

**Avoiding the Archetype:
Reading and Writing the Female Artist
Book 1**

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Declaration

I declare that:

- except where due acknowledgement has been made, this is my work alone;
- the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for another academic award;
- the content of this exegesis and creative project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of this research program;
- any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged;
- ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Signed

Philippa Garrard

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Abstract

This exegesis takes Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) and Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978) as case studies within a critique of the structuralist view of the male artist's novel (Kunstlerroman¹) and more recent structuralist readings of the female artist's novel (Kunstlerinroman²). It discusses Maurice Beebe's and Linda Huf's critical writings about fictional artist-portrayals and investigates the ways in which the post-modernist and feminist case studies conform with and challenge these theories. It argues that, by stereotyping the personality and largely the experience of the artist, the possibilities for individualized motive and character, as well as the opportunity for deeper interpretation of the text, are denied. As Roland Barthes famously asserts: 'To give a text an Author is to impose limits on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.'³

In examining the two case studies, this exegesis aims to dispel the myth that there can be one archetypal artist story. Through discussions relating to identity, gender and structure, this exegesis reveals that *Cat's Eye* and *Tirra Lirra* borrow from tradition before 'decentering' the genre. This is achieved through a circular treatment of time and a multi-layered thematic landscape presented through the prism of memory and identity. Where structuralist theory presents the artist protagonist as striving to conform to an image predetermined by cultural notions and literary conventions, my case studies insist that, above the artworks produced by the protagonists, the reinterpretation and retelling of their own life stories is a creative triumph for each.

¹The root of this German word, 'Kunstler' translates as artist in English. Kunstlerroman is the name given to a novel which focuses predominantly on the creative development of its protagonist as an artist in some discipline, be it painter, writer or creator of some other kind. The Kunstlerroman is a sub-genre under the larger umbrella of Bildungsroman, a novel that traces its protagonist's (most often a young man) development in relation to education or apprenticeship.

² This exegesis will rely on the understanding that the Kunstlerinroman is a genre deserving of a field of criticism all of its own. I am in agreement with Derrida's statement: 'Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.' (Derrida, J. (1980) "The Law of Genre", *Diacritics* 7.1, p65)

³ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", *Image, Music, Text*, (William Collins & Sons Ltd: Glasgow, 1977), 147.

Introduction

'...meaning in a text is always illusive, dynamic and transitory.' – Derrida⁴

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* was shortlisted for the Canadian Governor General's Award in 1988 and Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* won the Australian Miles Franklin Award in 1978. Both novels are thematically rich, exploring issues relating to identity, feminism, memory and the experience of being an artist, or more specifically, a female artist. They are both many-layered, heterogenous texts concerned first and foremost with the intricacies, complexities and variables that make up the human subject.

A structural analysis of the novels reveals a circular treatment of time, whereby the linear conception of narrative associated with the *kunstlerroman* genre is abandoned. This circularity opens further possibilities for reinterpretation of experience, which in turn, grants the protagonists 'the right to evolve change and learn from their mistakes.'⁵ In this way any notion of a coherent self is rendered impossible.

This exegesis does not aim to provide a comprehensive study of the female artist's novel. Instead it questions the restrictions of the genre suggested by structuralist writings and finds the idea of an archetypal artist figure inaccurate within the context of a postmodern feminist novel. Moreover these novels question the extent to which identity can be reduced to the role presented by the theories of Beebe and Huf. It will discuss the ways in which the case studies reject the idea of an archetype determining who and how an artist should be. In doing away with a linear narrative, they introduce a circularity that allows the protagonists to revisit and reinterpret their experience of life, in turn bringing attention to the role of representation and interpretation within memory.

The works of Beebe and Huf have been chosen as key texts for several reasons. Firstly, they are both book-length critiques on the artist's novel which claim to provide comprehensive analysis and reach conclusions about the genre as a whole. Secondly, the two books, written twenty years apart, one covering the male artist's novel and the other the female, create an interesting dialogue which provides an opportunity to understand the evolution of the genre. While several more contemporary theorists are called upon within my discussion of the novels, these two

⁴ Derrida, J, "The Law of Genre", *Diacritics* 7.1. (1980), p65

⁵ Debbie Wesley, "A new way of looking at an old story: Lee Smith's portrait of female creativity." *The Southern Literary Journal*, 30, no.1 (1997), 88.

works provide a sound basis from which to begin discussing the *kunstlerroman*. Through discussion and analysis of key theoretical works and the case studies, this exegesis will also attempt to answer the following key research questions:

1. In what ways do the case studies reject the idea of one archetypal artist figure?
2. In what ways do my case studies ‘decenter’ the traditional *kunstlerroman*?
3. How relevant are the traditional conventions of the artist’s novel to a contemporary *kunstlerroman* like my own novel, *A Small Flame*?

The final chapter of this exegesis will include a discussion of my creative project, a literary novel titled *A Small Flame*. Like *Cat’s Eye* and *Tirra Lirra*, my novel is the story of a female artist who relies on revisitations of her past in order to move forwards. As two halves of my submission, there is a direct correlation between the exegesis and the novel in the hope that one will shed light on the other.

I will begin with a brief literature review of the defining theoretical works of Maurice Beebe and Linda Huf. Beebe opens his 1964 text *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts - The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce* by explaining that his study is not only an exercise of literary criticism but also a study of the artistic temperament, the creative process and the relationship of artist to society. By identifying the similarities and common concerns in a series of *kunstlerromane*, Beebe suggests that we can learn about the artist figure in a general sense, in the belief that most *kunstlerromane* are autobiographies of their creators.

Beebe’s primary argument is that *kunstlerromane*, despite aiming for originality, are all overwhelmingly similar. The artist hero, argues Beebe, is an easily identified type; he⁶ is ‘always’ self-centred, sensitive, introverted and expert at distracting himself from reality. Beebe goes on to say that ‘Although the artist figure claims individuality in that he is different from the majority of men, his quest for his true self usually ends in the discovery that he is very much like other artists, that in fact he embodies the archetype of the artist.’⁷ In the words of Dr Evy Varsamopoulou of the University of Cyprus, Beebe ‘gives credence to a metaphysical category of the artist as a certain type of human being, set apart from the mundane lot by virtue of a

⁶ This ‘he’ is used when discussing Beebe’s book because he writes only of the male artist protagonist.

⁷ Maurice Beebe, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts - The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce* (New York University Press: New York, 1964), 6.

creative, semi-divine essence.⁸ Beebe establishes Joyce's Stephen Dedalus (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) as the archetypal artist figure whose character and temperament reappeared in varying forms in 'all portrait of the artist novels' since its publication in 1916. Dedalus 'flies the nets of nationality, religion, language, defiantly abandoning country, church, friends and family in an effort to attain the godlike purity and freedom he thinks is the artist's right.'⁹

Beebe identifies a pattern in the novels as a group, before reaching conclusions about the genre of the *kunstlerroman*. This pattern utilises three interlocking archetypes: the Divided Self (man versus art), the Ivory Tower (art as religion) and the Sacred Fount (art as experience).¹⁰ These themes, according to Beebe, appear so frequently that they take on the nature of myths telling universal truths, which, when studied as a group, enable theorists to develop an understanding of the artist in general.¹¹ In short, a typical artist protagonist, as a Divided Self, will waver between the Ivory Tower and Sacred Fount, and these traditions are discussed in more detail below.

Beebe identifies in the *kunstlerroman* an underlying assumption that creative man is a divided being: man and artist. The man is a being for whom 'life is simply the process of dying' while the artist is a 'free, detached spirit' who is not so concerned with the 'consumption of life' as with the 'transcendence of life through creative effort.'¹² 'Every creative person is a duality or a synthesis of contradictory attitudes. On one side he is a human being with a personal life, while on the other side he is an impersonal, creative process...The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends but one who allows art to realise its purposes through him.'¹³ In this way the artist is saved from mortality; where the man must disappear in time, the spirit can live on through artwork. The theme of the Divided Self emerges, claims Beebe, for the simple reason that the writer is aware of this division within himself and the artist-protagonist is almost always introverted because writing a *kunstlerroman* is so often an act of introspection on behalf of the author and Beebe assumes the protagonist and author are collapsible. He calls upon Thoreau to

⁸ Evy Varsamopoulou, *The Poetics of the Kunstlerroman and the Aesthetics of the Sublime*, (Ashgate Publishing Ltd: England, 2002). xvii

⁹ L.T. Lemon, *Portraits of the Artist in Contemporary Fiction* (University of Nebraska Press: USA, 1985), 53.

¹⁰ Beebe, *Ivory Towers*, 5.

¹¹ Beebe notes that James Joyce's novel is titled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, not *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and this distinction is important. The title suggests a universal story as well as that of an individual.

¹² Beebe, *Ivory Towers*, 5

¹³ Carl Jung, (trans W.S. Dell & Cary F Barnes) *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company: London, 1945), 194-195

illustrate his notion of the Divided Self and its basis in the nature of the introverted personality:

I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you.¹⁴

Beebe also suggests the idea of a divided self has a basis in the creative process, the subconscious force that overtakes the rational mind during inspired artistic production. He outlines a number of technical devices used frequently by authors which indicate the presence of the divided self motif. They include the use of the 'double' or 'doppelganger' figure and the theme of time and eternity.

Emerging in the Romantic period of the early nineteenth century, the Sacred Fount tradition equates art with experience. This type of artist revels in humanity. Many novels written in this vein assume the artist experiences life more deeply and at a greater intensity than others due to the fact that he has a greater awareness of the world around him. This often leads to the artist being outcast from a more conservative and mild-mannered society, but when this does occur he escapes to the mountains or the ocean where he can allow nature to rejuvenate him before returning to the world of men. He depends on nature and his fellowmen for his artistic needs. This type of artist-hero is also known as the 'Byronic' artist and credit for his conception and emergence can be given to Lord Byron who became a model for the public's notion of the poet. Due to his being renowned as a lover and man of action as well as a poet, Byron did much to establish the notion of 'poet-as-rebel' in fiction.

The metaphor of the Ivory Tower as the artist's private retreat was in use by the mid-nineteenth century, although it is not known where the term originated. The Ivory Tower tradition aligns art with religion, exalting art above life and insisting that the artist stand aloof. 'Life is replaced by art, and art becomes a sacred ritual.'¹⁵ The artist rejects the need for social engagement and denies his own humanity, wishing for release from human appetites. These protagonists are often larger than life, and see themselves as tragically alone and misunderstood by a lesser society. The theory

¹⁴Henry Thoreau, cited by Beebe, *Ivory Towers*, 7

¹⁵ Beebe, *Ivory Towers*, 114.

has its roots in what Beebe calls a secondary romanticism that counterbalanced the more dominant social romanticism of the nineteenth century which saw life as a fertile source of art, as in the Sacred Fount tradition.¹⁶ This secondary romanticism was more spiritual, suggesting that there is no barrier between earth and heaven, that all things outward exist within oneself. These new ideas came about largely because of an interest in mysticism and occultism, as artists and thinkers turned to otherworldliness for inspiration when disappointed by the inadequacies of reality.

In much the same way as Beebe lists a set of characteristics displayed by the male artist hero, Linda Huf attributes a set of traits to his female counterparts in her text *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman - The Writer as Heroine in American Literature* (1983). Published almost twenty years after Beebe's work, Huf's book explores six key kunstlerinromane from Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1855) to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). Huf makes some surprising claims on the basis of her research. Female artists, she writes, tend to be 'stalwart, spirited, and fearless', 'athletic in build, skilled in sports, unshrinking in fights, able in mathematics, plucky in love, and daring in their sexual adventures.'¹⁷ Where Beebe assigns the role of archetype to James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Huf states that Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* offers an archetypal female artist in Thea Kronborg. Huf lists two key thematic differences between the male and the female artist novel. Firstly, the female artist will need to make a choice between procreativity and creativity, whereas for the male artist a similar conflict will arise between sexual activity and abstinence or isolation. Secondly, the female artist's relations to other people are complex; she finds both men and other women actively discourage her artistic activity, while the male artist is provided with male supporters and female muses. In her attempts to cover ground ignored by Beebe, Huf manages to pigeonhole the genre of the kunstlerinroman almost as thoroughly and simplistically as Beebe has the kunstlerroman in *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts*. Like Beebe, she assumes that these artist protagonists 'as self portraits of their creators, are invariably surrogate authors.'¹⁸ She writes, 'Unlike men, women have rarely written artist novels; that is autobiographical novels depicting their struggles to become creative artists.'¹⁹ She notes that Jane Austen, the Brontes, Virginia Woolf and other significant female writers of the early-to-mid-1900s never wrote a portrait-of-the-artist novel. This fact

¹⁶ Beebe, *Ivory Towers*, 114-115.

¹⁷ Linda Huf, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman - The Writer as Heroine in American Literature*, (Frederick Ungar Publishing: New York, 1983), 4.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 1.

is attributed to the common perception that the female artist was driven by selfishness. The perception of women's artistic practice as selfish, narcissistic public display is one of Huf's core arguments. The guilt felt by the female artist at her own self-indulgent activity informs her experience.

Huf's book opens with a chapter titled *Selfishness Underlying All*. The ensuing discussion centres on the inadequacy of Beebe's text when applied to female artist novels (künstlerinromane). In addition to the two main thematic differences, she lists a series of essential dissimilarities between the male and female artist novel. According to Huf, the most significant way in which the female artist novel differs from the male is the fundamental difference in character between the artist hero and heroine. The female artist protagonist, claims Huf, tends to be 'stalwart, spirited, and fearless or, to have traditionally 'masculine' attributes such as athletic and mathematical skill. She is daring in her sexual adventures and inevitably faces some sort of conflict in regards to her art. (Huf4) Where Stephen Dedalus is a 'shrinking hero', Willa Cather's Thea Kronberg (*The Song of the Lark*, 1915)²⁰ is ambitious and courageous, with a 'defiant brow and a rugged will'.²¹

The second major difference is the protagonist's ruling conflict. The artist heroine is plagued by the art-versus-life dilemma just as the artist hero is, but her conflict relates more specifically to her feminine role as selfless caregiver versus an artist's commitment to creative pursuits. She must choose between 'her sexuality and her profession, between her womanhood and her work.'²²

Thirdly, the artist heroine is always pitted against a 'sexually conventional foil. This frivolous friend or enemy, who embodies excessive devotion to the female role, serves to make the aspiring artist look, not unwomanly, but heroic by contrast.'²³ This woman is most often blonde beside the seriousness of the heroine's darker hair, such as Doreen, the 'drugstore blonde' who befriends *The Bell Jar's* Esther Greenwood. The foil lives the expected life of subservience, and in cases where she herself is an artist, she is inferior to the artist heroine, flippant about her craft, as with Lily Fisher whose singing is flashy and cheaply sentimental compared with the finely-tuned voice of Thea Kronberg in *The Song of the Lark*.

²⁰ This artist novel was published in the same year as Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Huf uses the work as one of her main case studies and Beebe refers to it briefly in his discussion of the Divided Self motif which is looked at further in this introduction. (Interestingly, Beebe fails to mention that Thea Kronberg is anything but sensitive and introverted, as he suggests all artist-heroes should be.)

²¹ Huf, *The Writer as Heroine*, 5.

²² *ibid.*, 5.

²³ *ibid.*, 7.

The fourth difference between male and female artist figures, as observed by Huf, is the absence of a muse. Where the male artist goes to Woman in order to create, the female artist does not idealise men in the same way, and for the most part, the men in her life serve only to inhibit her development.

The fifth and final characteristic of difference is its radicalism. The artist heroine must fight against the 'man-forged manacles on her sex'²⁴ and is thus a true rebel, troublemaker. The artist hero fights against the 'bourgeois and philistine'²⁵ the artist heroine must challenge even those she loves and who love her. Indeed, she discovers she is even up against her own fear, self-doubt and guilt. Huf concludes that there is barely a *kunstlerinroman* to be found in which the heroine is not plagued by guilt about practising her craft.

These generalisations are reasonable when grounded in the romantic and modernist texts that form the basis of their study.²⁶ Where their analysis over-reaches is in the assumptions they make of the artist figure in relation to the actual author and their claims to have uncovered universal truths. Beebe's and Huf's hypothesis that all *kunstlerromane* are autobiographies of their creators leaves itself vulnerable to more recent post-structuralist criticism by reader-response theorists such as Roland Barthes who states that 'Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.'²⁷ Thus, according to Barthes, the search for authorial intention and a single concrete meaning of a text is futile. The meaning of a text is not circumscribed by the text alone but created also in the act of reading. To presume to be able to interpret the authorial intention from the text itself is fraught and to assume that the meaning of a text can be reduced to one reading is problematic. Jacques Derrida asserted that one interpretation cannot declare itself 'to be right and another wrong, for meaning in a text is always illusive, dynamic and transitory.'²⁸ Atwood herself promotes this view, stating that: 'Nobody can claim to have the absolute, whole, objective, total complete truth. The truth is composite, and that is a cheering thought. It mitigates tendencies towards autocracy.'²⁹

²⁴ Huf, *The Writer as Heroine*, 10.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 10.

