didn't follow me or nothing. I checked behind me all the time I was gapping it down the hill and no one was there.

My ankle was all fat and everything the next day. I went to school and the nurse put a big bandage on it for me. She put it on real tight. That nurse likes me though. She's always like touching me and stuff and she likes my jokes, she thinks I'm a funny guy. Like I told her one about this guy who didn't like his neighbours so he ripped them off by stealing their dog and selling it. She put this bandage on me and she was like touching my knees and stuff. She didn't need to, she just was.

She's like 'How's that feel?' And I went 'It's still sore miss,' and she goes 'Is it? It'll take a few days.' And she put her hand on my knee. I'm gonna go back again when I get the thing dirty and she can put another one on.

I kept thinking about that witch and I still couldn't stop pressing the buzzer. And true, sometimes it wasn't the button and that you wanted to stab it in its eye, but it was cause you were looking at the people on the bus and you knew where they were going to get off cause you've seen them heaps of times before, and so you watched them and watched them and waited for them to push it. Because some of them were really *slow*. I can't handle it when people are slow like that it makes me freak.

One of them was this weird fulla. He dressed like a lady, he wore a skirt. He always wore this skirt that reminded me of my nana's couch, brown and with flowers like a couch, and he wore these stripey blue and black things on his legs underneath his skirt, like a girl does. And plaits. True! I'm not joking. Like two plaits. And it was definitely a guy, with a beard and a dude's face, I looked at him real close one day. Sometimes I saw him with these two little kids. They all walked funny, they all did this Thunderbirds walk, all three of them coming along to the bus stop and getting on the bus. I wonder about those kids, what that would be like for them, having a dude for a mum. Like is he like a mum, making their lunches with sandwiches and chippies and lamingtons and that?

But so, anyway, this guy always went on my bus and I knew where he got off, it was at the corner at the top of the hill.

And this other lady. An actual lady though. She kind of reminded me of Mum, she was like about how old my Mum would be now. I saw her sometimes sitting on the seat that goes backwards, the one that faces everyone else on the bus. She was sitting there looking out the window and *smiling*. Smiling to herself, like she was thinking heaps of funny stuff. And with dark straight hair, same as Mum's. And also she had this black umbrella with a carved wood handle that's like Mum's that's in our garage now, nobody touches it.

This lady, she got off on Downes Street. One time I got off at the same time as her and followed her to her house to see where she lived. In a blue house. She was one of the ones I waited for to push the buzzer.

But heaps of them were slow. When they were slow you waited and waited and then in the end you had to push it for them, so you did.

But sometimes, they didn't get off when they were supposed to?

And so then the bus driver stopped and he opened the door and nobody got out. And everybody looked to see who was gonna get out and who was holding up the whole bus, and no one got out. And the driver closed the door, bam, like that, and he goes again, and then you had to push the buzzer again. And after it's happened only twice he got mad. Only twice! He turned around and he looked up the bus all squinty in his eyes and he shouted stuff and I couldn't even understand what he was saying, he like had some kind of accent I never heard of.

Everyone looked at you then. I just hummed my song louder and I didn't look at them, I looked out the window.

It sometimes stopped me that time, but not the next time I went on the bus. And then the drivers all knew me and somehow they all told on me and it was the last straw with Dad.

He goes 'Again? You dummy, you can't stop can you?'

'How am I supposed to get to school,' I said, 'it's like five miles.'

He goes 'Ha. Worry about that now eh?'

He goes 'I got no sympathy for you. You walk.'

So I walked to school. I got there but not really on time, so I got a lateness detention. You have to go to the room at lunchtime and write out something heaps of times. I got to school at lunch time, so I was late for my lateness detention and I couldn't go. So then Miss Robertson said I'd have to do it tomorrow. I said to her that I would probably be too late to do it tomorrow as well, cause I have to walk to school and she said don't be ridiculous. Ridiculous! Man that lady. Her undies are too tight. I always tried to explain things to her but she never listened to me. I started explaining, but she was like 'Don't try and talk all over the top of me. You need to learn to listen and accept criticism.' Listen and accept criticism! I reckon that's what she needs to do. I only tried to explain, but she just walked off then, she never got me. She could like have tried to *listen* and then she might've got me.

But I was allowed back on the bus again cause I kept on being late for school and the teacher rang my Dad. I kept thinking about that witch. I thought if it's there I'll be staunch this time. Like I was only packing that time because I was surprised and I was thinking it was my auntie specially come to give me a hard time and she was a hard lady, man, she was cold, and if she was dead she would be terrible, she'd be a hardass ghost.

But it probably wasn't Auntie Treena. I asked my cousin Mark what Auntie Treena would be like if she was a ghost.

I said 'do you reckon she'd be a hardass? Do you reckon she'd be like yanking on my ear and grabbing me with her shriveled up hands and throwing me around and stuff?'

He said 'Yeah like Jet Li. Mean scary temper and real muscley. Cause her hair was all short like Jet Li.'

And I said 'Yeah and I'd be flying all over the bus falling on the back of the seats and breaking my back and she would be this mental thing, swinging off the bars which are for holding onto.'

And Mark goes in this squeaky voice, '— no, make it stop, make it stop.' And he goes 'and all the rubbish in the bus and all the books and the newspapers and stuff flying around and the wind blowing hardout and you're backed in the corner of the back seat with your hair flying back. And the lights flicking on and off.'

Jeez I hope she didn't hear us, she might get some ideas. But it wasn't Auntie Treena. I just got the feeling it wasn't.

So I was set to be staunch on the bus. I went up the back and I waited and every few seconds I like turned around to see who's there. This guy got on with real ripped up jeans and he came and sat up the back on the other side to me. I was distracted looking at him and his piercings, like he had two freaky ones under his eyebrows, sparkly red. Like some kind of devil's eyes. He had this other big piercing in his ear and a whiteboard pen stuck through it. A purple one with no lid and I was thinking it was for tagging, but then I thought it was just for looking like a goon cause he didn't look like a tagger. Too old.

Then I looked in the glass in front of me.

You know how there's glass by the door, like I was sitting in the seat that comes after the back door of the bus, and in between that seat and the steps for the door there's glass?

I looked in there and I could see it in the reflection. This shape there, and I looked at it more and it had eyes, I saw its eyes.

I was like, uh oh the little black witch again. It's behind me again. Not in the seat behind me, but right back in the corner of the back seat. I could only just see her eyes over the metal bar of the seat in front of her.

I look at her and she looks at me in the glass, these black little eyes over the top of the seat like a chimpanzee's eyes. And then, she tips her head up, so I can see her whole face, this brown wrinkly face, all lumpy like a walnut, and freaky. But that wasn't the freakiest thing. The thing that was even more freaky, is she tips up her face and shows me her mouth, opens it, and in her mouth is brown, like a hole, and in her mouth are these fangs. Tiny white teeth all sharp and pointy and she opens up her brown hole mouth and looks at me.

I'm serious, I freaked, man what would you do if you saw that? I was frozen, I was looking in the glass and I couldn't move and I started *sweating*. Man, I thought I was gonna be stuck there frozen forever, but then I flicked my eyes away to see if I could, you know? I flicked my eyes up the front. There were a few other people up the front and one of them was the lady who looks like my Mum. I wondered if everyone

else could see the witch, and then I start thinking that I was mental and no one else could see her. Because I haven't usually seen weird things before, but sometimes I do hear them. I have heard people walking around in my house when no one was there, and I have heard a lady's voice talking once when I was in the shower, like she was outside the bathroom door, and no ladies live at my house now.

I felt like going up the front and asking the lady with the long hair if she could see the witch. I really thought about it. But then something made me feel like I shouldn't do that. Like the lady looked kind of sad. It was like my Mum looked when I came home with my foot messed up from that darts thing we used to do, and now I feel bad about that day cause she thought I was a pain in the ass and I know she was sick of me and my dumb stuff. I didn't want to interrupt that lady's life and freak her out by asking her if she could see the witch.

I was still sweating and freaking and that, scared to move, and my head was shaking a little tiny bit like a psycho, and instead I said to the guy with the piercings, I said 'Bro? Have a look over there.' And I jerked my head a little bit over at the witch. 'You see that?' He looked at me and then he moved his eyes around to the corners but he didn't turn his head so he couldn't see. He had a piercing on the back of his neck too, like a little silver bar. I said 'No man. Over there.'

I jerked my head back a bit more, but then I looked and no one was there. I looked back a couple more times and then I knew I didn't need to cause she wasn't there. I thought maybe then I saw her running away down the road, away from the bus. Her hair was all in dreads and it was bouncing around on her shoulders and she was running away with these tiny little steps, like speeding away, like a bug running for its life.