²⁶ Beebe's study includes the work of James Joyce, Henry James and Marcel Proust, while Huf's book critiques the works of Willa Cather, Sylvia Plath and Fanny Fern among others.

²⁷ Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, 142.

²⁸ C.E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: an introduction to theory and practice* (Pearson Education Inc.: New Jersey, 2003), 126.

²⁹ Margaret Atwood cited in: Jan G. Castro, "An Interview with Margaret Atwood: 20 April 1983", *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, edited by Kathryn van Spanckeren. (Southern Illinois UP: Carbondale, 1988), 298.

Both *Cat's Eye* and *Tirra Lirra by the River* clearly resist such readings and support post-modernist modes of interpretation in the extent to which they undermine traditional notions of representing a clear, single coherent self both through the representation of the protagonists and the narrative structure. Just as Derrida claims that there can never be one 'correct' interpretation of a text, *Cat's Eye's* protagonist, Elaine Risley comments that 'there is never only one, of anyone,'³⁰ and this concept is reinforced throughout the work on several levels. Elaine is portrayed as a complex fusion of various elements, not a stable, unified narrator, but one whose conscious and subconscious are continually overpowering each other in turn and whose memory is perpetually invading her present experience.

Similarly, Nora Porteous (*Tirra Lirra*) is an 'unreliable narrator', persistently providing us with memories of people, places and situations that may or may not be accurate. While this novel does hold out the possibility of some coherent self, the potential of this self being discovered by the reader is denied. The struggle for Nora is not to be an artist per se; rather the struggle, the greater work is in the holding together of her life through memory.

The structure of these two novels seems to set the genre slightly askew, as Dr Elaine Barry observes: 'The narrative of an old person remembering and re-ordering the experiences of a lifetime is ... the reverse of the *bildungsroman*³¹ which recounts a young person's growth to maturity.'³²

These feminist novels have protagonists who refuse the roles society attempts to constrain them to, suggesting that all notions of a fixed identity are problematic within a feminist critique of society. Atwood's protagonist consistently resists all attempts to limit her identity. For Elaine, this pressure to conform begins at a young age when she moves to suburban Toronto after leading a gypsy-like existence with her family for much of her life. Elaine is immediately identified as being 'different' and her peers punish her by tormenting her in ways that ultimately determine the kind of adult she becomes. In this way, *Cat's Eye* also challenges the Romantic concept that an artist is born with 'innate' qualities characterising him or her from birth and rendering him or her immune to change over time. Where Beebe and Huf draw a picture of the artist and his or her standard characteristics and temperament, Atwood presents a protagonist whose life journey is shaped by the collapse of past and present and a complex psychological retreat. In this way any attempt to slot her into a predetermined mould is futile. Similarly, Nora Porteous of *Tirra Lirra*

³⁰Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (Virago: Great Britain, 1990), 6.

³¹ Here, please note that the *kunstler(in)roman* sits under the larger umbrella of 'bildungsroman'.

³² Elaine Barry, 'Tirra Lirra by the River: "The truthful fictions of our lives"', *Fabricating the Self – The Fictions of Jessica Anderson*. (University of Queensland Press; St Lucia, 1996), 70.

presents herself differently to different people and reinvents herself throughout the novel, according to her location, occupation and company. My case studies explore the limitations of a self wholly identified within one role.

Elaine Barry writes of *Tirra Lirra* that it is “about’ many things, as any person’s experience generally is.’³³ The same can be said for *Cat’s Eye*. The experience of being an artist is just one of the novel’s concerns, and to analyse the works through the narrow telescope of existing generic conventions would be to overlook much of what the books are concerned with, as well as overlook the subtle critique of the masculine artist archetype that is implied in their approach.

³³ *ibid.*, 69.

Chapter 1

Dreaming of the blue flower

A question of identity

1.1 Beginnings

This chapter will discuss Elaine and Nora in relation to the idea of artistic identity, and the complex web of influences which contribute to, and inhibit, its development. Through close reading of the novels, it will argue that the concept of an archetypal artistic identity is not plausible when applied to a postmodern feminist novel. It will explore the ways in which the protagonists resist categorisation through an identity that changes and evolves. Firstly I will provide a brief overview of the beginnings of the *kunstlerroman* genre and the development of the artist protagonist in fiction, starting with Goethe in 1774.

It was Goethe who initiated the trend of artist protagonists in fiction and Beebe gives a detailed account of Goethe's use of artists in the opening chapters of his study. He writes that Goethe's novels and dramatic works concern themselves largely with the conflict between art and life, and in this way, introduce and address the main technical problem of the genre: the challenge of expressing in external terms a conflict existing within the artist protagonist.

When the novella *The Sorrows of Young Werther* emerged in 1774, its success propelled Goethe into literary fame. The work helped to establish the qualities which were to become expected in an artist-hero. Interestingly, Werther actually fails as an artist; a painter who loses sight of his artistic aspirations in the light of romantic ones and suicides when Lotte, the object of his affections, cannot return his love. Werther lacks the ability to balance the external world with his personal ego in a manifestation of the art versus life dilemma.³⁴

Where Werther did much to establish the artistic type, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* (1795) was more instrumental in defining the *kunstlerroman* genre. Despite Meister being, like Werther, a failed artist, he did much to 'establish the nature of the *true* artist by showing what he is not.'³⁵ Wilhelm becomes interested in art as a way of rejecting his family's materialistic way of life and also because his grandfather had been an art-collector. As it turns out, he never surpasses the level of amateur in his artistic pursuits of poetry and acting. This is not a problem according to Beebe, who writes that success or even artistic production are not

³⁴ Beebe, *Ivory Towers*, 31.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 33.

requirements of the protagonist of a *kunstlerroman*. Indeed, he claims that most artist-protagonists are only potential artists and some aren't identified as artists at all but are obviously surrogates for their authors. Thus, according to Beebe, the artist's temperament is more essential in defining him as an artist than anything else.

Despite his importance in the formation of the *kunstlerroman* genre, Goethe's two novels remained in the category of *Bildungsromane* because, while both protagonists have artistic aspirations, neither is a 'true' artist in the same way that Ludwig Tieck's and Novalis' protagonists are, and it was these two writers whose works refined the genre of the *kunstlerroman*.

Following Goethe's two defining works, the *kunstlerroman* officially appeared in 1798 with Ludwig Tieck's *Franz Sternbald's Wanderings*. Tieck's novel rejects many priorities of the *Bildungsroman* form due to its Romanticism. 'In *Franz Sternbald's Wanderings* we are told repeatedly that the artist is a rare and superior breed of humanity, whose autonomous works of art glorify God and the universe.'³⁶ *Franz Sternbald's Wanderings* tells the tale of a protagonist who insists on the absolute distinction between his art and financial concerns. Franz embarks on a journey to study and practise painting when he is urged to abandon his art for the prospect of wealth and social prestige in the world of business. Following this his mother encourages him to become a farmer. He rejects both offers, insisting that being an artist means he doesn't consider profit from his endeavours. 'I never think of earnings when I think of art; indeed, I can hate myself when I sometimes fall into such thoughts.' (*FSW54*) Thus the term *kunstlerroman* came to mean a novel that was the 'narrative account of the formation, development, education, psychology of an artist, as a *special* type of individual.'³⁷

It was Novalis'³⁸ unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1799) that finally established the *kunstlerroman* as a specifically Romantic genre. Like Tieck, Novalis had created a work that asserted art as the most noble of professions, not by suggesting that art is greater than life, but by insisting that the two are fused and his novel 'tries to reflect the alliance between matter and spirit.'³⁹ True to the trends of his time, Novalis believed that the creation of art was dependent on experience in the real world. 'Henry having...lived through and observed nature, life, and death, war, the East, history and poetry, turns back into his mind as to an old home. From his

³⁶ Todd Kontje, *Private Lives in the Public Sphere - The German Bildungsroman as Metafiction*. (Penn State Press: Pennsylvania, 1992), 80.

³⁷ Varsamopoulou, *Poetics of the Kunsterinroman*, xi.

³⁸ 'Novalis' was the pseudonym of Baron Friedrich von Hardenberg, a German writer and philosopher.

³⁹ Beebe, *Ivory Towers*, 116.

knowledge of the world and of himself arises his impulse for expression.⁴⁰ The *kunstlerroman* was taking shape as a distinctly Romantic genre. Where Goethe's hero was the son of a merchant who dreams of a career in the theatre but ends up a surgeon, Novalis's protagonist was the son of a craftsman who dreams of 'the blue flower.'⁴¹ The blue flower later became a symbol of longing among Romantics; it is unattainable and is to remain unattainable; a symbol of the ongoing search for artistic perfection. This longing for the unattainable ensures that the artist never reaches satisfaction with his or her craft and indeed, his or her life. In one sense this means that the 'true self' is never compromised because it is never brought to fruition. It remains an imagined projection of an ideal.

1.2 Other landscapes

The idea of an unattainable identity is a key concept in *Tirra Lirra by the River* which draws heavily upon elements of romanticism. Just as Novalis's protagonist dreams of the blue flower, Nora dreams of a world as beautiful as Camelot in Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*⁴², a poem traditionally understood to be an allegory of the artist. The correlation between the poem and the novel are to such an extent that its title is lifted from within the verse. Elaine Barry writes that, 'having been beguiled by the poem in her adolescence, (Nora) constructed an ideal world, a Camelot, in her imagination and lived the rest of her life with a sense of its betrayal.'⁴³ Whereas the blue flower symbolises the desire for unity and fulfilment from the imagination's propensity to sublime experience, *Tirra Lirra* is far more sceptical of the role of imagination in experience. Rather than a post-modern exploration of issues through the prism of other fictions, *Tirra Lirra* more consciously draws on aspects of romanticism to question it.

Nora's artistic identity seems to come into sharpest relief through the prism of Tennyson's poem, though the function of the poem in Nora's life is complex. Cathy Cupitt offers an interesting discussion on this topic. Not only does Nora dream of her own Camelot, and as a child, imagine its presence in the warped glass of her living room window, she is also trapped in a world 'half-filled with shadows' like the Lady.

⁴⁰ Novalis, *Henry of Ofterdingen: A Romance* (Cambridge: John Owen, 1842), 224, as cited in Beebe, *Ivory Towers*, 117.

⁴¹ Cranston, *The Romantic Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 36, as cited in Varsamopoulou, *The Poetics of the Kunstlerroman and the Aesthetics of the Sublime*. (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002), xi.

⁴² The Lady of Shalott is a figure cut off from the real world, which she can only view through its reflection in a mirror. Inspired by these images the Lady weaves a tapestry, until one day she is drawn by Sir Lancelot to turn from her mirror and look directly out her window. Because of the curse upon her, her mirror breaks, her tapestry flies away and the Lady prepares for her own death.

⁴³ Elaine Barry, 'Tirra Lirra by the River: "The truthful fictions of our lives"'. *Fabricating the Self - The Fictions of Jessica Anderson* (University of Queensland Press: St Lucia, 1996), 78.

Just as the Lady lives under a curse which forces her to view the world through a reflection of her window's view, Nora 'has lived under the curse of an imbalance between imagination and reality her whole life.'⁴⁴ Much of her life has been spent in the shadows of judgement, misunderstanding and unfulfilled hope. She has played up to the expectations of others with such success that her true feelings, for almost the entirety of her life, have remained in shadow, illuminated only for a select few. Her 'globe of memory' also has a continually shifting shadow side (this is discussed further in Chapter 4).

Yet for Nora, the poem itself and the imagery it evokes hold greater significance as she has used the motifs offered by the poem to consume her grief around her father's death. 'At intervals all through my life, sometimes at very long intervals, there has flashed on my inner vision the step of a horse, the nod of a plume, and at those times I have been filled with a strange chaotic grief.' (*TL16*) Though she is puzzled by this mysterious angst, Nora comes to the realisation at the end of the novel that her father, about whom she 'remembers nothing', has become identified with the figure of Sir Lancelot, 'and the hooves and plumes of the horses at her father's funeral have blurred into the chivalric image of Lancelot's warhorse.'⁴⁵

Tennyson's Lady fulfils the archetype of the female artist in her experience of entrapment and inability to exist within the real world. As she floats into Camelot, there is no mention by the townsfolk of her status as an artist, only the vacuous comment by Lancelot 'she has a lovely face.' Her death is ironically reduced to the observation of surfaces that engendered the fatal turning from the mirror. The poem recalls Beebe's Ivory Tower concept, yet where the male artist is celebrated for his rejection of humanity and exalted view of his own creativity, the female artist sacrifices all other aspects of her life in order to create, and even then, is not appreciated for her artistic identity. The Lady is reduced to a wild, fey, liminal figure.

What is perhaps most revealing about Nora as artist in relation to the Romantic conception is in the childhood experience of the sublime imagination that she keeps returning to. The following passage from the novel, in which the elderly protagonist, looking through the living room window of her childhood home, rediscovers a fantasy world from her childhood, echoes such Romantic sensibilities. The length of this quote is justified by its significance to an understanding of Nora. It is no small matter that as an old woman she continues to search for the imaginary world she retreated into as a child.

⁴⁴ Cathy Cupitt, "'Who does she think she is?'" A Quest for Understanding in *Tirra Lirra by the River* (2006), <http://www.geocities.com/ccupitt.geo/tirralirra.html>, (accessed May 2007).

⁴⁵ Barry, *Fabricating the Self*, 81.

I shut my eyes, and when, after a few minutes, I open them again, I find myself looking through the glass on to a miniature landscape of mountains and valleys with a tiny castle, weird and ruined, set on one slope.

That is what I was looking for. But it is not richly green, as it used to be in the queer drenched golden light after the January rains, when these distortions in the cheap thick glass gave me my first intimation of a country as beautiful as those in my childhood books. I would kneel on a chair by this window, and after finding the required angle of vision, such as I found just now by accident, I would keep very still, afraid to move lest I lose it. I was deeply engrossed in those miniature landscapes, green, wet, romantic, with silver serpentine rivulets, and flashing lakes, and castles moulded out of any old stick or stone. I believe they enchanted me. Kneeling on the chair, I was barely present at all. My other landscape had absorbed me. (*TL12*)

Nora's ability to transport herself into this imaginary place until she is 'barely present at all', so absorbed is she in her 'other landscape', reveals much. Rather than situate herself in the lounge room itself which she tells us is a room of 'hopeless character', she half-closes her eyes and, squinting, 'afraid to move lest I lose it', finds a vista more beautiful. Though this passage reveals much about Nora's imagination and creativity, the loss-of-self involved is problematic. Throughout her life, Nora retreats into 'other landscapes' to avoid situations of emotional difficulty. Her meditative recitations of the French subjunctive tense while living in the Porteous household serve the same purpose. She retreats into imagination to free herself from feelings of panic and entrapment (this thematic concern will be discussed further in Chapter 2 – *Escape Artists*).

While the similarities between Nora's experience and the Lady's form a meaningful reference for the novel, of greater significance are the aspects that make Nora's identity and experience unique. Like all humans, she is multifaceted and full of contradiction. While the poem allows Nora some reference within which to imaginatively make sense of herself and her experience, it also mirrors the extent to which she herself is trapped within a dominant male discourse of society.

In one sense Nora is a creative woman who is at once inspired by the world and dissatisfied by her experience of it, but unlike the Lady, Nora looks back to find her life has been far more rich and remarkable than she had previously realized.

Tirra Lirra offers a protagonist whose artistic identity shifts and evolves. She is not wholly defined by the implications or expectations of her role as artist, as Beebe and Huf suggest an artist figure would be. We struggle to categorise Nora as she herself struggles to truthfully answer the novel's underlying question – Who does *she* think she is?

When her friend David Snow tells Nora that they are both destined to be 'homeless wherever they live,' we suspect that Nora is recognised as an artist, long before she recognises her own talents. Nora, in her passivity, is 'waiting' to assume her identity, but takes little initiative in realising it. Her quest to fulfil her creative and personal potential is impeded by many things, one being a perennial sense of not belonging caused by the 'thicket of misunderstanding' between herself and those around her. This homelessness is shared by a small number of others she identifies as artists. The select few people she trusts become for the reader sources of insight into Nora's character. David Snow continues on the subject of homelessness: 'Once you admit it, you know, you will find it has its advantages. The thing is to admit it, and relax, and not be forever straining forward.' Nora denies that she is straining forward; rather she is 'waiting, and occupying (her)self while (she) waits. Which is quite a different matter.' (TL12) We know that this passive waiting is accompanied by an underlying feeling of panic and the reader longs at all stages for Nora to free herself from her unhappy marriage and from the constrictions of conservative society. The bohemians in the Sydney Harbour flats provide her with an opportunity for such an escape. The four houses on the point, Bomera, Tarana, Crecy and Agincourt, symbolize the section of Sydney Nora falls in love with and a welcome alternative to Una Porteous's house. Despite this, Nora's connection with the group of artists at Bomera is limited both by Colin who disapproves of her spending time there, and by her own inability to consider herself to be as artistic and talented as they are. Though Ida Mayo tells the others that 'Nora knows more about colour than any of you lot' (TL54), Nora is treated with a fond condescension by most of the artists. They take pleasure in shocking and teasing her, and sensing this pleasure, she pretends to be 'even more ignorant' than she actually is of their music, art and books. Nora seems unable to feel at home in either world because she sees herself as between two extremes: the conservative confines of her marriage and the bohemian environment at Bomera. Despite her love for the latter, she concedes she is too naïve and conservative herself to belong with the artists and musicians who live there. So difficult is her struggle to define herself that she retreats further and, to greater or lesser degrees, alters herself to suit her company in the hope of quelling her feeling of displacement.

Nora's sense of homelessness on the one hand correlates with the Romantic idea of the artist protagonist, who continually yearns for the 'blue flower.' Yet, Nora's inability to fit in with the bohemians at Bomera and her retreat into 'other landscapes' signify far more about her experience and character than is explained by an artistic temperament as understood by Beebe and Huf. Anderson's use of the Lady of Shallot in her novel creates an interesting dialogue between the tropes of Romanticism and the particular details of an individual's unique experience. Yet we know that Nora's childhood fascination with Tennyson's poem is tightly tethered to her memories of her dead father, and her retreat into 'other landscapes' is as much a form of psychological escape as the yearning for beauty it first appears to be.

Tirra Lirra takes much from the traditions of the genre as outlined by Beebe and Huf. It borrows heavily from Romanticism, yet presents a multi-faceted, continually evolving protagonist who is far more individual than archetype.

1.3 A career not exactly real

Like Nora, Elaine of *Cat's Eye* suffers from a feeling of homelessness, referring to herself as a transient and a nomad; difficult to pin down. We are told from the outset that 'Time is not a line but a dimension...Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing.' (CE3) It is in a similar sporadic and unpredictable mode that Elaine reveals herself to the reader. We are meant to struggle to categorise her, and to trust her. Most specifically her character actively resists all things that could be linked to an artistic identity. We find a true discrepancy between the details of her life and the thoughts she chooses to share with the reader. Though we know that she has been a practising artist for decades and has achieved great success in this field, Elaine still refuses to present herself as an artist. Early in the book we get the sense that Elaine is ashamed of her identity as an artist and this is illustrated in the following paragraph:

Alongside my real life I have a career, which may not qualify as exactly real. I am a painter...It's an unlikely thing for me to have become; on some days it still makes me cringe. Respectable people do not become painters: only overblown, pretentious, theatrical people. The word *artist* embarrasses me: I prefer *painter*, because it's more like a valid job. An artist is a tawdry, lazy sort of thing to be, as most people in this country will tell you. (CE15)

Expression through art sneaks up on Elaine at one stage during primary school when the class is asked to draw what they do after school. While the others draw pictures of 'jolly snowmen' and 'skipping ropes' Elaine draws herself lying in bed, then begins to colour in the darkness with a black crayon, frantically scribbling until her figure can barely be made out. On completing her drawing, she looks at it with 'dismay', shocked as she had not intended to draw this dark scene. Her art teacher, in what is perhaps the only true acknowledgement of Elaine's depressed state, touches her on the shoulder and walks on. 'Her touch glows briefly, like a blown-out match.' (CE162) This small gesture is all the more significant in that it emphasises the fact that Elaine's parents drifted away from her after they moved to Toronto and societal expectations intruded on the family. Where their nomadic existence had seen them all in practical trousers and flannel shirts, sleeping side by side in tents and cabins, their new life in suburbia introduces gendered patterns of behaviour unfamiliar to Elaine. Her father begins to wear shirts and neckties and is gone for most of the day, her mother's legs 'appear, sheathed in nylons' and her mouth is drawn on in lipstick. Life changes dramatically and Elaine states in no uncertain terms than 'until we moved to Toronto I was happy.' (CE21) Following the drawing scene, Elaine dreams her parents are 'dead but also alive...sinking down through the earth, which is hard but transparent, like ice. They look up at me sorrowfully as they recede.' (CE167) Elaine's isolation in her suffering at the hands of her friends is total - she is genuinely alone. In understanding this, her drastic steps towards self-protection make more sense. Elaine's methods of keeping herself emotionally safe, 'closed like a clam' are discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

It is worth speculating that Elaine may have continued to express herself creatively had she not had the transformative experience in the ravine of the metaphoric cat's eye marble entering her and taking the place of her heart. Instead she reverts to her knowledge of biology and botany, drawing the insides of crayfish ears and frogs' genitalia. Interestingly, it is during a high school botany exam, whilst drawing the life cycle of a mushroom that Elaine decides 'with absolute certainty' that she will be a painter. (CE255)

Despite this, in her interview for a place in the tertiary art course, she is asked why she wants to learn drawing and painting, to which she replies 'I don't know.' No further reflection is offered. Where is the certainty she felt as a high school student? It seems her enthusiasm is borne out of the crisp and emotionless biology diagrams and not connected to any passion for the arts. It's as though she is striving for something uncomplicated in her artwork, in her relationships and her life in general. This indicates the extent to which her scientific approach to art represents an attempt

to shut the unconscious from her artistic expression. Just as the iron lung represents for Elaine a freedom from engaging with the world, so does science, and in particular a scientific approach to art, free her from emotional expression. The descriptions of Elaine's paintings, however, reveal that her work moves far beyond diagrammatic drawings to images layered with meaning and metaphor, and these offer an alternative and insightful version of her experience.

Arranged at intervals throughout the novel, the descriptions of her paintings exist as a visual narrative alongside the memoir version she presents to the reader. Elaine claims to have forgotten the torment and subsequent period of depression she experienced as a child but her paintings indicate otherwise. "They are truly "sub-versions," uncovering that highly complex network of conflicting energies, conscious and unconscious, which make up the human 'subject' in its psychoanalytical definition."⁴⁶ Through the works it is as though she is simultaneously seeking revenge, trying for acceptance, cruelly analysing and aiming for forgiveness. Coral Howells writes that the paintings act as a 'corrective to the distortions and suppressions of memory and (offer) the possibility of theoretical solutions.'⁴⁷

When confronted with much of her life's work arranged chronologically on the gallery walls, Elaine has an urge first to burn them, and then to escape out the back entrance before anyone arrives for the opening. It is as though her artworks are a means of escape at the time of creation, but when exhibited reveal too much of what she has attempted to conceal from the world. She imagines people coming in the front door as 'treacherous little girls, whispering and pointing.'*(CE410)* As she is introduced to art buyers, critics and other artists, she feels 'scraped naked'*(CE412)*; too much of herself has been exposed, released into the world. Furthermore, she is against all reason anticipating the arrival of Cordelia, though it is unclear what her intentions are should she turn up. Nonetheless Elaine feels deflated and confused after the opening. 'So Cordelia. Got you back,'*(CE414)* says a voice in her head, but she is crying. We feel she is at last ready to reconnect in some way, to offer some sort of forgiveness, but Cordelia is no longer there.

Though, in one sense, her lack of genuine engagement with others appears akin to Beebe's Ivory Tower artist model, we know that Elaine's view of art is far from exalted. In regards to her prolific collection of paintings, she is at best descriptive

⁴⁶ Coral Howells, "Cat's Eye: Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art", *Margaret Atwood, Writing and Subjectivity: new critical essays*, edited by C. Nicholson. (St Martins Press: New York, 1994), 212.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 208.

(still offering none of her own interpretation), but ultimately ashamed of what she has created.

Whereas *Tirra Lirra* draws upon notions of Romanticism and at least nostalgically seems to still hope in some redeeming power of imagination, *Cat's Eye's* concerns are quite different. Nora is 'in love with beauty' (TL16), while Elaine views the details of her world, much like her father inspecting insect specimens through his microscope, intrigued and seemingly unmoved by what she sees. She is indeed a sensitive, intelligent child who longs for escape from the cruelty of the other girls, but unlike Nora who dreams of Camelot, Elaine fantasises about the inertia and pity of a life lived in an Iron Lung and about being put through the washing machine wringer to come out 'flat, neat, completed, like a flower pressed in a book.' (CE123) Her artistic practice is less of a creative compulsion or a personal pursuit of beauty than a form of revenge directed at childhood acquaintances such as Cordelia and Mrs Smeath, and a brazen critique of gendered society.

It is worth considering that perhaps Nora's sense of Romanticism and yearning is maintained due to her lack of artistic success, so that, for most of her life, she continues to yearn for a state of artistic perfection and unspoiled beauty because she finds little opportunity for artistic expression. Elaine, by contrast, views being an artist not as an exalted profession, but rather an occupation far less valid than other more conventional choices. Elaine's sense of art is grounded decidedly in the objective and empirical. Where for Nora, art still holds out some hope of consolation from the vicissitudes of life, for Elaine art is the means of confronting her past.

Chapter 2

Entrapment and Escape

Escape Artists

2.1 Walking out

“In freeing herself from her box, bell jar, house or madhouse, the woman artist is today more than ever an escape artist.”⁴⁸

This chapter will discuss the ways in which the protagonists of the two novels employ methods of psychological and physical escape from oppression and explore how this relates to identity. It will explore the closely related idea of rebirth and its instance within the experiences of Nora and Elaine. This discussion aims to reveal that above the presence of the escape motif, it is the motivations and particularities of character behind each instance of escape, which truly offer insight into the protagonists and the novels overall.

The quote opening this chapter is taken from the concluding chapter of Linda Huf’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*. Huf concludes her study with a chapter suggesting progress and changes are afoot for the female *kunstlerroman*. She writes that the contemporary artist heroine need only ‘walk out on the fellow who brings her down’⁴⁹ whereas yesterday’s heroine could not, though she spent much time fantasising about the prospect of leaving. The ritual of the heroine’s walking out on the “hero” is closely related to the heroine being ‘reborn as an artist’⁵⁰. In a feminist sense the protagonist is struggling against a masculine world to realise an artistic identity. To do this she must break free from that which impedes its development.

For the purposes of this discussion, it is useful to consider the term ‘hero’, as used by Huf, to mean the oppressor in a broader sense; that which holds the female artist down. *Cat’s Eye’s* Elaine ‘walks out’ on a number of occasions to escape oppression. She ‘walks out’ on her parents’ discouragement of her studying art; her mother believes art is something which can always be done ‘in your spare time’ while her biologist father believes her drawing skills would be better applied to ‘cross-sections of stems and the cells of algae.’ (CE287) Elaine ‘walks out’ on Cordelia at several stages in the book, initially escaping victimisation, but eventually abandoning Cordelia when she requires a level of friendship Elaine cannot offer. She ‘walks out’ on her art tutor Josef to whom she is merely a ‘muse’ and a comfort to his troubled

⁴⁸ Huf, *The Writer as Heroine*, 156.

⁴⁹ Huf, *ibid.* 156

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 153.

existence. She 'walks out' on her husband Jon who sees her art as amateurish and believes himself to be the 'real artist'. (In the end it is Elaine who succeeds as a serious artist while Jon creates special effects for the film industry.)

The most significant instance of Elaine 'walking out' occurs early in the book and it is of such magnitude that it shapes the adult she becomes. As a child made miserable by her friends' cruelty, Elaine 'walks out' on stressful situations by developing the ability to faint. 'Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time. When you wake up it's later, time has gone on without you.' (CE171) Thus, as an escape artist, Elaine's biggest achievement is escaping time itself. After the fainting episodes, she gains the ability to float outside her body and see herself from above; she describes this as being 'off to the side', and this is suggestive of the position she maintains throughout her life. Belgian literary theorist Hilde Staels writes, 'Time passes, but Elaine does not participate in its process, at least as far as the life of affections and sensations goes. She suffers from mental and emotional immobility, as if life stopped at the age of nine, as if it came to a standstill.'⁵¹ Staels identifies this point of standstill as an occasion where Elaine's friends abandon her in a hole dug in Cordelia's backyard. She is traumatised to such an extent by the experience that she is permanently altered.

I have no image of myself in the hole; only a black square filled with nothing, a square like a door. Perhaps the square is empty; perhaps it's only a marker, a time marker that separates the time before it from the time after. The point at which I lost power. (CE107)

Staels writes that this experience cemented in Elaine a belief in the existence of evil in other people. Not only does the event send Elaine further into depression, it also strips her of any faith she has in others. Atwood foreshadows the event with motifs of occultism: 'black cats and paper pumpkins gather in school windows' (CE106), deadly nightshade berries grow by the river and 'one drop' of the berry juice 'could turn you into a zombie.' (CE76)

As teenagers, when Elaine has 'forgotten' her childhood suffering, Cordelia brings up the subject of the holes she used to dig in the yard. 'I used to think that if I kept very still and out of the way' she says 'that I would be safe.' (CE252) She admits that her father often lost his temper with her. This offers the reader insight into Cordelia's state of mind at the time when she treated Elaine so badly, and also the

⁵¹ Hilde Staels, *Margaret Atwood's Novels; A Study of Narrative Discourse* (Francke Verlag: Tübingen, 1995). 180.

influence of patriarchal power and the children's imitation of it. The teenaged Elaine, however, is unable to enter further discussion in response to Cordelia's confession. She feels a rush of blood to the head and her stomach shrink 'as if something dangerous has just missed hitting (her), followed by a 'cold disgust with (her)self.' (CE253) After this, Elaine begins to avoid Cordelia but is puzzled as to why. It seems that section of her childhood has indeed become a 'black square,' which, though 'infused with grief,' lacks any detail. This is indicative of the extent of dissociation Elaine achieves as a coping mechanism. She is at times so distant from the world of emotions that she is unable to accurately identify them; rather they suggest danger and confusion.

As opposed to the self-directed instances of escape from opinions, places and expectations, which often lead to a very positive sense of rebirth, Elaine's fainting episodes are a reactive psychological retreat. Though this retreat does lead her to art creation, and a successful career, it also prevents her from evolving. In this way, the idea of the artist overcoming obstacles to realise his or her true creative self is implausible. The archetypes, as presented by Beebe and Huf, are one-dimensional, where Elaine, like all humans, is complex.

Atwood employs a number of literary motifs to highlight key thematic concerns in *Cat's Eye*. The iron lung motif in *Cat's Eye* is particularly interesting in that it functions as a symbol of both entrapment and escape. At various points of her life, Elaine fantasises about being in an iron lung as an escape from the pain and suffering of her own reality. An iron lung represents a life of 'inertia and pity' that Elaine admits being secretly attracted to. At the same time, she imagines Cordelia in an iron lung as part of the revenge fantasies she has throughout her life. 'She is fully conscious, but unable to move or speak. I come into the room, moving, speaking. Our eyes meet.' (CE8) That Atwood has employed the one motif to illustrate the opposing themes of entrapment and escape seems cryptic, but on deeper reading of *Cat's Eye*, we understand that Elaine's successful attempt at escaping reality has actually imprisoned her by stalling her emotional development. She is trapped in a past she longs to escape. The iron lung provides an image of the 'impermeable shell Elaine has constructed around her heart.'⁵² The shell is both protector and captor, in the first instance providing escape from her childhood tormentors, but eventually stunting her development in adulthood.

The use of the doppelganger motif is a key narrative device in *Cat's Eye*. The possibility of a coherent protagonist is made all the more unlikely by the fact that Elaine and Cordelia seem to share an identity which is both victim and perpetrator.

⁵² *ibid.*, 184.

Atwood references the doppelganger motif at several points in *Cat's Eye*, but its implicit presence throughout the book exists in the relationship between Elaine and Cordelia. Hilde Staels describes this relationship as a metaphor for Elaine's own divided identity, one self being weak and spineless, and the other self fierce. One self escapes Toronto while the other remains. Staels goes on to suggest that in escaping to Vancouver, Elaine is trying to repress the knowledge of her 'mutilated inner space,' to silence the dimension of herself attached to the memory of Cordelia.⁵³ When the girls are teenagers, Elaine's brother announces that 'Cordelia has a tendency to exist.' (CE242) This ambiguous statement signals the hidden dimension of Elaine; the repressed which continues to haunt her.

Staels also comments on *Cat's Eye's* epigraph, a quotation from Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire: Genesis* which concerns itself with the split between the body and the soul. The epigraph introduces the theme of the relationship between the soul or spirit and the physical body, which, according to Staels, characterizes the relationship between Elaine and Cordelia. 'The one cannot live without the other, for a body without a soul is solidity without vital energy.'⁵⁴ Staels goes on to say that Cordelia is the other invisible part of Elaine, both present and absent. 'She has power over Elaine for Cordelia's damaged face confronts Elaine with her own muted and mutilated inner self.'⁵⁵ This idea of Elaine's repressed side appears on several occasions in the text.