And then it was bad, then I started seeing these other things, like random things. I'm looking back over my shoulder at the witch, trying to see her running away and I see this little yellow car driving along in the lane next to the bus and in it, man, in it is driving this clown. True. A clown driving a car along the road next to the bus! A clown driving around at night, like looking for some kid's birthday party or something! It's got this disgusting orange hair, like this raggy, dready hair all orange like cheezels colour and he's got that white face and the little eyes and like these blue clothes, a baby's blue colour and man it made me feel sick looking at him squashed in his yellow car driving

along. It's like how I felt at my cousin's birthday party two months ago. You know how you feel sick at kid's birthdays? Cause of the food and all the kids running around screaming and that, and all the coke and the cheezels all crushed into the floor and the adults all around the table drinking piss except for a few mums and aunties cleaning up all the mess and putting on plasters when the kids bash each other and fall over and stuff? It was like that.

I just stayed on the bus then. Which is kind of weird. I don't know why I did that, I just stayed there right til it got to the end at the harbour. And then I went up the front and I asked the driver when's the next bus back to town. And he said like half an hour, so I just waited for that one and went back again. I was behind these two Chinese girls *exactly* the same. They had the same head and shiny black hair, sitting next to each other like a mirror and they had their Ipod wires coming from under their hair, like one Ipod that they're both listening to. They turned around and looked at me at the same time. They just both looked at me like robots with white cords coming out of their heads.

I just leaned my head on the window and watched the lights in my head go red and then red with black wires all over and then black and then red again and it did it over and over.

And I was thinking to myself, - What am I going to do, spend the rest of my life going on buses and waiting to see that witch forever? I just sat there and when I got to my stop I just stayed on the bus and kept on going. So yeah here I am.

Window

Anita had an image, pieced together from dreams and camera-phone footage from TV, of a great wall of water, shining silver and embedded with debris and long pale shapes which might be bodies or limbs. Often but not always, the wave came at night. On very still nights the house floated on the air and held its breath. She lay looking up at the ceiling, waiting for it to come. It was a rumbling vibration at first, it grew stronger, and then Anita turned and it was behind her and she was up on the roof or running up the stairs, grasping at things. She hung onto thin flimsy things; rooftop aerials, slates, bedclothes, which had not a hope of standing up to the torrent. She kept low and hung on and looked up as the high shimmering wall came forward.

When dawn came she lay quiet and thought of the birds. She knew that birds woke and became musical in the dawn. The birds would know if the wave approached and would fall silent. But Anita could not hear, so would not know if birds were silent or not. She wondered if birds, in spite of their hearing and their instincts, ever got caught in the wave, if it ever came so quickly that they were taken unawares and swept from the trees. She wondered if there were little heaps of sodden corpses of sparrows and blackbirds among the rubbish in the aftermath.

She looked from her window and saw the boy move across the car-park with a kind of animal air, loose of limb but skittish. The twitch and angle of his head suggested a narrow and careful gaze. She saw him sniff the air for the scent of threat before he ducked inside the convenience store. He was in there a long time. She waited, anticipating him emerging and knuckling across the car-park, as he had done before.

She could see right through the window of the convenience store and when he appeared at the crowded counter she watched his two kinds of behaviour with the people in the shop. The first was a little shifty, mistrustful, like an ape low in the

hierarchy, with head bobbing and slantwise looks and slight snarl of lip. The other was the reverse; a chatty, matey attitude, characterised by expansive gestures and long, loud laughter which made her inclined to expect knee-slapping to come next. She thought of a young orangutan from the zoo programme she had seen. An outcast; he was quick and clever and restless and he moved from group to group, establishing a precarious and temporary position through a forceful personality.

Her observation post was in the new second story flat at a small table under the window. It was an old sewing machine table which she had grabbed from the Salvation Army shop down the road because it was small enough to carry home and up the stairs on her own. It had a curved and intricate iron base and a dusting of specks of orange rust showed through the cream paint. On this table top were placed her cigarettes and a glass ashtray, this tableau giving her a sense of quiet and triumphant dignity whenever she looked at it. The flat was tidy, she hadn't had much to bring from the hostel. A bed and one faded armchair to sit at the table. The TV. The contents of five cardboard boxes now unpacked and put away, fitting easily into the wardrobe and the three brown cupboards in the kitchenette.

The window was large, gave the flat a feeling of exposure to the street and so was the source of vitality in the room. From standing she could stretch her eyes, see all along the street, follow the sagging power lines, store canopies and sun-bleached signs a long, long way toward the middle of the city. She could see who came and who went. There had been a hawk flying above the flat on the day she had taken it.

Next to her apartment building was a construction site, and beyond that was another block of flats. A tall thin woman came out in the late afternoons and leaned with one casual hand on her balcony railing, a glass in the other hand, watching the men in hard hats below. Anita watched the men call up to her, 'Hey there,' and smile. A soft breeze swept the woman's skirt from side to side.

She looked down from the window. The boy left the shop, in his animal walk a gangly grace. The dusk had taken the colours from the street and the shadows lengthened across the car-park. In the haze he twitched his way back down the road and disappeared.

She began to wait until that time of the evening to buy her cheese, her packets of pasta, her cigarettes.

In the shop he was restrained, hopped around her hesitantly in the narrow aisles between cleaners and newspapers. She saw him there three times; four times. On the fifth night she smiled openly, madly at him, with big gums exposed and pale eyes ablaze. He raised his eyes from the magazine, lifted them toward her, eyebrows arched. Her eyes went to the magazine and he stuffed it in the back of the rack.

She flicked a glance or two backward as she left and saw the eyes follow her. His T-shirt said: *We are beautiful, we are doomed*. His hair was very short and his eyes were black and round.

At home she smoked, her fingers drumming on the table. Last night and the night before she had hit the late night infomercial channel. Infomercials in the corner of the room had felt for a couple of nights like some kind of comfort, of company. Words displayed on screen as they were spoken: *magic; shine; girls*. As lengthy as a TV show but in them an illustration of tight logic, cause and effect; free the side of the house from lichen, now the steps, now see how the mould on the deck is erased. Tonight she changed it. She saw a grey forest, a thick carpet of leaves, a woman's hand, also grey, the fingers curved downward, a pretty diamond on a silver band. She watched for a time and then turned the TV off. She kept the window open and watched the skyline. When her back and legs stiffened she stretched and prowled the flat and eventually she went to her bed.

Up an hour before dawn, she emptied the ashtray as the sun began to glow over the flats above the shops opposite and sparrows flitted in the line of shrubbery at the edge of the car-park.

As a child, when her father had been ill and she grew tired of the company of television characters whom she had to stare at and concentrate hard to demystify and then only ever partly understood, she had sometimes wandered into the yard to create small temporary homes for herself. She dragged along certain necessary items; books, magazines, blankets, and tested herself to see how long she could stay there. She pushed the things into the thin part of the hedge where the sky was sparkly and patchy through the green overhead, where the ground dropped away at the hedge's other side and she could see straight down fifteen or twenty feet to the cars and people on the street. At

other times, she just went into the middle of the tall patch of wild grass beyond the untended vegetable garden and lay flat on her back and became a part of the quivering earth.

She asked him to reach a can of black spray-paint on a high shelf at the back of the store. She smiled her thanks.

‘Are you local?’ she asked, and he nodded.

‘Me too. I moved in across the road.’ She saw him listen to some quality of tone in her voice. For his benefit she fastened her eyes on his mouth as he answered, and then saw his careful speech:

‘I live a few blocks away.’

‘I love this city,’ she said, and his eyes grew brighter. He sauntered from the store and gestured to a bench seat and there they sat for a while, him swinging his legs and kicking a trough in the dust under the seat. He talked. She watched his lips but gained a larger sense of him through his body, his emphasis, his eyes directed up to where the rooftops met the sky. Night came and they watched as giant cockroaches sidled from under door steps and sprinted for the gutter, making strollers-by skip and hurdle, their mouths jerking, and they laughed.

The next night, and the next, he found her on the seat, waiting. She showed herself to be disinclined to argument and doubts and he became expressive. Sometimes, like a child, he engaged her in a dumb game and laughed and screwed up his face when he broke the silence as though there was a penalty for speaking. Sometimes he got tired of this and sat staring into the traffic. She smiled and swore at him, talked bad-ass to make him laugh, said he was a useless mute. A cop went past, and later, a tall man in a dark suit who glanced at them, and she saw again the boy’s slantwise look and snarl. From their bench seat, she indicated to him her flat above and the peeling wood framed window.

‘I see the sunrise from up there. Same but different, everyday,’ she said.

He sat up straight on the bench and slapped his thigh.

He showed her, fingers walking, a long, long time, all night, all through the city. His fingers climbed the back of the bench seat and sat at the top and his other hand made the slow rise of the sun, fingers spread. The high places were a challenge and

dangerous to get to, he showed building sites, fire-escapes and lock picking, and other things she didn't get. Sometimes he didn't need sleep, he walked and climbed all night and watched the sun rise.