As young teenagers, Elaine and Cordelia are walking through a cemetery on their way home from school when Elaine tries to frighten Cordelia by telling her that she is one of a set of identical twins; that she herself is dead and that her other half is existing on the earth as a zombie or ghost. 'I thought it was time you know,' she tells Cordelia. 'I'm really dead, I've been dead for years.' (CE233) There is another similar tale read aloud from a comic book by Cordelia. 'Cordelia reads a story about two sisters, a pretty one and one who has a burn covering half her face. The burn is maroon-coloured and wrinkled like a dead apple.' (CE211) After reading these comics, Elaine removes them from her bedside table before going to sleep because they frighten her. 'I'm afraid I'll find out that there's someone else trapped inside my body. I'll look into the bathroom mirror and see the face of another girl, someone who looks like me but has half her face darkened, the skin burned away.' Tales such as this foreshadow the relationship between the two girls who cannot escape the fact that they are attached, despite their efforts to separate from one another.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 183

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 184

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 184

Elaine paints to rid herself of her doppelganger and former tormentor Cordelia, or the repressed part of herself that Cordelia represents. Despite her efforts, Cordelia is not easily forgotten or discarded as is evident throughout Elaine's entire life up until the end of the novel. The memory of Cordelia haunts Elaine constantly as she wanders around Toronto in the days preceding her exhibition opening. She sees her in the faces of the needy who plead for money and in the thieving hands of a teenager trying to steal her purse, and she is also continually speculating on Cordelia's whereabouts and life situation. As mentioned in the discussion on the doppelganger motif, 'Cordelia's damaged face confronts Elaine with her own muted and mutilated inner self'⁵⁶ and thus she continues to have power over Elaine. Cordelia's 'haunting' of Elaine is especially apparent earlier in the novel, when Elaine attempts suicide as a young mother. On her way home from hospital, she reflects upon what it was that pushed her to cut her wrist; a voice urging her. '*Do it. Come on. Do it.*' Elaine continues to explain the voice, 'Not menacing but excited, as if proposing an escapade, a prank, a treat. Something treasured, and secret. The voice of a nine-year-old child.'⁵⁷ (CE374)

One of the final chapters of *Cat's Eye* presents a scenario in which the adult Elaine confronts the child figure of Cordelia. We know that Cordelia may represent a repressed part of Elaine and thus this scene depicts Elaine confronting a lost dimension of herself. Elaine reaches out for the Cordelia figure in a loving gesture: 'I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. *It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now*. The snow in my eyes withdraws like smoke.' (CE419) Rather than describing fear or hatred, Elaine is overcome with compassion, recognising Cordelia's own suffering to be the impetus for her cruel behaviour. It is as though the opposing psyches of Elaine's 'divided self' are finally connected and we are offered some sense of wholeness about our narrator for the first time in the novel. Significantly, when Elaine turns to look at Cordelia again, she is no longer there and nor is the weight of painful memory infused in the landscape. It is emptied out, or rather, as Elaine describes, 'filled with whatever it is by itself, when I'm not looking.' (CE419) In a final speculation on the nature of time, this scene conflates past and present, forcing Elaine to look back and acknowledge her own false

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 184.

⁵⁷ This is reminiscent of the time of intense depression during her childhood when she fantasizes about suicide in its many forms: eating deadly nightshade berries, drinking poison, jumping off the bridge and smashing like a pumpkin. She explains that though she is too frightened to do these things, she imagines Cordelia prompting her to do them: "*Do it. Come on.*" And Elaine would feel compelled to carry these acts out to please her.

construction of the past and to open a door to the future. Interestingly, it is through an act of imagination that the reconciliation takes place.

Despite this, if we are to think this reconciliation will lead us to a coherent understanding of Elaine we are mistaken. In her essay, 'Gender as Genre: Atwood's Autobiographical 'I'', Sherrill Grace comments that just as we begin to draw conclusions about Elaine, 'the narrative circles back once more and that unforgettable voice tells us that once the portraits have painted or the stories told, we still have not grasped the Self because "Whatever energy they have come out of me. I'm what's left over.'" (CE409) ⁵⁸

Though her brother Stephen tells her 'there are no such things as discrete objects which remain unchanged, set apart from the flow of time,' (CE219) Elaine is a compelling case to the contrary. 'She wants to stop the process of time and keep herself, others and the future, under control. Like layers of skin that cover up old wounds, new memories are superimposed on the earlier ones, which gradually fade away.'⁵⁹ The triumph of having in one sense escaped time is in actual fact Elaine's downfall. Her public success as an artist is at the expense of her own personal growth, and perhaps even her artistic growth. Despite her success (prompted by finding herself 'at the front of a small wave') Elaine's artwork, described at intervals throughout the novel, concerns itself very much with the past. Though she physically left Toronto's conservative society decades ago and her memory shows only a 'black square of nothing' in place of her childhood suffering, Elaine's artwork tells its own version of her story. Elaine's paintings attempt to claim the period of 'missing time' she herself has failed to process. On walking into the opening of her retrospective exhibition, Elaine is still plagued by the pious and disapproving stare of Mrs Smeath. In this way, Atwood creates the interesting duality of Elaine's artwork being at once her success and her failing. Initially her means of escape, her artwork eventually renders her a prisoner of the past as Mrs Smeath 'multiplies on the walls like bacteria, standing, sitting, flying, with clothes, without clothes, following me around with her many eyes like those 3-D postcards of Jesus you can get in the cheesier corner stores. Sometimes I turn her faces to the wall.' (CE338)

⁵⁸ Sherril Grace, "Gender as Genre: Atwood's Autobiographical 'I'", *Writing and Subjectivity: new critical essays*, edited by Colin Nicholson (St Martin's Press, New York, 1994), 202.

⁵⁹ Staels, *A Study of Narrative Discourse*, 181.

2.2 A 'sour rebellion'

In *Tirra Lirra by the River*, Nora Porteous's experience of escape is characterised by a 'sour rebellion' of societal expectations and conservatism. She 'walks out' on the conservative opinions of her mother and sister Grace. She 'walks out' on her home town of Brisbane where her footsteps sound 'loud and outrageous.' In her early thirties she 'walks out' on the oppressive environment of Una's house in the 'chequerboard suburb'. Although it is in fact Colin who forces the separation, Nora takes (almost all) the money she is entitled to and sails to London, 'because she can.'

On leaving the Porteous house with her divorce settlement of eight hundred pounds, Nora walks the streets of Sydney, gradually realising her newfound freedom. She refers to this first day of wandering as 'the day of my release'. 'In those crowded streets, where nobody knew who I was, my trepidation was absorbed as easily as the sound of my footsteps, which in the streets of the suburb had sounded so loud and outrageous.' (TL98) The account of Nora's rediscovery of herself is one of the most emotive sections of the novel, with Anderson's language touching upon emotional truths without a hint of sentimentality. We genuinely feel a sense of rebirth, that Nora is in many ways being reunited with her hidden self. 'Where there had been a vibrant space at my side, there was now an intimation of a presence, and sometimes, in a silent green-house or palm-grove, I nearly turned toward it, whispering.' (TL98)

Having lived by the expectations of her husband and mother in law, her only solace a 'secret life' of stubborn defiance and vivid imagination, Nora is finally free. Her time in the Porteous household is one of the 'periods of waiting' which, though separated by brief episodes of creativity and promise, actually make up most of her life as a young woman in Australia. Like most of these stretches of time, this one was accompanied by a sense of panic about her wasted life. Nora describes the panic rising 'without warning in (her) chest, a bird with wings so strong it seemed they must break the bone.' (TL24)

Even travelling independently to the other side of the world to establish herself as a dressmaker and the experience of living in a household of like-minded friends, does not free Nora from the fear of oppression that has plagued her since adolescence. Her final return to Australia is prompted by the prospect of moving from London to suburban Coventry where Nora anticipates the return of 'the old oppression, the breast breaker.' (TL174) By leaving England she escapes the fate of living in another 'chequerboard suburb' like the one in which Una Porteous's house sat, a 'rectilinear pattern made by straight streets and a hundred neat roofs. Iron grey and terracotta.' (TL174) The feelings of oppression experienced in her past are too

much to bear, and so she returns to Australia where structurally the book begins and ends.

The entrapment theme is reinforced through the subplot of Belle the cat who must be put down before Nora leaves London. While Hilda and Liza set up in Coventry, it falls on Nora to capture and deliver Belle to the vet. There is a direct correlation between Nora escaping the entrapment of the 'chequerboard suburb' and the act of caging Belle. Her grief is sporadically revived throughout the novel as the scratch she received when struggling Belle into the cage slowly heals. 'I see Belle in the cage, immobile now, her paws drawn neatly beneath her, no longer quivering, but expressionless, withdrawn, refusing to look at me...Flooded by useless grief, I hold my left wrist in my right hand.' (TL30) The scratch is used metaphorically to indicate Nora's own emotional healing so that, as she reassesses her globe of memory, making peace with its shadow-side, the scratch slowly fades.

Nora's experience of entrapment and escape is best understood through those few characters she aligns herself with. Anderson employs two characters to play out alternatives to Nora's experience, and their lives reveal much about Nora's particular traits, strengths and failings. As a teenager, Nora identifies with two others in her home suburb, the exotic Dorothy Irey and Olive Partridge, who shares Nora's love of books. Nora spends hours walking around the suburb, not with a destination in mind, but 'to outrun oppression' and on these walks she often runs into Dorothy also walking, and they exchange a look of 'secret sharp recognition'. Dorothy is slender and narrow-hipped, and said to have Polynesian blood. 'The effect she gave, of darkness, freshness, and white lace, left me incredulous. She was rare and beautiful, and she was twenty-three. So why did she stay?'(TL20)

Dorothy does stay, marries Bruce Rainbow from the bank and becomes busy with babies and housekeeping. Nora no longer runs into Dorothy on her walks but enquires after her through her sister Grace who says 'with that old anger' that of course Dorothy was happy. 'Why shouldn't she be? She has all any reasonable person could want.'(TL23) On her return to Australia decades later, Nora discovers that Dorothy developed a form of 'suburban neurosis', too frightened to leave the house, hiding in response to a knock at the door. By the time Nora is told that Dorothy suicided after murdering her husband and all her children but one, she is unsurprised.

Nora herself experienced a similar neurosis while living with Una Porteous; staying home out of fear and, when occasionally embarking on walks, returning to the house at the first corner 'at an ugly panicky trot.'(TL87) Just as Dorothy was known for being 'anxious to please', Nora's 'toadiness' is such a part of her character that

even in her old age, she humours her carer Lyn Wilmot, playing along with her idle gossip and meaningless chatter. Nora's acute self-awareness is clear in the following passage about her own desire to please.

Reckless. Cynical. Frivolous. Those were words they used about me. And rebuttal seemed so hopeless, and the thicket of misunderstanding between us so old and dense and dusty, that it was less exhausting simply to be as reckless, cynical and frivolous as they said I was. (*TL101*)

Nora recognises that such repression of a person's true nature is unhealthy, and the subsequent isolation and sense of entrapment that follow are illustrated within the narrative at their most extreme through Dorothy's story.

Olive Partridge offers a more promising experience - an artistic identity realised. As a teenager, Nora identifies an ally in Olive, just as she does in Dorothy. When the two are alone, away from the laughing girls at the tennis club, Olive is known to 'break suddenly into a run, then as suddenly stop and clack her boots together sideways.' (*TL16*) She is an avid reader, whose mother looks at Nora with a 'kind of quizzical understanding.' (*TL19*) Olive leaves the home suburb as soon as she can afford to and sails to England to become a successful novelist. Unlike the other girls, she has no desire to marry any of the local boys and exudes a worldly confidence beyond her years. Olive's independence and conviction allow her to orchestrate the movements of her life's journey and she achieves in her later books a simplicity Nora envies, claiming she herself has never achieved simplicity in anything at all.

Nora's own escape from the suburb is far more passive. Although, like Olive, she does manage to escape, she doesn't see leaving of her own accord as a possibility. This lack of confidence and conviction means that Nora's sense of control over her life is secondary to the expectations of others and this limits her capacity for self-expression. She continually settles for less, as is the case with her husband from the outset. At a party, she is initially taken with a romantic Lancelot-like figure: tall, dark-haired and headed for Africa, but settles for his fair-haired nephew. She marries Colin without much thought beyond the prospect of leaving the suburb. Before this opportunity comes about, Nora quietly goes about creative pursuits, making lampshades, embroidered cushion covers, writing poems, reading Keats, Shelley and Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Despite this period of creativity, Nora 'aspires to something of greater intensity', and the suppression of her true nature inhibits any sense of

identity, alluded to in the following passage which appears early in the novel: ‘I watched myself raise my arms to amass my hair at the back of my head. With sidelong glances, I turned my head this way and that, but there was no one to see.’ (TL21)

Only on her return home as an old woman does Nora begin to reflect on the fractured path of her creativity and the possible directions it may have taken. On looking at an embroidery she created as a teenager, she is shocked to realise that she had started to express herself after all.

‘I wonder what would have happened if I had never left this place.’

‘Haven’t you wondered before?’

‘Never once. I always believed it was imperative. But this shows I had begun to do something here after all. I have never done anything of this quality since. Who knows what I would have drawn...’

I stop myself in time. The words in my mind were ‘drawn out of the compression of a secret life.’ (TL184)

This indicates the beginnings of Nora’s gradual acknowledgment that her own personal weaknesses may have contributed to an unrealised artistic identity. This instance of an artwork opening an opportunity for re-evaluation of the past, illustrates the circularity which is continually at work in *Tirra Lirra* and *Cat’s Eye*.

Nora’s and Elaine’s lives are both characterised by occasions of oppression and escape. Huf tethers such instances of escape in the female artist’s novel to moments of rebirth, but in these case studies the potential for rebirth arises not out of escape, but in returning to places and events. For Elaine and Nora, their experience of escape is as much a retreat into the self as it is creative emancipation. On returning to the house of her childhood, Nora’s genuine rebirth begins as she starts to re-evaluate her past. Elaine’s experiences of escape, far from being moments of rebirth, relate to serious psychological dislocations with consequences for her personal development. The potential for rebirth, if it exists at all in *Cat’s Eye*, is in Elaine’s imaginative return to the bridge of her childhood.

Whereas Nora gains some consolation from the past through the memory of the enchanted garden scene – a kind of Wordsworthian ‘spot of time’ – in which she gains some sense of her imaginative powers, by contrast Elaine has a black hole in her past – memory and childhood glimpses into ordinary powers are absent. In this way childhood offers little hope of any romantic consolation to heal the divided or

fragmented self. Her imagination does not allow the mutilated past self to be remembered, or at least not in any coherent or tangible way.

The presence of the escape motif, its recurrence and its importance in the narrative, suggests Huf's hypothesis about the female artist as escape artist is applicable to these two novels. Yet undoubtedly it is the motivations relating to their instances of escape that are of greater significance to our understanding of the protagonists. In the case of both Nora and Elaine, life experiences unrelated to the presence of the 'innate artistic temperament' as written about by Beebe and Huf, have prompted their need for psychological escape. Recognising this is so imperative to the success of the novels that the fact of their artistic talents and practices becomes a secondary concern. We suspect that the postmodern feminist kunstlerinroman has a complex relationship with the themes of entrapment and escape. In the case of *Tirra Lirra* and *Cat's Eye*, the themes co-exist and overlap in such a way that Elaine's escape from the pain of her reality renders her trapped in her past. Similarly, despite Nora's escape from her hometown, she remains trapped by the conservatism and judgements of that place for much of her life.

Chapter 3

Passive battles and active conformity – a quest to be

3.1 Always and only, becoming

When the Lady of Shalott's body floats into Camelot, the palace's questions of 'Who is this? and what is here?' are answered only by Sir Lancelot's vacuous comment 'She has a lovely face.' That she was a tapestry artist who spent her solitary days imprisoned in a tower and 'died as a sacrificial victim to the chivalric values that sustained Camelot'⁶⁰ are of no concern. 'The value placed on physical beauty – with its subsequent devaluation of mind and spirit – has long been a curse under which women have laboured.'⁶¹ This chapter will discuss the ways in which gender has directed and inhibited the protagonists of *Tirra Lirra* and *Cat's Eye* in their journey towards claiming their own artistic identity.