'But you reckon it's beautiful, right? I reckon it's harsh. I look down on everything all burning up. Burning all the people up.'

She watched his lips and considered this too, felt the burn of the morning street in summer, the white heat coming off the chrome and the tarmac softening and the folks seared and dodging for cover under the awnings. She looked up high to see her window lit yellow, set into the grey stippled face of the building.

She said goodbye and set off for home and as she stepped into the street felt a yank at her shoulder that pulled her back and down and one hip hit the ground. She scrambled backwards and felt herself swept up, her feet left the ground for a second. He stood behind her, his arms still hooked under her armpits. She struggled and he let her go. She whirled to look at him.

'Man, that took you by surprise. You gotta watch carefully. You can't hear the quick ones coming.'

At home when the wave came, instead of clutching at the bedclothes she lay stiff on the bed and pressed her palms flat to the mattress as her heart-beat moved quick and light up her chest and she was lifted, weightless and then pummeled and swept up and around. Afterward she got up and smoked. She had not always experienced the wave, but now she drew a connection. As a child she had been obsessed by another visitation, certain it was a matter of luck and timing and the secret plans of spindly-limbed aliens. She couldn't know on which night they might choose to come to her house, to stand at her bedside in the dark and look down on her, examine her, send a humming vibrating light to disappear her from her bed. She knew from TV what they looked like and about their designs in relation to humans. She felt that her deafness would interest them, would draw them to her, as it had drawn others, as she grew.

As a child, her bed had felt wide open to the skies, given no impression of solidness, of protection. When morning came she had risen with a sense of gratitude, of fragile good fortune.

The evenings became long and warm and more people were on the streets at night, wearing light shirts and thin shoulder straps. On one of these nights as they sat on the bench, the boy wore a thick hooded sweatshirt and his bony bare feet poked from the bottoms of his jeans. His clothing often seemed slightly out of synch with his environment and Anita felt that there was deliberateness about this, as though he was dressed for mysterious activities which he wanted to show excluded everyone else. He stood up and sat down. He stroked and gripped the worn wood of the bench seat, tracing its splits. She watched him. She said:

‘No shoes today?’

He glanced at her with irritation.

‘I don’t have to always wear shoes.’

‘No, you don’t,’ she said.

There was a pause.

‘The thing I always wear is a weapon,’ he said.

She missed it, and looked at him blankly.

‘A weapon,’ he repeated. ‘You don’t know who’s gonna come at you in the dark.’

She looked him over. ‘For example?’

‘*For example*, people who are dangerous man, look around you, winos, kid-gangs, people who want something from you, or just people who want to hurt you.’

She hesitated. ‘I’m not paranoid. People are pretty nice, they leave me alone.’

He snorted and put his hand into the pocket of his sweatshirt and pulled from it a narrow black shape. The blade flicked open in his lap and made her jump. He sat back.

‘*People are pretty nice.*’ She saw in the downturn of his mouth that he was mimicking her. He stroked the blade and then looked at her.

‘Not paranoid, huh?’ He glanced up at the window of her flat, and then at the ground. ‘Is that why...’ he stopped. ‘I’d be paranoid. People come sneaking on you.’

He toyed with the knife, pulled a foot up into his lap and put the blade to its underside. He began to scrape at the hard rind on the bottom of his heel and then carved away a thin sliver which dropped to the ground. He was about to get up and leave. She gazed at the wisp of skin and got up. She stepped across the road and back to her flat without looking back.

A few evenings later she hung some T-shirts and underwear on the white wire rack. The rack in the middle of the room made the flat feel starker, functional and hollow. Moving back past the window to fill the jug she glanced out across the construction site. The thin woman stood on her balcony, glass in hand, talking with a man in overalls. His hard-hat was balanced on the balcony railings and he also held a glass, half full of something clear. They looked out at the city lights. The woman swayed slightly, perhaps they had music on. The builder's eyes moved across to Anita's window and he said something and the woman laughed and Anita shifted away.

At the hostel, Anita had left behind a black and white cat and a boyfriend. Rhys was a little older, dark, smooth skinned, exotic with a tidy goatee. A paunch. Rhys was comfortable in the hostel, where the day room and corridors were grey and mint green like a hospital ward and his mother brought round a cake every week.

‘You won’t make it,’ Rhys had said, Rhys’s mother had said.

Leanne, the hostel manager had not said this but had said many times: ‘Keep my number on you. Keep your key.’

Toward dusk Anita was back at the window and the thin woman and the builder had gone. Anita looked instead across the road. On the patch of grass the other side of the car park, were two small figures stretched on the long strip of green. Their dark heads poked from under a pale blue blanket. People walked by on the pavement and glanced down at the sleepers.

A heavy man with red hair and a red shirt trudged by, dragging a green shopping trundler. The man also looked at the figures as he went past, and a second later circled round on the grass and approached them from behind. He stood still for a while. He knelt, his fingers brushing the grass for balance. The sleepers still did not move. He rocked back and forth a little, watching them. He drew one foot up, and nudged one of the heads. The heads moved and faces twisted toward the man. His glasses flashed as he spoke. His thin fluffy hair stirred in the breeze. The figures on the ground turned and goggled at him from the ground. Anita could see the whites of their eyes.

They scrambled up and sat back on their heels, young, slight and angular. Close together, the two dark girls faced the man, the three of them forming a long sharp triangle on the grass. They were small, about fifteen Anita judged. One of the girls had a tremor of the head, violent enough for Anita to make out from her window.

The man leaned in, his lips curved into a smile. A pressure came to Anita's ears, followed by dull vibrations, a series of them like a small, swelling rhythmic earthquake. She held the edges of the table. The girls sat, mouths square and closed, and looked at the man. The girl with the trembling head shifted backwards further, squatted and the other girl put her arm over her shoulders. From out of the trundler, the red-haired man began to produce things and set them down on the grass. The girls watched.

Anita leaned on the table and watched a silver thermos and items in plastic bags get pulled from the trundler. Yellow bowls, spoons. The girls were served. The man watched them both reach up and tie back their thick dark hair.

They ate. One cross legged, the other with the violent head-shake in an odd kneeling crouch, her knees spread wide, the bowl on the ground in front of her. Pigeons and people looked on.

They finished eating and drank from white Styrofoam cups.

The crouching girl sat up and smoothed her T-shirt down around her waist and Anita saw the hard, round forward bulge of her stomach. The girls sat close again and spoke to the man, whose large glasses still glinted in the sun. They smiled occasionally, briefly.

The girls wiped their mouths, looked at each other. Then they turned from the man and lay back down, on top of the blanket this time, lay face to face, each with an arm stretched out toward and draped over the other. The evening sun gave the skin of their arms and faces and their thin faded T-shirts a lemon glow. The man looked for a minute at the thin yellow limbs, at the compact, enclosed shape they made and then took a long look along the street. Then he left them.

Anita waited. This time the rumbling was the pulse of the city. It surged and ebbed.

The girls stayed on their grassy square all the next day, the pregnant, shaking girl huddled on the blanket and the other mooching up and down a little way, occasionally speaking to passers-by, receiving coins into a small tin box. In the middle

of the evening Anita looked from the window to see the boy over there, sitting on the grass beside the blue blanket, his legs stretched out straight and wide in front of him, his white running shoes angled out at the darkening sky.

She rose from the bed in the alcove and turned the TV on as the glow of dawn came in the window. She stopped and watched it trickle over the roof-tops opposite.

She stood and observed the way the glow intensified by tiny degrees and spread. She saw the iron on the canopy below her develop its soft colours and the tiny sparkles on the bare patches of iron begin to wink. The canopy spread away up the street in many coloured pastel blocks. She followed it with her eyes and traced paths up fire-escapes, along ledges, a place at the end of the block where a wall at right angles led like steps up to the very roof-top where wide brick chimneys and aerials sat, on an ordinary day unnoticed.

Once the day had made its proper appearance she washed the ashtray, put it back on the table and lit another cigarette. Holding the cigarette between two fingers, she leaned in at the window. It opened on two sides. She pushed the sides open to a hand-span's gap between them. Again she pushed at them but they wouldn't budge further. She sat on the table and leaned her shoulder against the frame on one side and shoved harder and it gave another inch.

People looked up from the street. She sat still on a blanket on top of the canopy in the open morning, the heat of the sun coming up and through her from the iron underneath, the rumble and throb of cars and trucks in the air all around, in every direction.

The Fall

In her tiny book-lined house Mrs. Bean made a small hunched figure, pooled in the white light of the table lamp. Her plate sat in front of her and in front of that, a large book on a heavy wooden book stand. She chewed slowly at the food and read about magic boxes and ley lines, mathematical equations and invisible fields. She read doggedly. Many things seemed not to be explained well in the book. Who had determined that the ley lines existed and how had they done such a thing? What purpose did they serve?

Reading too much was making her fat, and a worse crime, was separating her from the world, but what else should she do? Her old, close friends were gone, replaced by acquaintances of short-standing; depressed Agnetha next door, obsessed by a web of family conflict, who looked in on her once a day; Bill across the cul de sac, a prize dahlia-grower, writing an incomprehensible pamphlet on his own particular views on Christianity. They were peripheral to Mrs. Bean's awareness. Central were books, expansive books which swept up the essence of eras, cycles of growth, transformation and collapse.

She read and then at around ten she placed the dishes in the sink and went to her child's neat white-painted bed.

It was unusually dark, like ink poured into the eyes. Still, a sense of the proportions of the room around her asserted itself and those proportions felt unfamiliar, nothingness expanded where somethingness should be. She was not in bed; not in the bedroom. She felt along an unidentified piece of furniture which had a hard, slick and then a clothed surface. Reaching out ahead her hand brushed a door frame. She held the frame and turned back to face the room again, sensing for a reference point. She stood.

Instinctively she turned for an orientation of light. But where there ought to have been thin silvery light coming in at the side, there was nothing. Now the situation seemed to require something but she could not grasp what it was. So she waited.

She became conscious that there was no sound. As she waited she abruptly swooped and circled up and over and then looked down into the black vacuum. She saw how she stood gaping into nowhere, a small stooped pyjamaed statue, suspended, no thoughts in its head, no intentions, no expectations. She smiled at the sight.

She stirred and saw the same black void.

Again, opening her eyes she was in a strange position with cold hardness against the points of her body. Her cheek, hip, knee-joint were set sharply to the floor and felt lacking in clothing or skin or muscle. She lay still and the cold began to bite.

Raising her head to look about, the weight of her lower body dragged her back toward the floor. She poured will into the effort and wriggled to a different position, moved her upper body at an angle and her legs followed along and she saw a faint glowing trail left behind them in the blackness.

Her free arm wavered blind; a feeler. It struck some vertical flat thing a short distance from her head. A bench? Her kitchen bench? It seemed not the right shape or feel although she could not quite recall what a bench was like. She felt its surface for the whole of her reach and discovered no suggestion of edge or top or bump. She lowered her arm and considered. Getting up was impossible unless there was a low, stable object with which she could lever herself a little at a time. She lay still and made calculations for the length of time she might lie here. Her grandson was to come sometime. She had been mentally preparing. Perhaps two days time.

She woke again and it seemed as though a long time had passed, although it was still dark, black. Conversations and events wafted her way and she drifted along in their wake. Her own voice came to her ears, saying 'We had to take the children down the path through the jungle. You had to beat your way down the hill with a stick to warn the snakes that you were coming.' She heard herself. Who had she been talking to? Who might she be having this conversation with, in her imagination, or otherwise?

Fragments from the past were murmured in conversational tones in the air over her head. Hotels, fruit-picking, characters. Writers; men and women who wrote novels

about themselves, feckless, opportunistic, of indeterminate morals. Her poor mother had thought herself well read, but was not, not at all, by the new standards at university. But she was appreciative now, of her mother's love of books.

The flow of words petered out and she lay quiet. The silence was deep and became deeper and she let herself into it until she swam.

She heard her voice make an indeterminate sound. She stiffened and heard her heart from a way off come plodding toward her along a long corridor.

A movement. She listened. Footsteps and then a soft settling of furniture. Someone sitting down, somewhere nearby. It was unfamiliar to hear sounds made by others in the house.

Yet it was an easy sound, as though the someone had slipped into a chair and was about to call out to her, tell her that the paper was in. She waited but became tense, this wasn't getting the baby its breakfast, the someone should say or do something. She became a little conscious of her body, squishy, the parts undistinguished. She called a mucousy 'Hello!'

Mrs. Bean woke again with the sensation of wafting air and weightlessness. She relaxed and the contrast of the new sensation with the memory of the hardness of the floor was a great relief, like an expanding and overflowing heart. She was swept up and dropped gently into an armchair, and softly, light was there in the room. She was neither warm nor cold. She looked for who it was who had lifted her.

A boy was seated on the edge of a chair in a room bearing a resemblance to her small living room. Did she know him? He was wiry and dark eyed. Black hair fanned out around long pale ears, between which sat a soft-skinned milky face with freckles across a nose which had the developed bone of a young man. He wore a long, rather dramatic dark coat which flared out below his knees. He looked at her and she said 'Thank you for helping me.' He said nothing, but nodded.

He shifted back on the chair arm. Mrs. Bean glanced around, trying to remember the house and identify the things she saw around her.

'What are you doing in my house? Did you hear me calling?'

He remained quiet, examining her and the room. She found something in his face.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, ‘I forgot for a moment that you were coming. You’re early! But it’s just as well for me isn’t it?’

His mouth twitched as he chewed at his cheek.

‘Yes, really, just as well. I’m very lucky,’ she said. ‘I haven’t seen you for such a long time! At your piano recital?’

He gave a slight shrug of shoulders and looked up, out the window at a winter sky.

‘How do you feel?’ he asked. His voice was low and melodic, but hesitant, shy.

‘Alright,’ she said.

‘Not afraid.’

‘No.’

‘You feel like you did before? Present?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You feel present. As though you are still here?’

‘Well no, not quite. Give me a minute or two.’

‘What was it like? I watched you.’

‘What was it like? Oh well. Just a fall. I just woke in the night and I didn’t know where I was for a moment. Nothing to worry about.’ She looked up sharply. ‘What were you doing watching me? How long were you watching me?’

His gaze was steady, stately. ‘What was it like for you?’ he said.

‘Dreadful. No, it was fine. I felt like I had changed into a slug.’

He said nothing, stared, his head at an odd angle. She noticed two small silver-black conical spikes under his bottom lip. Good lord, like tiny horns, evenly spaced. Primitive.

She frowned and pressed down on the arms of the chair, easing herself up to standing. Pausing, she tested her stability and then began a shuffle toward what she hoped was the kitchen and he started and said ‘I’ll do that.’

She sat down again and turned to look out of a sliding glass door at sparrows on a patio. They picked at snails, dashing them on the concrete with violent little shakes which left their feathers ruffled and then lit off effortlessly and steeply one by one for the sky. The view beyond the patio was of soft shapes in a blue-grey haze, like fog at sea. The patio itself was unusually coloured, and worn and faded objects she couldn’t

name lay here and there as though left behind by some long-ago inhabitant. She was reminded of a book she'd read; a man gained sight as an adult after being blind all his life. He was disoriented. He could not learn the difference between an orange and a banana by sight. She listened to the boy boil the jug and take a cup down from its hook.

He came through with her tea and stood for moment. He pulled over a small table and set the tea down on it beside her.

'Do you know why?' His mouth moved carefully, as though trying out new words.

'What do you mean why?'

'What just happened to you. The reason.'

'Oh, look, it's not something to dwell on.' She shut her mouth with a smack and then opened it again. 'Better to get on with the present than worry at the past. You tell me what you've been getting up to.'

He scratched his cheek and she sat back and sucked up some of the sweet tea and cast around for another topic of conversation. She saw that this answer had not satisfied him. Reason: Did he mean a lesson of some kind? She frowned and thought of Agnetha next door whose son had had a psychotic breakdown from pot. She had seen him on the street, clutching at the jacket of a man walking past, asking to save him.

She wondered if he was hungry and if she should mention something to eat and then couldn't be bothered. She remembered a clock and her eyes went to where it ticked faintly above the boy's head. She looked at it for a long time but its numbers were like spiders trails in dust; she could not read it.

Dropping her eyes, they fell upon the book on the table next to where the boy sat. She said 'I have been reading a very interesting book. You might like it.'

He said nothing.

'You had an interest in these things when you were younger. I remember giving you a book about Atlantis, the pyramids and things. And you were quite engrossed in it. She looked at the ceiling and sipped her tea.

He chewed his mouth and tapped the side of his cheekbone with a set of pearly fingernails, each darkened with a line of dirt at the end. A silver emblem hung on his chest; an L shape. A foot? It shone as though giving light out from through his sternum. To stop him tapping she got up and pushed the book across the table to him.

He sat and turned the pages. She relaxed and shifted in the armchair and drank her tea. The floor seemed to slip away and she had the same sense of weightlessness that she'd woken to before.

They sat a long time and he looked through the book, scanning particular pages, flicking ahead and reading more closely. He seemed to forget she was there. She closed her eyes and rested her head on the seat back. The book shut with a snap and her eyes flew open to see him turn to her and cross one leg over the other, lean forward, an elbow on the table. He put the other hand up to his throat and his dark sleeve fell back to expose a white cuff.