In her article "The Blank Page" and the Issues of Female Creativity', Susan Gubar discusses one of Atwood's prose poems in which two boys create a woman out of mud; she is more of a torso, beginning at the neck and ending at the knees. The boys work at adjusting her figure by enlarging her breasts and widening her hips to suit their tastes. Gubar uses the poem to illustrate the point that, not only is Woman historically more of an object than a subject, she is frequently an art object. She is 'the ivory carving or mud replica, an icon or doll, but she is not the sculptor.'⁶² Gubar claims that in literature and other art forms, women's creativity is deformed in such a way that 'infantilises the female turning her from an autonomous person into a character in search of an author. Such a woman is always and only 'becoming'...always imagining some future identity that she is unable to realise by herself.'⁶³

Anderson employs a variety of narrative devices to signal the theme of identity as central to *Tirra Lirra*. The women in the fashion houses are an interesting case in point.

'Those women 'mad about clothes', always running to me with bits of cloth and pictures cut from magazines, always asking 'But is it me?' hadn't they been forever seeking to express their conception of

⁶⁰ Barry, *Fabricating the Self*, 74.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 74.

⁶² Gubar, *The Blank Page*, 249.

⁶³ *ibid.*, 249.

themselves? And wasn't that conception usually imaginary? A composed character? I myself had once dressed with the same vague intention. (TL159)

The women Nora writes of turn to clothes to define themselves. With their own conception of their identities concealed by social norms and expectations, fashion is an aspect of self-expression over which they can exert some power. When they ask 'But is it me?' are they in actual fact posing a question more like 'What do you think about me?' or 'who do you think I am?' If woman is an art object, clothes are another layer on the canvas. Just as Nora's artistic expression is played out through 'feminine' crafts such as embroidery and dressmaking, women's interest in fashion can be seen as another form of self-expression within a socially acceptable context. The glossy world presented by fashion magazines also offers the young Nora a glimpse of a more 'beautiful' and fanciful world, in the same way as poetry and dreams of Camelot did for her as a child. Looking through Ida Mayo's overseas magazines at Bomera while Ida and the artists worked, Nora reflects that she was 'under enchantment again.' (TL55) On asking herself what they made her long for, she is unable to reach a satisfactory conclusion. 'Not the clothes exactly. Nor the life shown, exactly.' (TL55) These speculations suggest a longing for a kind of nebulous world separate from reality. We suspect Nora's concept of her own identity is just as nebulous. Self-suppression inhibits her identity from taking further shape.

Nora is well aware of the role fashion plays in women's quest for self-expression. When, at the age of thirty-eight, she becomes unconcerned with her own clothes and 'accept(s) a suit for (her) uniform' (TL123), we understand that Nora has accepted her suppressed identity. She no longer strives to show others a more authentic version of herself, nor does she imagine the possibility of some future identity for herself. Rather she is resigned to a life of disappointment and self-suppression.

Having been praised for looking like Lillian Gish and Bette Davis for much of her life, Nora suffers greatly from the loss of her looks as she ages. Though as a young woman she responds to compliments on her appearance by saying that she is 'the type who collapses overnight,' she confides to the reader that she never really believed this to be true. It is her husband Colin who predicts it. Running his finger along her jawline, he tells Nora 'this is where you'll go first, when you start to go.' (TL86) Perhaps Nora's defiance of Colin's cruelty is a contributing factor in her decision to undergo a facelift many years after the end of her marriage. We know that Nora is 'in love with beauty' and the 'invisibility' which results from aging presents an

‘encroaching greyness’ which she can only fight for so long. True to her nature, Nora quietly accepts the disastrous result of her surgery, though silently noting that the surgeon has made an ‘irretrievable error.’ She describes the failed facelift as her ‘last throw of the dice’ and on returning home to her lonely London flat swallows an entire bottle of sleeping pills. After being ‘saved by the London County Council and a stomach pump’ Nora insists that she took the pills by accident and secretly plans to try again. Also, the trappings of physical appearance translating to self-worth are at work here. Nora believes herself to be ‘invisible’ after the loss of her looks as though she is stripped of substance with nothing to offer the world.

Anderson sets up an interesting parallel between Nora’s suicide attempt and Dorothy’s murder-suicide. On the night Nora swallows the pills, she finds a small pile of letters inside the front door, but ‘fixed in indifference’ throws them into the grate to burn. Further along in the narrative we discover that Grace’s letter explaining Dorothy’s fate burned unopened in the fire while Nora counted out the pills and drifted into unconsciousness. As discussed in the previous chapter, the parallels between Nora and Dorothy reveal much about the experience of the repressed artist.

If not for the job Nora takes at a theatrical costumers, she may well have taken her second bottle of pills, but the prospect of the job brings with it a promise of creativity and the bohemian atmosphere of Bomera, as is evident in the passage below:

my interior eye was assailed by a medley of rich rippling colour, of bright lights and inhabited shadow – all latterly derived from the theatre, no doubt, but first of all from Ida Mayo’s hands manipulating satins and brocades beneath her little lamps.(*TL158*)

Nora goes on to become chief dressmaker for the theatre and works with many designers, some of whom she considers to be brilliant. She takes pleasure in seeing some of them alter their designs at her suggestion and does not resent it when they regard the result as wholly their own. ‘What could have better suited my nature, as it had developed, than exerting the more influence by pretending to have none?’ (*TL159*) ‘The privacy of the gratification, the vicariousness of the achievement, and the rationalisation of the whole process tell their own story of the suppression of Nora’s identity.’⁶⁴ In her essay, *Fabricating the Self*, Elaine Barry discusses the passivity with which Nora lives her life, and the way this shapes most of her decisions and therefore much of her experience.

⁶⁴ Barry, *Fabricating the Self*, 72.

Nora's life is characterised by a 'passive battle against patriarchal attitudes.'⁶⁵ This pattern begins with the boys who would wait under the camphor laurel trees for the girls to finish singing practice, entice them away from the group and throw them to the ground. 'They would try to pull down our pants one minute and abjectly beg the next. As we made our escape, they would vilify us horribly.' (TL18) Though Nora concedes that 'nobody was raped' (TL18), this experience 'introduces a pattern of male hostility -and female escape- that is a formative element in her life.'⁶⁶

In her thesis *Gender Mapping Genre – Studies in Female Künstlerromane from Canada, Australia and New Zealand*, Christine Hamelin writes that Nora's 'sexual oppression and her symbolic barrenness, caused in part by the patriarchy of her society and of specific men, reflect, and to a certain extent bring about, her artistic repression.'⁶⁷ To counteract Hamelin's argument, Elaine Barry claims that 'Nora's artistic potential is crushed more by her own failure to value or nurture it than by external circumstances.'⁶⁸ If we consider the passivity with which Nora travels through life, we understand that this indeed can only be true 'to a certain extent' for her own lack of 'backbone' and artistic conviction render her powerless to confront those who seek to oppress her true nature. We can see that societal attitudes and a lack of understanding combined with Nora's passive nature result in an unrealised identity. As discussed in the last chapter, Olive Partridge leaves the suburb of her own accord to pursue her writing career, while Nora leaves by way of marriage, which is less of a romantic venture than a means of escape, but still is accepted and respected in the eyes of the community. Anderson has chosen to represent Nora not wholly as a victim of patriarchal society, but also as a victim within herself.

Nowhere is Nora's self-repression more apparent than in the suppression of her sexuality. Her marital experiences of sex offer little more pleasure than the antics of the boys under the camphor laurel trees. To Colin she is first frigid and then a whore and for the most part, she endures intercourse by detaching herself with silent recitations of French grammar to escape the 'intense and bitter misery' (TL85) of their physical connection.

Barry writes that Nora's experience of love re-instates an archetypal pattern in women's sexual experience; 'constructing (out of books and a female romantic tradition) an ideal of a tall dark handsome stranger, then actually marrying someone

⁶⁵ Christine Hamelin, *Gender Mapping Genre: Studies in Female Künstlerromane from Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Queens University: Kingston, 1994), 224

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 224.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 226.

⁶⁸ Barry, *Fabricating the Self*, 77.

quite ordinary, who in turn changes into a monster for her.⁶⁹ Nora's marriage to Colin, eventually a 'co-habitation of bitter enemies' (TL86), plays a considerable part in the suppression of Nora's identity, artistic and otherwise. Consider the excerpt below where she talks about the discrepancy between the façade of their relationship and the truth of it.

Their conception of our marriage presented us with a model by which, if we pretended to follow it, we could avoid total disaster. Thus passed many months of meaningless harmony, studded with carbuncles of silent misery. Who was I? Nora Porteous, nee Roche, thirty-five, domestic worker, amateur dressmaker, detested concubine, and student of the French subjunctive tense? (TL86)

Following her divorce, Nora has a brief affair with a married American on the boat to England and this is her only positive sexual experience. This affair could have established a healthier sexual pattern on which to base future relationships, had she not fallen pregnant and undergone an abortion. The abortionist's treatment of Nora mimics Colin's lovemaking with directions of 'do this' and 'do that,' as does his attitude of cruel contempt. Though she tells Olive in the waiting room that the procedure 'was perfectly alright' (TL114), Nora never again has any sexual contact with anyone for the remainder of her life. Male friends such as David Snow, like Lewie Johns from Bomera, are all homosexual and therefore present no risk of intimacy.

Consider Gubar's comment that 'such a woman is always and only 'becoming'...always imagining some future identity that she is unable to realise by herself.'⁷⁰ This is very poignant in the case of Nora, whose relationship with her own creativity is impeded repeatedly by a lack of self-belief and a shifting sense of identity.

Nora survives 'the dull and steady misery' of her marriage in the same way as she had her teenage years in the conservative Brisbane suburb, by retreating to her imagination and finding solace in beauty of the smallest order. During the day while Colin is at work she imagines him to be a 'man (she) could love' and escapes to Bomera for books and conversation while Ida Mayo and the other artists work. At

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 75.

⁷⁰ Gubar, *The Blank Page*, 249.

home, she expresses herself again in an acceptably feminine way. 'I made white curtains and a yellow bedcover, and varnished the floor black...I polished the brass bedstead and painted a honey jar white and filled it with flowers from the garden.'*(TL75)* Gubar writes that women's traditional interest in fashion, cosmetics and interior decorating indicates 'the effect of a life experienced as an art or an art experienced as a kind of life'.⁷¹

The inclusion of oppressive male figures like Colin and the reinforcement of his attitude in the abortionist indicate that patriarchal oppression of women is one of Anderson's key concerns. At the same time, the inclusion of Olive, who breaks tradition, forges a career for herself as a writer and marries a philosopher, suggest that women's entrapment and victimisation are not inevitable. We understand that various negative forces in Nora's life contribute to her suppression of self, some of these relate in a broad sense to women's experience of patriarchal society and some to personal failings specific to Nora's character.

Where Nora has long been plagued by panic about her wasted life, it is the reflecting, reordering and reinterpretation of the events of her life that is her true creative triumph. This triumph is paralleled by her discovery of Grace's garden - a symbol of reconciliation with the past. To Nora's great surprise, her sister Grace, once excessively pious and conservative, has created a space representing the kind of simplicity and creativity Nora has strived for all her life. Grace's garden, a lush patch of green against the dry of the suburb, is nourished by compost, which in Grace's own words, was not so much a gardening method, as a 'philosophy'. *(TL191)* We know from Betty Cust that Grace altered a great deal at the end of her life, and the garden is living evidence of her new philosophy, suggesting she experienced a similar re-evaluation and acceptance as Nora does throughout the novel. Betty recounts Grace's comment that 'for the whole of her life, she had tried to have faith, and that for the whole of her life she had only opinions.' *(TL194)* Though Nora is initially 'unwillingly to allow that Grace has touched (her) heart at last', her newfound acceptance of herself creates room for her to make peace with her sister.

On recovering from her bout of pneumonia, Nora sees the back garden for the first time and is 'dazzled' by a 'garden so fresh and verdant, so deep and rich and detailed, that I wonder for a moment if the glass is tinted.' *(TL190)* The reader can't help but be reminded of the 'Camelot' of Nora's childhood imaginings, found in the warped glass of her living room window. The poignancy of this scene lies not only in

⁷¹ Gubar, *The Blank Page*, 251.

Nora's finding beauty in the childhood home she so eagerly escaped from many years earlier. Unlike Camelot, the vista is not an act of imagination. Grace's garden offers an alternative treatment of, and outcome for, waste. She has created something beautiful, fertile and sustainable out of it, just as Nora finally creates something wonderful in the reinterpretation of her own life story.

Entering her final period of waiting, Nora reflects on the safety of the household at number six, Hilda, Liza and Fred (another homosexual), whose companionship presents few emotional challenges or risk. 'I find myself thinking that we were all great story-tellers at number six. Yes, all of us, meeting in passages or assembling each other's quarters or in the square, were busy collating, and presenting to ourselves and the other three, the truthful fictions of our lives.' (TL200)

Nora decides that even if it were possible to have that audience again, she would not, for 'an audience, especially so sympathetic an audience, imposes restrictions I now wish to do without.' (TL201) By relinquishing her need for an audience, Nora finally finds her own unique voice; 'her 'art' moves from the feminine genres of tapestry wall-hangings and cushion-covers to the more universal one of narrative, of telling her own experience.'⁷² Where for most of her life she is a figure such as that Gubar writes of, striving for an unachievable identity, 'always and only becoming', as she enters her final period of waiting, Nora has claimed an identity through reinterpretation of her life's experience so far.

Made possible through a circular narrative (discussed further in Chapter 4), this reinterpretation allows Nora to reach a level of contentment, not through artistic achievement as we may expect, but through an acknowledgement and acceptance of her life's journey. Rather than gaining a sense of identity through the freedom to create, as she may have done as a dressmaker in London, it is the narrative itself, formed with honesty and great insight, that allows Nora to abandon her quest for the unattainable, and claim her own story. In understanding this, we accept that the idea of an artist archetype only applies in the sense that the concept is acknowledged, examined and set aside in the creation of a unique artist protagonist.

3.2 The women who paint flowers

'None of the girl students wants to be an artist; instead they want to be teachers of art in high schools, or, in one case, a curator in a gallery. Or else

⁷² Barry, *Fabricating the Self*, 76.

they are vague about their wants, which means they intend to get married before any of these other things becomes necessary.'(CE275)

Unlike Nora's experience of an earlier era (and different continent), Elaine is encouraged to study. She attends the Toronto College of Art in the 'Art and Archaeology' stream - the archaeology aspect to reassure her parents. The College is a patriarchal institution where 'any painter who would call himself an artist is an asshole'. (CE279) Echoes of this attitude remain with Elaine throughout her life, as is evident in her embarrassment in calling herself an artist, even after she has successfully practised art for decades.

Elaine accompanies the boys in her Life Drawing class to beer parlours that are divided into 'men only' and 'ladies and escorts' sections. Her presence allows them to sit in the latter. The implications of a world segmented into male and female are significant for Elaine. Her first alienating day at primary school in Toronto reveals a world where she can't wear pants any longer, only skirts, and where there are two separate entrances side by side: GIRLS and BOYS. 'If you go in the wrong door you get the strap' though the separate doorways lead to the same building. At playtime, the division occurs again with separate play areas for each sex. Elaine misses her brother who now plays in the BOYS playground and ceases to be her playmate.

At the beer parlour, the boys speculate about sleeping with the life models from class. 'There are two possible attitudes to this: lip-smacking or nauseated revulsion.' (CE280) They also speak with disdain about the two older women in the course whom they call 'lady painters.'

'If they're lady painters, what does that make me?' I say.

'A girl painter,' Jon says, joking. (CE279)

In her need for acceptance Elaine does not resent the boys' attitudes but instead feels privileged, an exception to some undefined rule. She begins to reject the conservative expectations and mannered aesthetic associated with femininity at the time. At school she swaps cashmere twin-sets and pearl button earrings for the clothes the boys wear: black turtle-necks and jeans. When a neighbour tells her mother that Elaine looks to be 'letting herself go', Elaine remarks that yes she is indeed 'letting herself go'; she is releasing herself from the world of girls. Consider Elaine's early childhood of camping and exploring the wilderness; in this ungendered world she was happy. Here she had access to her brother and parents throughout the day and the unstable, dangerous world of girls was yet to be discovered. The boyish clothes she adopts at college are 'not a disguise, like the other clothing, but an

allegiance'.(CE276) This allegiance is problematic because Elaine's relationship with men is ambiguous, as is illustrated in her painting *Falling women*. Despite the absence of male figures in this painting, Elaine explains that it is about men; the kind of men 'who caused women to fall. (She) did not ascribe any intentions to these men. They were like the weather, they didn't have a mind.' The painting depicts three women falling from a bridge, their 'skirts opened up like bells by the wind.' What the canvas doesn't show are the men who lie 'unseen, jagged and dark,' waiting for the women to fall onto them. (CE268) The bridge depicted in the painting recalls that over the ravine where Elaine nearly freezes to death as a child. Not only is this the site of abandonment at the hands of her friends, but the ravine is also rumoured to be a place where predatory men lurk in wait for young girls. Still the painting is cryptic. On the one hand, this work can be read as a revenge piece directed at her three childhood tormentors, Cordelia, Carol and Grace. These girls who abandoned her to the dangers of the ravine are here painted as women falling unknowingly into that dangerous place themselves. Yet in the context of Elaine's own ambivalence towards her femininity and towards men, the painting holds further significance. Though Elaine reveals to the reader that the men lie in wait for the three falling women, these men are not depicted on the canvas. This suggests that her perception of men as 'dark' and 'jagged' is one she wishes to keep hidden. As a person of limited capacity for displaying, and even experiencing, emotion, to admit a fear of men, to whom she feels an allegiance, is a shameful admission of vulnerability.