'What do you think of that?' she said.

'What do you think?'

She was irritated. 'Actually, I think it's unnecessarily obtuse.'

He waited.

'I'm saying that it's muddy where it should be clear. I'm saying why write a book like that at all if you're going to veil it so thickly and leave such gaps.'

'Why would you read it then?'

'Why? It's the kind of thing I like to read.'

Far too intense, she thought, but a lovely smile. For a minute they sat looking at one another; he with his body twisted on the chair arm, lean and elegant; she formless and spongy.

She thought of how she had lain on the floor and remembered that she had been speaking. She had had no idea how much time had passed. Somehow stories from her life had come whirling out without any fuss. I was happy, she thought.

'Have I told about how when I was young I went to India with a poet? A friend. I was nearly finished my degree. Just one paper to go. The poet asked me to go so I just left it all behind for two years.'

She went on. 'On the trip across we had a lovely time. This poet, he was wonderful to talk to, we had great long conversations on the boat, talked about all sorts of things, ideas.' Another happy time, she thought. That makes two. She gazed out into the room as she continued. 'His wife came too. I think I was there as a sort of buffer between them. We got there and I stayed for a few months with them, but it got too

claustrophobic and in the end I took off, and got a job way up in the north, teaching.’ She gestured with one hand, seeing the vast distance to the north, the hills.

She stopped. The boy looked ahead, silent, and she could not tell if he was interested or just a pinhead.

‘A little school in the hills,’ she continued. ‘All of the teachers were English except me. The boys all from wealthy families; some little princes, the sons of Rajas. I was good at class discussions. We would talk about religion, and they would become very earnest and try to get to grips with things and ask a lot of questions. How did the world begin. Reincarnation. That sort of thing. The other teachers didn’t do this of course. English, as I said. An odd lot. All lesbians.’

He got up and she saw with surprise how small he was as he strode to the sofa. As he moved he tripped and raised his arms for balance and his coat flew out stiffly. He recovered and sat in the middle of the sofa, coat spread, legs crossed at the ankle. His dark jeans were roughened at the thighs and the cuffs and spattered finely with mud. A long brown smear of clay down one side.

She resumed. ‘After a concert or something like that at night that I had to walk the children down the hill in the dark to their dormitories. The boys were all terrified. Of the jungle, and other things.

‘One night I was in front with my big stick, beating our way down, singing to frighten off lurkers. We got to a place where you had to walk single file across a swing bridge which spanned a creek. The bridge was very short and not particularly high, but I always waited at the other side to watch all the boys come across, and I always counted them as they came off. This night there were seventeen instead of eighteen.

‘I went back across the bridge and up the path a little way, still using my stick and calling out. I heard sounds, a pitiful hoarse shouting, and crashing. I stopped and yelled, and the sounds died down to a kind of high gasping and rustling. It was hard to know what to do. I couldn’t see a thing in the direction it was coming from, it was dense black jungle. I made a lot of noise and flailed around at the bushes with my stick.’

She stopped again and looked at her grandson. He looked into the middle of the room; his eyes had turned the colour of methylated spirits.

‘I didn’t really know what I was doing, I just kept this up for a good while. Eventually I stopped and heard breathing quite close by. I called and there was no

answer. I pushed through the undergrowth and there up in a jackfruit tree was the boy, about eleven years old, a young nephew of one of the Rajas. He was very black, but I could make him out in the moonlight. His eyes were closed. He sat there on a big thick branch on his haunches. He would have looked quite peaceful if he didn't have dark wet blood shining all over one side of his head and his neck.

'I tried to get him to climb down but he was in a trance, docile as a sleeping chook. I had to climb up there and grab him and I managed to string him onto my back.'

She paused, thoughtful.

'The worst thing was that the other boys wouldn't speak to him after that. It was partly that he was so strange, he was in a trance for the rest of the night, and then after that he never spoke about it. The boys took this as a sign of something, and no-one spoke a word to him again. He sealed himself off from everyone, made himself self sufficient, carried around a spooky aura.'

She stopped and sat back again and clasped her hands on her lap. Her skin felt cool, the fingers boneless. She looked down. Her arms and hands were the same soft white she saw when she slid her knife inside cooked fish.

'Do you know what it was?' said the boy.

'A panther I expect.'

He smiled faintly. In his spreading coat he was flanked by the fleur-de-lis detail on the fabric of the sofa, glimmering soft gold on brown. She took in his face and tried to align its features with her memory. The freckles were familiar, but the very black hair, the thick, spiky eyelashes set against the pale skin were not. His small round eyes were now a dark blue and set in those stark dark lashes they gave him a watchful, feral look. The metal spikes spaced evenly beneath his lower lip lent him an alien quality in her living room, a horned insect. The spikes turned her stomach.

They sat a while more until she began to feel it was ridiculous.

'Penny for your thoughts?' she said.

He had been looking into the corner of the ceiling at a spider-web. He shifted his gaze.

'Yes. It's tempting to retrace our steps. But maybe it's for nothing in the end?'

'What?'

She looked away and frowned. Touched, she thought. He was so very smudged about the eyes, was it bruising or make-up? Perhaps he was gay?

There was another pause which she gave up on and left to sit. Eventually the boy said ‘And what happened to the boy? The Raja’s nephew?’

‘He toppled off a cliff a year later. I understood it. It wasn’t what some of the teachers thought. He wasn’t depressed because of the other boys. It was more like he was drawn to death. He had seen it and wanted to fall back there. It was like his first love affair. A compulsion.’

Having said this she felt extinguished. She looked around her living room at the shelves lined with books, many-coloured ribbons lining the room. To the boy she said, ‘I appreciate you coming. It was kind of you and it has made me very happy to see you.’

She paused and looked at him. ‘I suppose life isn’t very easy for you.’

She excused herself. He will sort himself out. It’s not for me to worry anymore. And what a story. Love affair, ha. Romantic idiot, I am. He spent a year alone, smug as a bug and then threw himself over a cliff.

Her bedroom was bathed in dusk, its colours like the memories of colours. She went to draw the curtains and looked out at the strange waiting landscape. She lay cocooned in the little white bed and as she drifted, the ordinariness of a life gathered momentum; fountain, bridge, house, fruit tree, window, known more intensely as things than before. In a powerful current, she could not move and was for a moment, satisfied. On the shadowy wall in front of her were the foaming grey detail, the swirling flaws and she thought; I must remember the trick of this. Night came and put its thin velvet arms around her.

She opened her eyes once more and the boy was standing shrouded in the doorway. His face stood out like pale stone, his lips and eyes were black and glossy. He was small against the door frame and she wondered vaguely if she had his age right. If she knew his age.

‘What happened after the Raja’s nephew fell?’

She thought back. ‘After a few months I came home and I finished my degree. I met your grandfather.’

She looked up at him in the doorway and said ‘You must do the same. Perhaps you are not doing a degree, whatever. Whatever you are doing, are in the middle of doing, you will finish off. And then you will start the next thing.’

And the boy looked down at her, shifted his weight and stretched his narrow shoulders ready to light off like an arrow up into the night. His tiny horns were black holes in his skin.

‘And you too,’ he said.

Friend in the Woods

Out beyond the end of the unsealed road at the north end of town there's a track winding up and over two ridges and up that track there used to be some abandoned wooden cabins, some kind of spiritual retreat in its day. I headed up there with my three-string one day, I had known them to be empty for a long time and I had hit on an idea of sitting on a porch and doing a little practice out to the valley.

I picked a likely one and got in the door and there he was inside, lying in the corner, looking over at me with his yellow old eyes. He was tucked up on a woven flax mat on the dirty floor, rolled in grey blankets.

The cabin was painted brown on the outside and rotted in many places. Inside there were big murals painted right onto the walls, faded scenes of orange orchards and ladies dancing, white flowers in their hair. It had just one room with wooden plank shelving, a small chair with hard straight arms, nothing else. He lay there on the floor, under the ladies with flowers in their hair, under the shelves.

He needed help, I could see that. I went out there every day and fed him and gave him water.

Sometimes I wasn't sure if my friend was very young, like a baby, or very old. He was creased and black, all black. I have never seen such a thin wizened thing. Loose greasy skin on his face, limbs, neck; all deeply creviced. His eyes were swollen and they looked out as if they had looked too far and were weary of looking. His look was as ancient as they come, and he was as helpless as a bubba.

One day in late autumn I went out there around ten in the morning and it was raining. Deep in the valleys under the canopy it was so still, all the leaves sleek and fresh green-wet, the wet earth smell. All silent, all around, except for the trees dripping.

The rain became finer the further up I climbed and then turned to mist hanging around along the ridges, draped across the valley in scarves and pockets. I got to the top and my head popped up out of the bush.