The betrayals of romantic love are perhaps all the more bitter for Elaine who has retreated to the world of men for safety. Like receiving a blow from the inside. Perhaps it is due to the complicated dynamic of being 'one of the boys' and in a few instances their lover also, that Elaine's sexuality is largely absent from the novel.

Fellow art student Susie⁷³ represents the sort of highly sexual femininity that Elaine is scornful of. Susie is blonde, with 'full hips and breasts too large for her height, like a rubber squeaky toy.' She wears heavy make-up and tight fitting clothes and has a 'breathless voice and a startled little laugh.'(CE282) Elaine describes Susie as a 'powder-puff', studying art simply because she is 'too dumb to get into university.' She represents the feminine world from which Elaine has 'let herself go'. On discovering Susie's relationship with the art teacher Josef, Elaine assumes that Susie is toying with him cruelly, that she is the one in control. 'Susie herself in incapable of love, she's too shallow' says Elaine, though we have come to think Elaine

⁷³ Susie's appearance in the narrative hearkens to the tradition of a 'sexually conventional foil' in the female artist's novel, as identified by Linda Huf. This character is blonde to the artist protagonist's brunette, flighty as opposed to serious and if she is also an artist, a far inferior one to the protagonist.

incapable of love, at least of compassion. Elaine has learnt about love from reading Faulkner and modern French literature and knows what it is meant to feel like; 'obsession, with undertones of nausea.' She would not go in for this type of love, she says, 'the sort that can obliterate.' (CE293) Elaine's own decision to respond to Josef's advances seems an anomaly in her personality. On the one hand, it seems to be more of an escape from the chaotic fumbblings of the younger men in car seats and movie theatres. 'No nonsense, no fooling around' (CE294), but there are aspects of his personality that she appears to respond to. A depressive and needy Hungarian, Josef tells her that she is an unfinished woman who will be finished in his class. He continually rearranges her in the areas of clothing and make-up so she appears more artistic, and importantly, more suited to his taste, much like the boys remoulding the statue in Atwood's poem. Elaine is his art object. Josef is ostracised by the boys but idealised by Elaine who finds his European-ness 'romantic'. This confession by Elaine comes as a surprise for the reader who knows she is otherwise not at all romantic. She also claims to feel he needs rescuing or protecting, yet Elaine has never before admitted to being at all maternal or nurturing. These contradictions reflect her genuine ambivalence towards men and a persisting confusion about her female identity.

Elaine's first marriage to fellow art student Jon is prompted by her pregnancy and lasts only a few years. The marriage is characterised by the repression of Elaine's artistic talent in order to make space for Jon's. She continually silences her opinions of his work and ideas for her own for fear of rocking the boat. She backs down in all their arguments. Initially she convinces herself this is out of love, but later admits that if she 'were to win them, the order of the world would be changed for which she is not ready.' (CE341) In the years after her daughter Sarah is born, Elaine stops painting altogether and wonders if 'all I will ever be is what I am now.' (CE342) Both Jon and Elaine are trying, and struggling, to succeed as artists. It becomes clear to Elaine that she is unable to treat her creativity with any respect while married to Jon.

Jon does not like me painting at night. "When else can I do it?" I say. "You tell me." There is only one answer, one that would not involve the loss of his own time. Don't do it at all. But he doesn't say this.

He doesn't say what he thinks of my paintings, but I know anyway. He thinks they are irrelevant. In his mind, what I paint is lumped in with the women who paint flowers. (CE345)

Perhaps because of the strain caused by her and Jon's concurrent artistic struggles, Elaine is grateful that her second husband Ben is not an artist of any sort. Thoughts and details about her husband and children take up little space in the narrative and their presence is not particularly important to the story, despite making up Elaine's 'real life.' Langston observes that the presence of Elaine's family serves to make the point that her painting career does not 'preclude her existence as a woman...instead it seems Atwood has inserted them as a merely perfunctory means of demonstrating Elaine's status as female.'⁷⁴ Elaine's brief description of Ben and her marriage to him also reinforces her need to separate herself from the world of women. When she marries Ben, who is 'practically single-minded' and a 'chauvinist of the more amiable sort', Elaine delights in the 'outlandishness' of it: the defiance of the lesbians and feminists in the art community. Ben regards her paintings with a naive wonder mixed with apprehension, 'like a small child looking at a candle,' he helps her with the business side of things, booking-keeping and tax deductions. Her marriage to Ben seems to validate Elaine's view of herself as an 'outside observer' of a society that dangerously reads too much into her work.

Elaine's painting *Life Drawing* shows the naked figures of both Josef and Jon, facing away from the painter, their bodies idealized with luminous skin and defined muscles. Each is midway through a painting on an easel. Josef's is of a voluptuous woman draped in a white sheet with a Pre-Raphaelite face where Jon's is an abstract series of 'intestinal swirls, in hot pink, raspberry ripple red and Burgundy Cherry purple.' Before them sits the model on a chair, draped in white, breasts exposed, her head a 'sphere of bluish glass.' (CE366)

The painting could well have been titled 'self-portrait' though Elaine neglects to recognise (in her description or in her own mind) that the life model is herself. The painting suggests that although Elaine rejects stereotype, she feels imprisoned in that role by men in her life. The image at once objectifies the male figures as they objectify her. The sphere of glass not only renders her anonymous by replacing her head, it also carries its own significance as the cat's eye marble, the kernel of glass which has all but obliterated her emotional identity. This missing identity is replaced by the depictions painted by Jon and Josef; one an idealised feminine or the classic muse, the other a cruel abstraction of the female body which could be interpreted as meat or candy.

⁷⁴ Jessica Langston, *Writing Herself In: Mother Fiction and the Female Künstlerroman*, (McGill University English Department: Montreal, 2004), 23.

The clear resentment of the objectification of women in the painting *Life Drawing* communicates a true feminist concern, but we cannot label Elaine a feminist because she actively resists stereotypes and categorising of any kind. Furthermore, she refuses to acknowledge that her gender has affected her experience as an artist. Consider the interview at the gallery prior to the opening of her retrospective. When asked if feminism is a meaningful classification for her art, she is defensive and confrontational. She defiantly deflects the questions, guessing the young interviewer is hungry for stories about ‘Male art teachers pinching your bum, calling you baby’. (CE90) Why should she be so resistant to this conversation after her relationship with Josef, who took advantage of herself and Susie? Elaine remains on the side of the men, despite the revelations of her paintings that she fears their power and resents the roles they prescribe for her. Her distrust of women, established during childhood, is far more deeply ingrained and the saturation of female images in her artwork is indicative of this fact.

When asked why she paints women, however, Elaine is dismissive, replying that she is a painter. ‘Painters paint women. Rubens painted women. Renoir painted women. Picasso painted women. Everyone paints women’. (CE90) From her detailed descriptions of her artworks we know that Elaine’s women are not romantic studies of beauty but uncompromising, two-dimensional critiques of character. Woman is the art object, but not in the tradition sense. Her nomadic early childhood and initial experiences with other girls have marked her as an outsider. Lillian S Robinson writes of *Cat’s Eye* in *The Nation*:

There is a sense in which women’s traditional destiny has always been more of a spectacle than an experience to her. For one thing, rigid sex roles and conventional relationships are an alien subject matter Elaine had to begin learning at age eight, when her family abandons a roving life of collecting botanical specimens in Northern Ontario and moves to a Toronto suburb. Although on a certain level Elaine is so eager to fit in with the neighbourhood girls that she mutilates her own personality in the attempt, she nonetheless views their ways with a bemused combination of detachment and agony, rather like an anthropologist captured and prepared for the table by cannibals she had thought would only be the subjects of study.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Lillian Robinson, “Cat’s Eye Book Review”, *The Nation* 248, no 22, (1989), 776.

In the Vancouver art group as a young mother, she views the other women, all feminists, with a detached bemusement. Many of them are lesbians, some newly declared. Though she claims to be ashamed of her lack of desire, Elaine admits to being terrified at the idea of intimacy with a woman. 'Women collect grievances, hold grudges and change shape. They pass hard, legitimate judgements...know too much (and) they can neither be deceived nor trusted.' (CE379) This distrust is borne out of the 'lessons' in gender Elaine receives from the other girls after moving to Toronto as a child. She is continually adjusted in the areas of appearance, manners and behaviour, and punished cruelly when she doesn't conform.

In contrast, when wandering through Toronto on her return to the city, Elaine passes Josef's house and reflects; 'Women were not real to Josef, anymore than he was real to me', she writes. She admits that she treated him unfairly but explains that 'young women need unfairness, it is one of their few defences.' (CE365) Elaine presents women as cruel and conniving on the one hand, weak and vulnerable on the other. This, again, reflects the genuine ambivalence she feels.

By the time of her retrospective, Elaine has come a long way from being lumped in with the women who paint flowers and this success is not only an artistic one. It is also very much a triumph of having challenged and broken free from stereotype. When she sees herself on a billboard advertisement for her retrospective, she is pleased by the moustache graffiti-ed over her face. On the one hand, she has a 'face worth defacing' but also, she has been masculinized and this says much of her place in regards to the stereotype of the artist. She has reconfigured a space seen as specifically masculine. This reveals much about Atwood's notions of women in art and is suggestive of her own reconfiguration of the artist's novel - a genre once owned by male experience. The Art Gallery of Ontario refuses to host her retrospective because it favours the work of 'dead foreign men', yet the aptly named Subversions Gallery is interested particularly because she is a woman and because her depictions of females subvert the stereotype.

Where Nora sees herself between the extremes of conservatism and eccentricity, Elaine is caught somewhere between denying patriarchal attitudes and rejecting extreme feminism. Between these polarities lie complex layers of ambivalence and contradiction. Both Nora and Elaine exist in a nebulous space between where they are expected to be and where they dream of being. Nora lives in a society where female roles exist strictly within the home, and the artists at Bomera, though creative like herself, do not see her as one of them and treat her with amusement, as though

she is their mascot. Similarly, Elaine is seen as a 'girl painter' by the boys in her art college and the women are too extreme in their feminist views for Elaine to feel comfortable (after all, she lives with a man, and sees it as hypocritical to hate them at the same time). Where Elaine defies the typical expectations of the female in arts practice by becoming a progressive and serious painter, Nora navigates art forms seen as 'feminine' to reveal glimpses of her creativity and artistic talent. Both protagonists, be it overtly or passively, resist the roles prescribed for them by the expectations of others. These expectations may be conservative, eccentric or somewhere in between, but in all cases threaten to categorise the individual. What Nora and Elaine are asserting is their agency and freedom of their identity beyond a stereotype.

Chapter 4

Driv'n by spheres⁷⁶

A circularity of time

4.1 In two places at once

Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backwards in time and exist in two places at once...Nothing goes away. (CE3)

This chapter will discuss the circular treatment of time in the case studies and the role of memory and interpretation in building the protagonists' identities. In his essay *Retrospectives in Patrick White and Margaret Atwood*, South African writer, Rodney Snelling Edgecombe discusses Elaine's painting *One Wing*. 'What Risley does...is to abolish the sequential nature of time and present her brother as he was at the moment of his death, pushed from an aeroplane in a hijacking, and as he was in childhood wielding a wooden sword. Risley has conflated the images of man and boy instead of recording them at different stages in time.'⁷⁷ Edgecombe goes on to say that the "afterlife of paint" referred to by Elaine is timeless and timelessness, with no linear graph, is better represented by 'the forms of sphere and circle, as in Henry Vaughan's vision of eternity.'⁷⁸ This vision, within Vaughan's poem 'The World' describes eternity as 'a great ring of pure and endless light' beneath which, 'time in hours, days, years' is 'Driv'n by spheres.'⁷⁹

Just as her artwork depicts this overlap of time, when Elaine returns to Toronto, she finds herself existing in at least two dimensions at once due to the ever-presence and intensity of her memories. 'There are, apparently, a great many more dimensions than four', Elaine discovers while attending one of her brother's lectures, and *Cat's Eye* is a testament to this idea. Coral Howells notes that both Elaine and her brother are concerned with 'trying to reconstruct the past, he through physics

⁷⁶ Henry Vaughan, "The World," *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, edited by D.H.S. Nicholson & A.H.E. Lee (The Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1917), 38.

⁷⁷Rodney Snelling Edgecombe, "Retrospectives in Patrick White and Margaret Atwood." *Quadrant* July-August: (1995) 85-89.

⁷⁸ibid., 88.

⁷⁹ Henry Vaughan, *The World*, 38.

and mathematics, and she through memory and imaginative vision.⁸⁰ Stephen's influence on Elaine's work is just as apparent as her entomologist father's and the two are united in Elaine's most recent painting, *Unified Field Theory*⁸¹.

Underneath the bridge is the night sky, as seen through a telescope. Star upon star, red, blue, yellow, and white, swirling nebulae, galaxy upon galaxy; the universe in its incandescence and darkness. Or so you think. But there are also stones down there, beetles and small roots, because this is the underside of the ground. (CE408)

We know that before Elaine trained as a painter she was influenced by the work of her biologist father, creating coloured pencil drawings of planaria worms which she found 'breathtaking, like stained glass windows' when seen through a microscope. *Unified Field Theory* has the microscope lens overlapping that of her brother's telescope, and in this way each minute detail is interconnected with the macrocosmic environment. As well as paying homage to her brother and father, the work also suggests a reading of the novel as a whole, which pays such close attention to the minutiae of Elaine's childhood as well as speculating extensively on the nature of time and the universe.

The structure of the novel with its present-day narrative formed around the preparation and opening of Elaine's retrospective exhibition, creates an opportunity for her artworks to tell their own story about her life. Jessica Langston believes the female *kunstlerroman* structured in the form of an older, accomplished artist recalling her past introduces a circularity in the sense that, by returning to previous material, there is opportunity for reinterpretation and revision and this is a creative process in itself. The idea of circularity is of key importance to both *Cat's Eye* and *Tirra Lirra*. Consider Nora's globe of memory, the way the reader is presented with themes and characters from her life as the globe spins. There is a freedom to explore made possible by a lack of linearity in the sense that the order and instance of events, themes and characters are not dictated by chronology. *Cat's Eye's* musings on time and memory continually reinforce a non-linear conception of time. Langston writes: 'Elaine's quest, and through it, Atwood's – is to bring the new, implicitly masculine,

⁸⁰ Howells, *Works and Impact*, 209.

⁸¹ The term 'unified field theory' was coined by Einstein in his attempts to prove that electromagnetism and gravity were different manifestations of a single fundamental field. Unified field theory is sometimes called the Theory of Everything (TOE): the long-sought means of tying together all known phenomena to explain the nature and behaviour of all matter and energy in existence. <http://whatis.techtarget.com>

vision of space and time, of the multiplicity of dimensions, into the framework of her life as a woman and artist.⁸²

The theme of time and eternity is, according to Beebe, closely related to the divided self myth. 'To escape death and become immortal, the artist-self would somehow remove himself from the bonds of the chronological time which drives him relentlessly from cradle to grave.'⁸³ The artist attempts to escape the bonds of time through his artworks; so while the man himself must die, the artist can become immortal. Any artwork or even object can potentially be immortal, but when a work of art is subjective, is infused with the spirit or consciousness of its creator, the artist can personally feel his existence to be in a way, eternal. In the text, *Margaret Atwood's Novels: A Study of Narrative Discourse*, Hilde Staels observes that Elaine Risley refuses to participate in the process of time, at least as far as the world of sensation and emotion goes. We can see the beginnings of this when she begins to faint as a child. As discussed in previous chapters, Elaine perfects the art of escape to such a degree that, by the start of high school, she has actually forgotten the details of the trauma she went through and refers to this section of her life as 'missing time' (CE263). Though Beebe says the artist attempts to capture lost time and imprison it within his (or her) artwork, Elaine's paintings serve more as acts of revenge or modes of communicating complex emotional landscapes she herself is unable to diffuse and articulate.