As I got there he was singing, I heard him as I came up past the midden. His voice was long on vowels and deep and musical, like a melancholy Belafonte, but not with words you know.

I stood outside and listened, and waited for him to finish. He came to the end of his song and stopped as if he knew I was there. I scraped my boots off on the step, went past the bucket by the door, stepped inside and hung my coat on the hook on the wall. He was propped up a little, a dark shoulder like a bat wing poked from the blankets. I went to him and picked him up in my arms and held him and his smell was like scorched earth, a dry, warm, bitter smell. He had been waiting for me and I put him down on his mats and fed him, bread and milk from a jar. He always ate slowly, as though tired. When he had eaten he stretched a little and looked about him with his yellow eyes and this is when he told me things, things I saw in my mind, like where he came from which is a place I can't recognize; hard and sparkling but bleached of all colour.

This day, the day I heard him singing, I carried him over to the window and we looked out. I showed him what the bush looked like when it had been raining. He was interested, his eyes reached far down the valley into the bush, so I held him there a while. Someone came over the ridge at the other side of the valley, a dark shirt, a cap low over his eyes. Then another; two figures, in single file. They disappeared again under the trees.

I put my friend back on his mat and I covered him with the grey blanket and it didn't look like anything was there. I slipped out the door and down the steps. I wished there was a lock on the door.

I went to the back of the house and slipped between the trees and crouched there, just a few feet back from the cabin clearing. I waited for a while, a lot longer than it would take someone to come up the next incline and reach the cabin. No-one came. I looked very carefully around and stepped over to the path and had a look along it and then crept back into the cabin. I thought my friend might be sleeping.

He was awake.

Wide awake he was when I lifted the blankets, and staring up at me unblinking. I washed him and gave him some water and then I left him. The woods were silent and holding their breath.

I walked back down the track that day full and overflowing with the image of how I had crept out and left my friend lying alone wrapped up inside the cabin. Everyone's got an old monkey on their back.

Later in the afternoon of the next day I went again. I went about my usual routine of cleaning and watering, feeding, sitting with him, and he didn't seem as hungry, so I shared some of the bread and milk with him. The day was fine and I had a clear view out of the window across to the other ridge. A cloud of birds swooped up from beyond it and flowed across the sky in a loose formation which straggled away at the tails. Over they came, above the cabin and a chill went through me, they seemed headed for us. I had a vision of them perched all over the cabin, on the sills and the roof and strutting about the porch. Gulls. Maybe headed for the coast. They were small and neat. They were odd in their displacement in the bush, and in their numbers.

My friend looked skyward at the ceiling and he seemed to nod.

The birds flew on and I picked up my friend. I packed him into my backpack and stuffed his blankets and mats around him so that he would not loll and flop around. We slipped from the cabin, closing the door after us and went back away down the path and then I branched off and headed on the thin trail to the south-west. All the time I was running through the different options in my mind.

We went along, him snug and warm at my back. I walked confidently and quickly. Night came on and I stopped.

In the dusk, I dragged together a shelter of branches in the hook of a tree bent close to the ground and in this pocket we huddled and soon we slept. In the night I dreamt that I was flying up high, circling and circling. Laid out below, the woods. A shaggy grey and twisted mat patched and dotted with dry brown, with spikey, lush balls. In the dream I looked for the clearing and the cabin but they weren't there.

The next day we moved on heading to the coast. The familiar parts of the wood were behind us now but I knew which was west and I followed it. As I walked other options came into my mind but none of them stuck.

As we slid underneath the pines creaked sweetly far over our heads. Brown needles covered the ground and here and there poked through a species of brilliant green moss. We stopped at night.

The next day the going was difficult. I woke very thirsty but there was little water left and I kept it for my friend. As I moved my shirt stuck to my chest and back and for a while I was glad of the slight cooling breeze, but after several hours my skin prickled with chill. The wide-spaced trunks all around were saw-toothed, knotted, like a thousand giant staffs rammed into the ground as markers. The track was uneven and sometimes curved in circles. Often I had to decide whether to follow it or to strike a more direct route.

We moved slowly lower and lower through the hills and eventually the woods thinned and we walked down a snaking open fence-line. We stopped for the last of the bread and as we sat quietly on the wet grass the ocean hissed in the distance.

I held the bread up to my friend's mouth but he wouldn't take it. His breathing was tense and shallow and held a thin whistle. Unwrapping him from his layers I felt his limbs. They were very cool and smooth. I gripped a foot in my hands and pushed my thumbs into the spare flesh, rubbed it briskly and thought I felt a little warmth return. Taking the other foot I did the same and noticed something different in the bone formation between right and left. I compared the different knobs and angles while my friend looked on. If either were painful he did not show it.

We continued through the afternoon. I expected to see the ocean over every rise, but there was always another stretch of grass or patch of bush edged with another rise at the far end. The sound of the ocean did not get louder and sometimes it disappeared. As night came again we were moving along a wide track, again through widely spaced pines and I began to wonder if we had circled back somehow when we passed a gate with a large iron padlock. A sign, red on white, said: KEEP OUT. HARVESTING IN PROGRESS. I walked on. A distance away on the other side of the fence we passed a man astride a four wheeled farm-bike, a brown dog at either side. Man and dogs looked

at me in the dusk with voodoo in their eyes. We passed from their sight and came upon an open hill.

I paused and listened to the silence, watched into the night and felt others watching too.

The side of the hill was rutted with splits and small crevices and these were spanned by short planks linked with fencing wire. Tired, heavy, I trod these tiny bridges and the long open scars in the hillside dropped away beneath us. I went on, my mind shut-in, fixed on finding cover. The moonlight shone brightly and I stepped with my eyes on own shadow before me. Once I glanced up and saw a small light in the distance ahead, down on the flat.

I stopped.

The light twitched with rhythmic movement. Then it went out. We were sluggish targets on the bare hillside and my heart began to tap quickly. It was difficult to tell how close or how distant the light had been. I leaned against the slope and waited and soon caught a glimpse of moving shapes, three or perhaps four, for a couple of seconds across an open patch of grass. I looked around and saw no immediate cover. Over the edge of the track I gauged a distance of six or seven feet to a ledge below.

I jumped. My feet smacked the ground and the pack jarred on my back and I was glad of the tightness with which I had bundled him inside. I pressed myself flat again to the hillside and inched my way back under the track until I got to a thin crevice, over the top of which ran the section of wooden walkway I had walked over a minute before. I swung the pack around and pressed my friend into the crack which he slotted into snug like a rock womb, and then I sealed him away from the outside with my body. We waited.

My blood pulsed in my ears. After a while we heard them treading lightly and quickly along the track toward us. My neck was twisted and through the corner of my eye I looked back. I saw the wide sky and wide moonlit valley beneath and felt as exposed as a black monkey clinging to the battlements of a white stone palace. As they tramped over, they ground the wooden slats down hard onto my skull. I waited for a hesitation in their step, for them to notice that the lump underneath had not been there before.

They passed on. When they had skirted the hillside I slipped out. The pack was lodged in the crack and I tugged gently at it, but as I tugged the stones rolled under my boots and I slid sideways. I let go of the pack and slid to a stop, grabbing at tufts of grass until I was steady. I reached again for the pack, but as my hand closed on the strap my feet shot out from under me and one hip crunched on the ground. As I slid, arms and legs scrabbling, the pack came tumbling past me and on down the hillside.

I slithered a short distance and stopped at the lip of a cliff. I sat up. The pack had disappeared. Smothering my hard breath, I waited, feeling it impossible that the walkers with the light would not return. I shook out the rubble lodged in my shirt and pants.

I peered over the cliff. The pack lay at the bottom in a bare bowl of rock, upside down in the moonlight. Nothing moved. I sat back and stretched my eyes up into the dark sky. It stared back and didn't blink. I sat like that a while and gently rocked. Clouds crept over the moon.

I walked again, stepping lightly under pines. I drifted on through the forest.

The soil beneath my boots turned to hard clay and a while later became sandy. I emerged, stumbling, on the other side of the pines, out into open dunes. The air was fresh and salted and the moon lit everything white. As I rose over each rise now I could hear the ocean roar growing. The grasses left fragile spiked shadows. I trudged, my feet sinking in sand, looking around me at the chalky glow everywhere.

When I looked up at the night my head spun and my vision careened around colliding with objects and bouncing off. The beach must be right there, beyond only the next rise or two, but I had to stop. I propped the backpack up gently and sank to the sand myself. With cool, soft sand sifting through my fingers I looked around. The treetops fringed the dunes behind. To the front and around were stretches and stretches of sand and clumped grass. Heaven was high and black, its many stars picked out brilliantly. I took mats from the backpack and lay them on the sand side by side. I moved slowly. We lay on slight incline, our heads angled up at the forest behind, our feet at the ocean.