For the most part, Elaine's paintings are described in detail in an impassive way, though towards the end of the novel, Elaine does begin to reflect on the works to a greater extent. *Pressure Cooker* is a series of paintings created after her mother's death, and reveals a far more sensitive and telling interpretation of her mother: six images showing her mother first dissolving then materialising. 'You could read it as a materialisation, out of the white pipecleaner mist into the solid light of day...I made this right after she died. I suppose I wanted to bring her back to life. I suppose I wanted her timeless, though there is no such thing on earth. These pictures, like everything else, are drenched in time.' (CE151) The realisation that she cannot escape the bonds of time is a painful resignation for Elaine; here again she has attempted to recapture 'lost time' in her artwork. There is a sense of regret infused in her words which suggests she is mourning more than time itself. Elaine seems to be hoping for her mother to reappear, perhaps so she can relieve herself of the hostility she has harboured towards her parents for bringing her to Toronto, before which she was 'happy.' Though she suggests that the triptych can be read as a materialisation, for

⁸²Robinson, L. "Cat's Eye (Book Review)". *The Nation* 248, no. 22 (1989):776-780.

⁸³Beebe, *Ivory Towers*, 11.

Elaine, the true meaning is quite the opposite. If read in the other direction, the figure disappears into the 'white pipecleaner mist,' and the work can be seen as a direct illustration of her mother's disappearance from her life once the family arrived in the city. This sense of abandonment is also expressed subconsciously in a dream she has as a child in which her parents are 'dead but also alive.' Elaine describes them looking sorrowfully up at her as they sink down through the earth which is hard but transparent like ice. (CE166) The painting of her mother could be an attempt at forgiveness, though Elaine herself doesn't offer any clues. 'What would I have done if I'd been my mother? She must have realised what was happening to me, or that something was.' (CE150) In her description of the work, she offers two conflicting interpretations – one a materialisation, the other a gradual vanishing of her mother. Neither reading is finite, and it is in this way that *Cat's Eye* demands to be read.

In her thesis *Surviving Women: A Study of Margaret Atwood's Protagonists*, Kelly S Reese highlights the references to Stephen Hawking's ideas about time which exist in *Cat's Eye*. She quotes Hawking: 'Time (is) a more personal concept, relative to the observer who measure(s) it. Imaginary time is indistinguishable from direction in space. If one can go north, one can turn around and head south; equally, if one can go forward in imaginary time, one ought to be able to turn round and go backward.'⁸⁴ *Cat's Eye's* structure, which denies a linear concept of time, aligns itself with Hawking's theories; Reese goes as far as to suggest Elaine's brother Stephen is Hawking's namesake. Reese believes that Elaine's own musings on time are of vital importance to the reader when it comes to understanding Elaine herself. When she talks of existing in two places at once, Elaine offers insight into the struggle for survival that is her everyday life. Her childhood torment is not simply something that occurred in her past; it is very much a part of her present. In this way *Cat's Eye's* treatment of time is based not only on circularity but on the idea of 'at once-ness' where past and present run alongside each other and one invades the other so that they are often indistinguishable.'

Where Beebe's artist archetype paints to recapture that which he has lost and to immortalise himself through the art object, Elaine paints to make sense of her emotions, but primarily to assert some control over those who disempowered her as a child. What Atwood does is employ the traditional concern of time and eternity and,

⁸⁴ Stephen Hawking, quoted by Kelly S Reese, *Surviving Women: A Study of Margaret Atwood's Protagonists*. (New Britain: Central Connecticut State University Department of English, 2003), 31.

not only apply this thematically to Elaine's personal experience of conflated time, but also she allows a rejection of chronology to determine the structure of the novel. Where the tradition is decentered most dramatically is in the emphasis on the psychological basis and consequences of Elaine's withdrawal from time, as well as her own particular motivations to create.

4.2 Deliberate turns and accidental flicks

Like Elaine, Nora develops a visual concept of her memory, which is not linear but spherical, much like Vaughan's vision of eternity, and indeed, Elaine's cat's eye marble, which contains her 'life entire'. Nora's 'globe of memory' is 'as small as (her) forehead, yet so huge that its surface is inscribed with thousands, no, millions of images. It is miraculously suspended and will spin in response either to a deliberate turn or an accidental flick.' (TL25) The globe of memory mirrors the circularity inherent in the novel's structure. Take, for instance, this sentence in the novel's opening paragraph: 'I am not wearing the gloves Fred gave me because I have left them behind in the car, but I don't know that yet.' We are at once ahead of our protagonist and behind her, privy to more knowledge than she is and yet knowing less, as it is through her words that we are learning. In this way, the expected unfolding of time is collapsed. The reader embarks on a journey 'driv'n by spheres.'⁸⁵

The few artworks that feature in *Tirra Lirra* are also not immune to change. Though the images themselves are static, they alter in terms of Nora's perception of them. Take for example, the embroidery wall hanging that Betty Cust brings to show her. At the time of its creation, Nora thought it to be unsatisfactory and amateur, but upon seeing it decades later, she is 'so astonished by the excellence of the design and the beauty of the colour that (she) cannot speak.' (TL92) It is not until this point that Nora starts to realise she had begun to create things in her home suburb, despite her unhappiness there. This realisation causes Nora to 'alternately grieve for lost time, and rejoice that it was not lost entirely.' (TL93) She considers that while she waited to leave home, she had been able to play and create without the panic that plagued the later periods of waiting in her life. Like the shots from the firing range Nora overhears and mistakes for tennis balls bouncing off catgut, like Lyn Wilmot whose simple-mindedness recalls Nora's ex-mother-in-law Una Porteous, the embroidery provides a way into her past and the opportunity to reinterpret whatever it is she finds there.

⁸⁵ Henry Vaughan, "The World," *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, edited by D.H.S. Nicholson & A.H.E. Lee (The Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1917), 38.

The circularity of the narrative allows us to revisit objects, characters and scenarios (several times in some cases) so that a little more is revealed each time. It allows Nora to finally revisit a defining childhood experience which has been hidden far on the shadow-side of her memory globe throughout her life. Early on in the novel, we learn about her father's library containing *The Idylls of the King* and *The Lady of Shalott* and see that for a child 'in love with beauty' these books were portals into more beautiful worlds. Nora reflects; 'The poetry in my head was like a jumble of broken jewellery. Couplets, fragments, bits of bright alliteration, and some dark assonance. These, like Sir Lancelot's helmet and his helmet feather, burned like one burning flame together.' (TL13) The image of Sir Lancelot becomes tied to the memory of her father, though Nora is unaware of this and as a result feels puzzled by some of her emotional responses. At intervals throughout her life 'there has flashed on (her) inner vision the step of a horse, the nod of a plume, and at those times (she has) been filled for a moment with a strange chaotic grief.' (TL23)

It isn't until the end of the novel, when Nora's memory globe is 'in free spin' that she identifies this chaotic grief with her father's death and the plumed heads of the horses at his funeral. Though his face is static as a photograph, she remembers him in motion for the first time, coming up the stairs in his straw boater. 'Hold me tight!' she hears herself, a young child, cry out. By fusing the image of Sir Lancelot and the significant character of Nora's father, Anderson reinforces the idea that 'imagination is only memory at one, or two, or twenty, removes'. (TL201)

Critics have noted the 'literariness' of the structure of both novels; the protagonists returning to the cities of their childhoods where memories are sparked by the environment. This format, however convenient, is far more than simply a neat narrative arrangement. It corresponds with the idea of the circular narrative in that the end point is the point at which we begin, but if we were to continue with the circle analogy, both novels would be better represented by circles over circles, interlocking at various points, leaving a pattern rather like that of Nora's invisible footsteps during her obsessive walking: 'arcs, ovals...figures of eight, and any other shape you might care to name, all imposed and impinging on one another so thickly that it would have been impossible to trace a single journey.' (TL19) The key concept here is that there is no one single journey for the artist. The life remembered and the fictional self represented are all the richer for the co-existence of past and present. The fictional recasting of the past not only tells us of the self in the present, it also tells us something of experience filtered through imagination and memory and the circular arc of the narrative invites such returns. The full significance of the past is

not always able to be understood and part of the self's journey lies in revisiting the past to fully understand its connection to the present. This denotes a modernist sense of healing of the fractured self.

Chapter 5

Conclusions &

Reflections on my creative project

Often I draw shells from my old collection, relishing their knobbed surfaces and smooth interiors, the bowls of shadow they hold, the stretching irregular silhouettes cast across the desktop depending on the angle of the lamp. Though on the page there is an image of only the shell itself, for me they evoke an entire landscape, which I struggle, in words or images, to describe.

This concluding chapter will discuss my novel, *A Small Flame*, in relation to my research and analysis of *Cat's Eye* and *Tirra Lirra*. Following the discussion the key findings and main points of this exegesis will be reinforced. This section will form a bridge between the theoretical and creative components of the submission.

Like the two case studies, *A Small Flame* is a kunstlerinroman whose protagonist has a fluid and evolving identity and is not defined wholly within her role as an artist. Twenty-three-year-old Eve approaches the world with an endless string of questions. She questions the nature of life and death, happiness and depression, grief, love, relationships, the nature of creativity and her place in the world. Such concerns as these historically feature in the genre, as they do in many coming-of-age novels. On first reading, Eve is similar in temperament to the archetypal figure presented by Beebe in that she is introverted and sensitive, though differs greatly from Linda Huf's idea of the female artist who is 'spirited and fearless.' A deeper reading, however, reveals that she possesses, to varying degrees, every one of these traits and many more. Eve is difficult to categorise just as Nora and Elaine are.

The postmodern sense of dislocation experienced by Elaine and Nora also plagues Eve, permeating much of the novel. We feel that, though she experiences moments of connection with her environment, she is an observer, set apart. Her viewpoint shifts so that the reader is at once an inhabitant of her own mind, and an abstract pair of eyes watching from afar.

I inhabit that viewpoint and see a young woman walking, her thin legs caught in a childish gait, arms swinging, the wrists a knot of bones. She

looks full of potential, walks with purpose as though she's just set off towards some beckoning horizon.

Eve's perennial sense of dislocation relates to the mysteries of her past and the repression of the grief that followed her father's death. Just as Nora's globe of memory has a shadow-side, Eve lacks a coherent sense of history on which she can begin to build her adult identity. Like *Cat's Eye* and *Tirra Lirra, A Small Flame* utilises a circularity of narrative in that the protagonist relies on reinterpretation of the past in order to move forwards. It is during a discussion with her mother about Samuel's darkening state that Eve discovers her father's drowning was more intentional than accidental. Only upon uncovering this fact can Eve finally come to terms with the loss of her father and her mother's strange behaviour. In doing this she reaches a level of genuine expression in her artwork. This denotes a modernist sense of resolution between the past and present self, leading to greater self-expression which is discussed further in this chapter.

The implication of characters using creative pursuits as a kind of healing is modernist in the sense that the fractured self is on its way to becoming whole, yet the notion of art creation as therapeutic is an idea borne out of the late 20th century. This juxtaposition of historically conventional and contemporary ideas is characteristic of the 'decentering' of tradition which is a feature of the case studies.

Eve experiences periods of compulsion where she 'obsessively' creates drawings and collects textures by laying paper over a surface and taking rubbings with a soft pencil. In regards to Eve's artwork, we feel it is not only concerned with aesthetics but rather represents her need to tie herself and her life in with her environment. By assigning meaning to household objects such as spoons, shells and keys, she strives to create a sense of connection between all aspects of her life. She longs for everything to 'hang together' to offset the perennial feeling of dislocation felt by herself and those around her.

Rather than relating to grand aspirations, art is portrayed in *A Small Flame* as something which heightens a person's sense of wellbeing and enriches life. Elliot acknowledges that he could be pursuing a career, making greater use of his intelligence, but is happy with the balance of his life. His parents think he is wasting his potential, but he is unconcerned. His decision is in one sense a defiant rejection of his privileged upbringing as is apparent in other instances, such as his refusal to live in the investment property owned by his parents. He explains to Eve that the only way he can be free from the expectations of his parents is to not be tied to them or

dependent on them in any way. Elliot's boat building also seems to be a form of escapism. He admits that the presence of the boats in the apartment reminds him of the sea and the playful contrast they create in the apartment suggests broader and more adventurous possibilities. Gubar's idea of 'art as life or life as a kind of art' is relevant here. Just as Eve's drawings recreate and repeat the objects of daily life, so do Elliot's boats become almost like installations in the bathtub and sailing across the mantel. They redefine the space, throw out the perspective.

A Small Flame echoes a feminist concern for the protagonist beyond her role as an artist. We feel that Eve's emotional journey is of greater importance than her artistic development, though the two are inextricably linked. Despite spending much of her time worrying about creative problems, emotional issues and concerns about her identity, Eve is unconcerned with money, not even knowing how much a car would cost, if she decided she needed one. Apart from her art teacher's suggestion that she consider pursuing illustration, she doesn't worry over her future career or opportunities for financial gain. Where Henry is an example of creativity applied to a commercial context, Eve is concerned only with the aesthetic and conceptual success of her art.

Unlike *Cat's Eye*, in which the artworks themselves provide an alternative version of Elaine's life, *A Small Flame* does not feature extensive descriptions of Eve's work. Eve's artistic growth is primarily used to illustrate her emotional growth as she becomes more confident in her self-expression. At the beginning of the novel, the main concern of her art teacher, Candice, is that Eve never 'lets herself go' with her art. Eve struggles to express herself and works within the safe confines of still-lives. It's not until she discovers the truth about her father's death, and in doing so, connects with the past – the initial site of her grief and beginning of her artistic repression – that Eve's artwork begins to develop into something expressive and genuinely creative. Her still-lives of household objects begin to take on extra meaning as she 'collects textures' and merges these found elements with her own drawings. As Lisa notes, the strength of Eve's work is in the 'selection; what she chooses to portray' and also the arrangement of one object beside another. In the same way as *Cat's Eye* concerns itself at once with the minutiae of microscopic natural objects and the nature of the universe, *A Small Flame* explores the existential concerns of its characters and, in Eve's case ties these in with the small mundane objects of everyday life. Objects such as seashells, keys and model boats open up entire landscapes of memory and emotion.

Despite her sense of dislocation, Eve's concerns are not to do with female repression as in *Cat's Eye* and *Tirra Lirra*. Her experience is quite different to that of Nora and Elaine who find that social expectations inhibit their quest for identity. Eve's struggle to pursue her art is not hampered by pressure and expectation. Rather for Eve it seems the opposite is true. Her anxieties, and those of her friends too, relate more to the complexity of having too much choice and too much opportunity. Therefore the risk presented is that of making the wrong choice, be it in relation to relationships, career or lifestyle. Thus, Eve's artistic journey is set in a very different context to Nora's and Elaine's.

Unlike Nora and Elaine, who rarely find themselves in this scenario, Eve is on an 'even plane' intellectually and creatively with her friends. She may display a fair dose of self-doubt and insecurity, but she has 'loosely' located herself in a community of like-minded peers who encourage her creativity. Where Nora and Elaine struggle to connect with others, Eve's journey is not marked by the same sense of existing as an outsider in society. Though she finds few like-minded friends as a child and adolescent, her present friends are reflective, philosophical, university educated people like herself. In fact, almost all of the characters are engaged in creative pursuits in one way or another. Eliot is a French polisher by trade but is also a fine craftsman when it comes to working on his boats, which he does almost obsessively in the front room of the flat. Sam is a writing course graduate, disillusioned with the lack of employment options in which he can use his creativity. Eliot's boyfriend Henry is a graphic designer. Ollie, a visitor from Sydney, designs sets for theatre and encourages Eve to have more conviction about her status as an artist. Eve's university friend, Lisa, though on the surface she fulfils the role of the 'sexually conventional foil' discussed by Huf, is talented and serious about her art. Eve's mother's creative expression is directed towards her garden which provides an ever-changing backdrop to the events of the novel. In contrast to Grace's garden in *Tirra Lirra* which is a symbol of reconciliation and healing, Eve's mother's garden is a form of creative escapism similar to Elaine Risley's painting. Eve recognises this as a child when her mother distracts herself from meaningful conversation by talking about planting, potting and fertilisers. This is clearly illustrated in the scene when Eve has created a still life arrangement on the kitchen table using the sea shells collected at her 'dad's beach'. Her mother's interest in Eve's drawing activity turns quickly to disapproving indifference in response to the shells; she puts her gardening gloves back on and heads back outside. 'Think I'll re-pot the pittosporum in that blue pot, what do you think? Hmm?'. Her indifference is all the more hurtful considering Eve's drawing is a

blatant expression of grief and her choice of subject a cry for help. Eve is quite literally abandoned for her mother's garden.

Despite the greater freedom she has as a woman in late-twentieth century Melbourne, the men in Eve's life do play a powerful role. Her father, who quite evidently suffered from depression and whose heavy sense of melancholy dictated the mood of the household, is idealised by Eve. In spite of his depression, he was a warm-hearted and affectionate person, whose memory stands in stark contrast to her mother's cold withdrawal from Eve after his death. Though I did not set out to write a feminist novel per se, Eve is, to a degree, dependent on men for emotional security. The relationships she fosters above all others are those between herself and Sam and herself and Elliot. As such, male figures become the most significant in her life; Sam, Elliot and, most importantly, her absent father who has been made a taboo subject by her mother. The story of his accidental death conceals the truth about his severe depression and thus makes the possibility of reconciliation impossible. Where his melancholia affected Eve in childhood, so does the repressed grief around his death continue to affect both her and her mother.