I lay awake for a little while, picturing in my mind the waves rushing up to the shore, the white foam on the beach, wondering at the softness of the pale light on the sand, the constant high thrumming ocean sound, the expanse of air all around. When I

have helped my friend I thought, I will build a house here. I slept more peacefully than I ever did before. I don't say deeply, it wasn't a deep, heavy sleep. It was a light sleep in which I was aware all night of the soft open blackness above with its pin pricks of light and the silver sand stretching around me like great wings.

In the haze of morning I picked myself up slowly and quietly, not wanting to stir too many of the atoms in that place. I bundled my friend up again in his mats, taking care of his dry limbs, carefully folding them in next to his body. The dunes and the pampas had a pinkish glow as we set off once more.

Over the last dune the wind hit us as though it had been crouched there waiting. I loped down the dune face, extinguished by the cutting wind, by the roar of the surf.

Down on the flat, the beach and the white waves stretched for miles and miles. The pale early sun came from behind the dunes and slapped those waves with no hesitation, like it had waited all its life for that coming together.

There we were my friend and I, stood at the edge of the ocean with nothing but the seabirds for witnesses. I swung him down from my back and carefully slid him from the pack and he came out like a birthing. I looked at him there on the sand, as black and limp as a strip of seaweed.

I laid out the blanket and the mats and placed my friend inside for the last time. I curled his limbs up snug. There was a strong feeling in me to give him something. I had nothing but the empty water bottle, a grey old list and a key ring. Instead I unwound the scarf from around my neck. I folded it once and I lifted his head and placed it around his neck and crossed it at the front and there he lay like a poor Irish child at a wake with a holey old blue woolen waistcoat on.

Then I turned in the blanket so it was tight as a papoose. I cradled him and walked on down to the edge of the ocean. A few seabirds wheeled in the sky paying us no attention. A small wave lollopped up and I hung a hand in it as it swirled at my boots. I pressed my wet hand to my friend's face, smoothed the water over his dry skin so he shone. I walked out into the grey water, waded until the coarse satin waves ran over my head and I swam. At some point I had to let him go.

I have built my house. Not in those dunes, but somewhere with a similar feel, and I plunk my three-string in it and fumble and rummage around there in relative peace.

Sometimes at night I take a blanket outside and scrape a long hollow in the cool sand and sleep outside under the stars with my back to the house. I think about that time and I hope I went the extra mile.

Mr. Pinkerton, Online

I sat in Simon's conservatory and put his details on the form.

'Would you like to tell me about Mr. Pinkerton?'

'A class act. A real gentleman.'

I waited.

'A man of the world though too. Stern, very intelligent.'

'He speaks to you.'

'Yes.'

'In your head?'

'Yes.'

'He helps you out.'

'Yes.'

'How long have you heard him?'

'A long time. Years.'

It wasn't strictly my job to know all of this, but a bit of background helped. A sense of personality, relationships, life stage, were part of the method and helped me to explain it better to the client, so it was my habit to believe.

At home I combed my hair, something I do to procrastinate. The mirror showed me my lilac shirt, the opal hanging from a gold thread on my chest, my softly greying hair back combed high on top and hanging straight to my shoulders at the sides, a style I have kept since the eighties. I turned from the mirror and to business with a sigh. The software could do every kind of chart in seconds and some things which had never occurred to me. I thought of it as an idiot savant; able to do the calculations, but lacking depth of experience, incapable of interpretation. Smug and flippant. I gave the computer no attention and mapped the chart by hand, but little of the old geometric pleasure

surfaced. I pushed the setsquare off the edge of the desk and picked my teeth with the compass. In the chart, Mars in Pisces seemed the major affliction. Impractical, easily sidetracked, self-sacrificing, deceitful, self-delusional. His left hand didn't know what the right was doing.

I went to Simon's a second time. He stood in the doorway, one of those dark verandahed bungalows, mildewed white stucco all around. We circuited again through his living room. He was a big, stiff-walking man, always in baggy khaki shorts with large pockets, always wore his running shoes in the house. We edged around paper bouquets, blue and pink feathers, costume jewellery draped on plaster busts, their necks elongated in the Mannerist style, flamboyant coloured silks draping the walls, magazines stacked and yellowing everywhere. There wasn't a bare patch of surface. I glanced at Simon's table, on which amidst the clutter a number of shiny eggplants with the flat lustre of plastic sat in a large shallow bowl.

'I grew those,' said Simon, gesturing and looking intently at me.

'Very nice,' I said and looked hard at the eggplants as we squeezed past.

A small stone sculpture of two cats mating sat pushed by bowls and stacks and knickknacks up to the end of the sideboard. The cats were thin and stretched, both their backs arched in long hard curves. They craned their necks forward, straining as they copulated for a peep around the doorframe into the conservatory where we were to settle ourselves.

Inside the sunny conservatory, the glass surrounds, the sweet peas and clipped rounded edges of the garden outside and the tea waiting for us on the tray seemed to be a try for the ambience of an English cottage, but backed by the strange mess through the rest of the house it felt like we were fronting a puppet show which was destined to turn nasty. There was a harsh tang in the air which caught in my throat and coated it and I remembered this from last time and suspected that he sprayed the conservatory for flies before I came.

I took my glasses off to stand at the window and admire the peas and hydrangeas. I had barely sat down when he began to tell me one of his dreams.

‘I was standing, cuffed in irons at a big bonfire. Like this.’ He showed me, his arms hanging low in front, the wrists pressed together, his legs apart, knees slightly bent as though straddling something.

‘They were making me watch, and someone was getting burnt at the stake. I couldn’t see the burning figure, it was dark and smoky, I didn’t want to look but I knew. Something came flying at me and it landed at my feet. It was a burnt hand.’

‘How awful,’ I murmured.

‘Awful, but exhilarating.’

There was a pause.

‘What’s it mean?’ he asked.

I knew it. Why ask me? My brain felt detached but I made a stab. ‘The person at the stake,’ I said. ‘Who was it?’

‘It was my mother.’

‘And?’

‘She looked at me through the smoke. Very judgmental. She wanted to humiliate me.’ He looked at me and held his palms up and shrugged.

‘By being burned alive?’

‘Yes, by making me watch, and tossing the hand.’

I looked at him. ‘I think we are beginning to get away from what I’m here for,’ I said. ‘I’ll show you your natal aspects,’ and we worked on this for a while.

I didn’t see him for two or three weeks and plodded on with other clients.

‘You’re lucky to have such an interesting profession, such access to insights,’ a young music student told me. I used to think so. My early days had been the best. I loved the merging of science and art, the clean precision of the segmented circle overlaid with the unique spatter of symbols, the calculation of angles and the conglomeration of data, the painstaking drawing out of meaning, slippery as mercury. The heroic struggles, the pretences, the obsessions, drawn together in such intricate blueprints they would take lifetimes to comprehend, all there was to be done was to pick special sections of the pattern to examine, and to admire the prettiness of the whole. But I had my dark spells even then. It could feel voyeuristic, lacking integrity. I berated myself for being afraid to live, for studying lives instead.

And then, one day I was sitting in my own study with a man who had just lost his wife, lost her in Rome, on holiday. She had disappeared along with most of their joint account. He was injured, he was bloodthirsty, he doubted that she could stand up to life without him, he wanted to know that he had a change of luck in the wings, that he deserved more. He was a philanderer, a liar, conceited, self-serving. I listened for more than an hour and all the beauty and the fascinating flaws drained away and what was left was the boundless need for self affirmation, the self-preoccupation of people. It's harmful, corrosive to the judgment to be permitted to talk on and on about yourself, to have someone uphold your belief that you are good and interesting, that your personal behaviour is beside the point. Countless times I'd tried to explain: Fate is not written. Patterns can be identified; do with them what you can, what you will.

Simon phoned again and asked me to come.

At the door he gave a wry smile. I said hello and he switched from foot to foot and said 'Yes,' and did his funny open-handed shrug. He stepped aside for me to come in and we did a little shuffling dance, both of us colossal and pressed against the walls in the entrance-hall until he took the lead through to the conservatory. He had taken to scraping the top layers of his hair back with a tiny black elastic band, like Gandalf. I had begun to find his affectations tiresome. I looked at his clothing, his hair, his home and tried to put them together.

At the third session when I sat down he told me he'd stopped going to church.

'Why?' I asked.

'The priest made me nervous.'

I looked at him with raised eyebrows.

'I was in love with him. Not now, in a past life.'

There was a silence.

'Do you want to record this session?' I said.

He hesitated. I looked up from his file. 'Some people like to be able to play it over again later. They get more out of it.'

'I'd rather just take notes,' he said and rushed away to get some paper.

We began again with the natal aspects and then moved on to the current transits. He was having a difficult time with his Mercury. In the birth-chart it was conjunct

Jupiter: Expansion of the mind, optimism and openness to new ideas. But then also, tendency to extreme views, poor judgment, exaggeration.

‘Now,’ I said, ‘at the moment Mercury is in opposition to your Uranus. You’ll be having some difficulty focusing clearly. There may some eccentric behavior and nervous tension.’ Simon scribbled furiously on his sheet of paper.

‘Mercury,’ I said. ‘Is communication and enlightenment, the winged messenger. When it’s...’

‘I don’t like to admit it,’ he interrupted, ‘but Mr. Pinkerton knows me better than I know myself. If I listen.’

I sat back. ‘You know he’s not real,’ I said. ‘You hear him in your head. You’re making him up.’

‘He’s very real. He’s there.’ There was a pause.

‘He’s very sharp, very sharp,’ his eyes were bright and watery. ‘Oh he’s very stern with me. He tells me all sorts, I won’t say what he tells me these days,’ he said, drawing circles with his finger in the wet tea rings on the table. I was not sure what this meant. He began to gather the charts and notes and tapped the edges on the table, smiling hang-dog at me. I looked at his lonely eyes, at the twin hard faces of the stone cats straining over his shoulder and the flowers coated in dust beyond them in the gloom and felt a little shift of heart, a desire to help.

‘Why do you need me then Simon, if you have Mr. Pinkerton?’

‘You said yourself; it’s all interpretation. Like suddenly noticing you’re inside a prism. If you bother to look at all the reflections, you’ll see the many and the one.

‘I was walking in the street yesterday and thinking about a problem of mine, a little habit. This time Mr. Pinkerton said: ‘What would Yvonne say?’ I saw your face and I knew what you would say: Play to your strengths. Venus and Sun Sagittarius.’

He’s been listening, I thought.

The next time, Simon said: ‘My daughter came for lunch yesterday.’

I had not heard of a daughter before and was fleetingly suspicious. ‘How was she?’

‘She told me she’s having an affair. With her tutor at polytech.’

‘Oh.’

‘It was a shock.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I told her the story of why I left the church.’

‘Everything?’

‘Yes. I was trying to tell her I understand what it’s like to be irrationally compelled toward action, to be overcome.’

‘Oh, right,’ I said, thinking: Same old justifications, new clothing.

‘I told her about my Mars. In Pisces. I told her that at the times when our feelings are at their strongest we are the most vulnerable to deceiving ourselves.’

‘Good advice,’ I said, and we both grinned.

The next day an urgent knocking at the door got me out of my bath.

‘What are you telling him?’ a young woman on the step demanded.

I blinked and dripped on the mat and tried to keep the towel from gaping.

‘Simon’s daughter?’

‘Leave him alone, will you. Look, he’s got enough problems without putting past lives and crap into his head.’

‘I’ve not filled his head with any crap.’

The girl hesitated and then stuck her neck out toward me, her lipstick red and thick and shining. ‘I’m telling ya, leave him alone. It’s all crap, what you do’ She waved her head from side to side a bit on the outstretched neck. She appeared to want to add something further but seemed at a loss. I looked at her T-shirt and cream cardigan and thought of Simon and the priest and wondered if her objection was religious.

‘How did you get in?’ I said, stepping back.

This seemed to infuriate her. ‘Look,’ she said. Her neck snapped back and her shoulders rose, but she remained inarticulate.

‘You look. I provide a professional service, I don’t advise people on past lives. And your Dad can make up his own mind about what’s crap and what’s not.’

‘You think?’ she said. She gave a great eye-rolling sneer, her disdain so forceful it screwed up one whole side of her face and tipped her head back, and then she spun and stalked back off toward the gates.

I emailed Simon. *Your daughter's been to see me. She appears to be concerned about your state of mind and thinks we should stop your sessions. I suppose she wants what's best for you.* I chose Holst on my Ipod and used its thunder to power myself around the community for three quarters of an hour. It began raining and I kept walking, a little appeased by the drama of the Holst and my soaking wet clothes and the slippery, noir look of the mini-streets.

Simon sent a reply that evening. *I have no intention of listening to what my daughter says. She is not a well person. Can I come and see you tomorrow evening at 7?*

I went to the metal file cabinet and pulled out his birth-chart and progressions and transits. I think I may have rubbed my hands. I took '*Planets and Identities*' and '*Astrology, Karma and Transformation*' from the bookcase and sat and made notes on his file.

At seven the next night I looked from the window and saw him at the gates, punching in the code. The gates swung inward and his blue four-wheel drive rolled across the threshold and around to the visitor's parking spaces. I opened the door to him and saw his small blue eyes like points in his head, a theatrical, smoldering look, a large plastic bag bursting with eggplants.

We sat in my flat between my oatmeal walls and sand furnishings. He fidgeted and got up to look through the ranch slider out over the tiny verandah and the other flats to the patch of green and black bush beyond. He turned and faced me and smiled, shifting from foot to foot.

'Look,' he said. 'I got a tattoo.'

He lumbered to the sofa, sat, turned and pulled up his shirt.

'Sagittarius,' he said.

On the soft pale skin of his left kidney area was a centaur, the horse-half muscle-bound with huge shiny hooves. The human half was outlined thickly as if covered with fuzz, the face looked up and out at the distance with little dot eyes under a beetled brow, the bow hung impotently at his side. It looked as unlike Sagittarius as you could get. Not free, not fierce, not open-hearted. Like the paradox of the craft; always this but tempered by that; at heart one thing, but shadowed, blunted, by every other thing.

He leaned forward and kissed me. It was like a door swept open melodramatically and I stepped through out of politeness. His lips were too small and soft and his teeth were crooked. I collected myself and pushed him off and smoothed my skirt. We sat too close, at odd angles, looking at the new tan carpet.

He said 'I have not got my head around this yet.'

I shut the door on him. I picked up his file from the table and flicked through it. I flung it and paper fanned from the folder and slipped slowly from the sofa to the carpet. I felt soft and tired, my face seemed to drip toward the floor as I stooped to gather up the file. A sheet of scribble in strange handwriting caught my eye, and I recognised it as the notes he had taken in the conservatory weeks ago. Some scrawled lines on an upward slope about hope, beauty, truth flowering and maternal authority were underlined. I had not said these things. I put the sheet aside and sat on the floor and collected the rest of the file together. Perhaps I would post the notes. I glanced at the sheet again. The reverse side was printed off a webpage, just a blank sheet, with the date and address at the bottom, www.pbdsbn.com, a little circle around it, in pen. I recalled Simon tidying up the paperwork that day, tapping the edges together in a tight tidy sheaf, his urgent stare.

I had a desire to call my sister in Canada and spent a few stupid minutes trying to work out the time there. I sat on the edge of the sofa and heard the phone ring and ring and thought of the signal bouncing around the world, circling it over and over with each ring, each failure to connect with its receiver.

Pbdsbn: Princess by day, Slut by night. The site advertised: *BDSM friends and services*.

My name is Cherie. I am a dominatrix. I'm the owner of Harold, but Harold is free to find another owner, I read. I stared at the creamy wall above the computer and then lowered my eyes and read on. The site was labyrinthine, red and black with a hint of chrome. Banal, obsessive caterwauling jangled and clamoured off its walls. Insistent children: I'm here, I'm special let me explain, do you like me? Have you ever met such a case as me?

Too far, I thought. My mouth puckered. Shakily I shut the computer down and sat for a minute, looking at my moon-face hovering in the ranch-slider. It sat slap in the

middle of a hazy constellation which swept from the top right corner of the window to the bottom left. I went out into the dark on the balcony. I could make out the pink fuzz of Jupiter, surrounded by other tiny white freckles all across the blackness. The freckles crept away from one another and the space between became blacker and blacker. I went back inside and switched the computer on again.

‘I’m sorry I can’t help you anymore.’ I held the phone loosely and closed my eyes, making only a floating, tenuous connection with him there at the other end, in whichever universe he was.

‘I wanted you to see. I want you to see, if you are going to help me.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m no help to you.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘No, I can see that.’

No. I smiled sadly. People are discombobulating. I really have no idea in the world of what they want.

The websites are expanding and contracting galaxies and the galaxies contain all the dazzling lies and lines of the self. The inhabitants fight for liberty, for beauty and absurdity, as folk cannot live without these. The princesses and sluts shimmy and jostle up and down and Mr. Pinkerton has joined them on their promenade and he knows that the nasty taste it leaves in his mouth is only due to the failure of life to live up to the majestic proportions of a work of art.

He helps them now. Knowledge and self-knowledge are an illusion as he knows well, but he is up for the discussion. And some of his advice may be quite sound. Pictures of him have gone up on the websites. He looks a lot like Drake Carrington from *Dynasty*, remember him?