Similarly, Eve's relationship with Sam occupies her thoughts frequently. She laments the extent to which he has changed since the first carefree years of university. Where initially his friendship gained Eve much needed social confidence, the dynamic between them has shifted as a result of his darkening mood. Eve is beginning to lose patience with Sam's negativity - his company has become 'heavy' - and she longs for the 'old Sam' who surfaces only occasionally. Sam is disillusioned with the working culture of contemporary society and his worries become increasingly existential in nature. The parallels between Sam and Eve's father are clear long before Sam's suicide attempt and the truth about her father's death come together in the narrative. Her troubled relationship with Sam forces Eve to question what she wants in life and is ultimately what brings her to an understanding of her mother and her past. In the sense that Eve's struggles ultimately lead to healing and greater self-knowledge, this is a modernist novel. Eve's compulsion to free herself from Sam's negativity and depression mirrors her need to come to terms with her past. Just as she feels trapped by Sam's neediness of her, she remains a prisoner of the idealised memories of her father and dishonesties of her childhood. As in *Tirra Lirra*, the modernist idea of the fractured self being healed is undermined by the novel's ending. There is a sense of burgeoning contentment which emerges as a result of events taken place and truths revealed, but we feel that the novel's final scenes are no more an ending than another chapter in Eve's journey. Her relationship with Sam

remains in doubt, her mother continues to be enigmatic and Eve's fears for the future linger.

This exegesis suggests that the postmodern and contemporary artist novel is a fusion of traditional conventions and the specific details of unique stories. The archetypes identified in the structuralist theories of Beebe and Huf still have a surprising level of relevance to these postmodern works. The recurrence of time-honoured themes such as conflicted identity and search for self, as well as the use of narrative devices such as doppelganger figures all draw upon features of the genre established by earlier writers. The freedom offered by a non-linear time structure allows the protagonists to reinterpret and, in a sense, recreate their own lives in a way that is truly original and creative. Rather than aligning themselves with a predetermined image or archetype, the female artist has an identity which evolves over time and therefore is fluid and unique. This study has shown that, while the writers certainly borrow from traditional conventions, these conventions are revisited and reinvented without their limitations. In this way the artist archetypes of Dedalus and Kronberg exist only as reference points from which an entirely different protagonist is conceived.

An examination of *Cat's Eye* and *Tirra Lirra by the River* as well as my own novel, has revealed that their relationship to the kunstlerroman genre is complex. Their links to tradition are in their reference to the established conventions of the genre, yet their strength as original works of literature lies in those elements which make them unique.

The case studies of my research employ a rethinking of the conception of self which is in one sense modernist, though the lack of opportunity to understand the protagonists in a linear sense suggests the novels are postmodern works. Nora, Elaine and Eve are, like all people, full of contradictions, subject to change over time, and able to rework past experiences through a circularity of memory and interpretation. The psychoanalytical significance placed on past experience and the coexistence of past and present situate these novels in a postmodernist context, however, modern elements also exist in the works. This is one of several ways in which they refuse to be pigeonholed. Where *Tirra Lirra* hints at the existence of a 'true self' hidden within Nora, it is shielded too heavily by her own inability to recognise it and by the narrow viewfinder through which the reader can make sense of her. We understand that Nora's reflections on and reassessments of the past are a process of healing and personal growth, yet the concept of a coherent self remains impossible to the end. The very last scene of the novel conflates time so that Nora sees the 'plumed heads of

the curbed horses' at her father's funeral appear in Grace's garden. She is both old woman and young child, joined in grief. The circularity of the narrative makes such a scene possible and by the same token renders the concept of a story beginning and ending implausible. Like the arcing and criss-crossing patterns left by Nora's many walks around the suburb, an individual's life journey is portrayed here as an evolving and circular process.

Where Linda Huf claims that the contemporary female artist in fiction need only 'walk out on the fellow who brings her down'⁸⁶ in order to free herself from oppression, the theme of entrapment and escape in the case studies relates not only to men and patriarchal society, but more significantly to the protagonists' own limitations and neuroses. Elaine remains, for much of her life, a prisoner of her own inability to come to terms with her past, despite achieving great success as an artist. Atwood has decentered the traditional thematic concern by giving her protagonist a complex psychological makeup which reaches far beyond her identity as an artist. Just as the novel is about many things, so too is Elaine, and to assume her identity as an artist to be all defining is to misunderstand *Cat's Eye*. In a feminist sense, the significance traditionally placed on the role of artist is diminished next to the large number of other roles women assume and in the context of roles foisted upon them. In this way the idea of an artist archetype only applies in the sense that the concept is taken, critiqued and set aside in the creation of a unique artist protagonist.

⁸⁶ Huf, *The Writer as Heroine*, 156.

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A Small Flame

a novel

Philippa Garrard

My white sandshoes disappear into a sea of leaves but my father's heavy boots press the leaves down, making two indents in the autumn carpet of our front garden. My father kneels in front of me and opens his hand. In the crinkled bowl of his palm is a gift for me. It rolls gently to one side, revealing a small hole at its top and a larger one at its base, where the North and South Poles would be on the Earth. It looks like a faded antique Christmas decoration, with stripes running vertically over its surface in perfect design. I reach out my hand to find it is filled with air and light as a table-tennis ball. All over the surface are tiny bumps, smaller than grains of sand, so small that the ball still feels smooth despite them.

'It's a sea urchin shell, Evie,' my father says and smiles his cloudy smile. 'It came in with the waves and when the tide went out it was left behind.'

'Is it a seashell?'

'Sort of. It's like a skeleton of the creature it used to be.'

'Before it died?'

'Yeah that's right. Before it died it had little spines all over the outside.'

I hold the sea urchin so that I can peer through the large hole at its base to see the pale walls of its interior and the small window of light on the other side. I pinch my other eye closed to bring the little scene into focus. Through the tiny window I see the olive green cotton of my father's shirt, then as I move my viewfinder, the brown skin of his neck, Adam's apple, blonde hairs, right up past his chin, mouth and nose to his eye. The eye comes closer to the window with a chip of white light at its centre. I hear the breathy exhalations of my father's laugh and the eye disappears. When I take the sea urchin away from my face, my father is standing up to his full towering height.

'You're a goose you are.'

I am scooped up near the bending branches of the trees with their yellow and orange leaves and carried towards our house. I hold my gift as though it were glass.



With the beginning of the rain everything changes. The wind inflates the curtains down the hallway like billowing sails and suddenly we are at sea, right here in the flat, the city cluttered and glinting all around. Elliot and I rush over the floorboards pulling down the heavy frames of the windows we leave open sometimes carelessly, often intentionally to allow the café smells, the tram and traffic sounds inside. At 10.30pm the doorbell rings and there is Sam with clothes soaked, hair dark and curling around his ears. I laugh at the sight of him. His wet footprints follow us squeaking down the hall.

‘How good is this?’ says Elliot from the kitchen doorway, a glass of red wine in his hand.

‘Not so good when you’re out in it.’

Sam peels off his sodden jacket and drapes it over my bike leaning against the wall.

‘I have that damp dog smell,’ he says.

Sam and I drink beers sitting on my bed, the old partnership, the ease of it. He tells me he has started writing a novel. His eyes light up and he is more animated than I have seen him for months.

‘I write it at work. We sit in these partitioned desks and behind mine is a corner with a grey cupboard that’s never opened, no one walks behind, no one sees my computer screen but me. So I’ve decided I’m just going to write what I want.’

‘What’s it about?’ I ask.

‘Well it’s kind of a bit aimless at the moment,’ he laughs, arranging tufts of tobacco expertly in the fold of a Tally Ho. He leans across to open the window a little. Frantic spatters of rain fall onto a section of my doona.

‘Shit sorry Evie.’

With the window closed the smoke fills my bedroom but I don’t mind the smell, not with the rain settling in outside, Elliot moving around in the kitchen and Sam back, for the moment at least, to his old self.

‘Hey did you hear about that woman, the paraglider?’ he asks. She got sucked into the eye of a storm and ended up at 32,000 feet, that’s like the cruising height for passenger planes.’

‘Shit. What happened?’

‘She came down again. Had some bad frostbite.’

‘Wow.’

‘I know.’

‘I think it would be hard to have that sort of luck. I mean she should have died. Imagine being alive only due to a miracle? It would be like a burden almost,’ I laugh and drink the last of my beer.

Then comes one of those moments when Sam alters the energy between us and I am unprepared. We are hanging out, all is relaxed and then he ups the ante. This is how it is. He places his beer on my bedside table and leans right up close to my face.

‘There are times I watch you talking, not really listening,’ he whispers. ‘And I want to dive right into you...and then just stay there, in the dark corners.’

And his mouth is on mine, my eyes close and we lie back on the bed. It is not so much passion I feel but a sense of something giving way, like falling into a peaceful doze and then into a familiar dream where I know the sequence of events by heart. I roll my face away, my eyes right near the dark window glass, droplets quivering on the city side. Sam begins to moan quietly in that puppyish way he has and we set off in the same direction, at the same steady pace, aiming at something like love.

These train trips exhaust me. I slot coins into ticket machines, walk up concrete ramps and stairs, slide my palms along cool metal railings. I travel in diagonals up and down escalators, listen to computerised voices and the repetitive beeping of automatic train doors. On the carriage, I avoid seats with dark patches and also the eyes of crazy people with stories to spill. Of course I would buy a car if I had the money, but to be honest I don’t even know how much one would cost. One aspect of train travelling I do like is looking out the windows. Looking at the places most people never visit, spaces between the tracks and redbrick walls tattooed with graffiti, strange buildings the size of toolsheds with warnings stamped in red on their locked doors. When the train stops between stations, I watch the workmen in their fluorescent vests carry out tasks I don’t understand or form circles in clouds of smoke. Their heavy dust-coated boots are like the ones my father used to wear. They remind me of deep imprints in hard sand, of the tangy smell of seaweed.

As I travel further from the city, I watch the green world of back gardens with their scattered bikes and dog kennels slide by. The trees here are versions of the one in my mother’s garden which I used to climb as a child, the leaves shaped like stars and the dry bark with deep grooves running lengthways. I remember climbing almost to the very top where the branches became dangerously thin and clinging to the narrow trunk like it was the tall mast of a sailing ship. From here I saw the layout of our garden with plants spilling over the edging in perfect design, the pittosporums with their shivering confetti leaves and the neat shape of our house, birds’ nests in the gutters, green lichen growing over the roof tiles in shapes like countries on a

map. My mother would be kneeling in the earth down below, pruning or planting or potting. She wouldn't know I was up there. If she did know she would have ordered me down, but I had become good at invisibility, moving without sound, observing the world like a portrait hanging on a wall. I would often move through the hours of Saturday afternoon up the tree, in the days after Dad had gone.

I lean my head against the train window where children's small fingerprints are arranged, layer upon foggy layer on the thick glass. The trees fly past in a blur of gesturing boughs and foliage. I am on my way to visit that very house I grew up in where my mother still lives and tends her garden. Her hair has become so long she winds it around on top of her head in a scroll of white and grey. A cluster of pins and combs is stuck into the cushion of hair and sometimes a flower or two pokes out. She used to dye her hair dark brown and wear it shoulder-length and styled but now she doesn't have so many people to impress; no schoolteachers, other parents, no friends either. I guess you would call my mother a hermit. I find it an effort to visit. We sit at the kitchen table and peer around flower arrangements and sip tea.

'So uni is going well then? Keeping you busy enough?'

'Yeah it's fine.'

'Almost finished now?'

'Uh huh.' I like to get her talking about gardening so I can nod and relax. She goes on for hours, showing me paper packets rattling with seeds and taking me on tours of the back garden. My mother's house sits on a double block, a large outer-suburban slice of green, roughly rectangular but tapering slightly towards the front, so the effect of the back garden is that of a broadening expanse, opening out on both sides when looking at the back fence, or the small sections of it that can be seen through the trees, plants and vines. Today it is, as always, sculpted to perfection, spectacular in its arrangement and glistening from the rain. The pond in the fernery beside the garage is a relatively new addition, something I would have loved when I was a child and teenager still living here. Circular, shaded and cradled by rocks, the pond suggests its own separate environment, its own moist atmosphere, its own scale. I feel as though I should be smaller, small enough to swim laps across it, or else it should be larger, a deep lake surrounded by cliffs. I enjoy looking at it. It throws everything else out.

When my parents first moved into this house, I was just a few months old, and they had moved from the beach. I remember driving past their old house once when I was very young, just starting prep grade. We were travelling further down the headland for a holiday but pulled off the highway through a smallish surfing town and down a gravel road which ended in an odd-shaped cul-de-sac. The house was white weatherboard, peeling and rusted on the roof, hidden behind a lot of scrappy trees. The other houses in the court were new, most of them not yet

finished with piles of sand and odd sections of timber out the front. These new houses sat in pairs, identical like twins with facades of grey stone.

‘Don’t think it will be around for much longer, Jude,’ Dad had said, peering out the window at the street.

‘I’m amazed it’s still here at all,’ answered my mother. ‘What do you think Eve? Can you imagine us living here?’

I remember feeling frightened at the idea of living in this strange street. The trees were the sort huntsman spiders crawled along to make their way into a house. It was harder still for me to imagine my parents here, without me, living a different life, different people.

There was a time when I thought of my parents in the format of a love story. I was at an age where fairytales revealed truths about reality, and I relied on their lessons for reassurance about the world. They revealed to me, love, as something undying, constant and exciting. Both parties in love were beautiful with symmetrical faces and clear blue eyes. They resided in either a charmingly lopsided cottage or an ice-blue turreted castle, or first one and then the other. There are some aspects of my imaginings, however, which I believe came from my own observations of my parents, and not from the pages of my storybooks.

Sitting in the backseat of the car, I would listen to them singing along to the stereo, my mother taking the harmonies, Dad drumming the steering wheel with his fingers in short bursts. Every now and then they would wander off-key and drift into laughter. This was my travelling soundtrack while service stations, pale spreading fields and all the familiar road signs flew past the car. Did we only ever travel to the beach? Even when we travelled into New South Wales and up to Sydney, we meandered up the east coast, taking four days instead of two, stopping over in ugly brick motels in the coastal towns. Fish and chip dinners on the pier, the sand, a park near the shore.

I remember the way they would float on the ocean side by side, laughing and talking loudly. My mother’s long pale legs stretched out with pointed toes, rising out of the water and lowering again in a slow dance that was both graceful and awkward. Dad would float, still and calm with his arms crossed over his chest, his skin turning browner by the minute. I would attempt to float as well, filling my lungs with air, adjusting my arms for balance and closing my eyes against the sun’s yellow glare, feeling its warmth settle on my face like a soft cloth. The three of us on the surface. I remember that.

There is a tree in the wide bedding along the back fence, a Japanese maple which grows and sheds stars, at intervals orange, crimson, blonde and brown. The tree was planted the day after I

was born, just a greenish stick in a plastic pot. It used to be called 'Eve's tree', my tree, now it is called nothing, but it still has this name in my mind. I try it on.

'My tree's looking good,' I say, turning for my mother's reaction. I see she has squatted at the side of the path to pull some weeds from a crack in the paving. She looks up.

'What's that? Oh yes. It just keeps on growing.'

I think about myself growing up here, a baby, a child, a teenager and all the while this Japanese maple growing in the garden alongside my life, like my silent twin. It will outlive me, I realise this for the first time. I envy it. Not for its longevity, but because its only purpose is to be still and beautiful and continue to grow. We should have planted a tree for my father, one that would keep going for decades and outlast us all. I keep these thoughts to myself. We don't talk about him. If my life was a film and you walked into the cinema late, you wouldn't know I ever had a father. On the surface this is how it is. I long to search the garage for the yellow envelopes filled with photos, for the albums she locked away, the suitcases full of his clothes. I imagine myself demanding she let me look, foot down, flushed face and tears springing out of my eyes. But this woman with seaside daisies in her hair and freckled fingers pointing out the bluish tinge of her hydrangeas never had a husband.

The train back into the city is almost empty. I watch the sky, the segments of it I can see through treetops, between buildings, sometimes an expanse. Looking off into the distance, my thoughts seem to spread out into the space, trying for some sort of clarity. I think about Sam. I remember feeling compelled to kiss him, to stroke his hair and taste him. I remember him arriving at my door with a backpack full of beer, cheeks flushed from riding in the cold air, thoughts focussed only on the following few hours, the evening we had together. On these nights we'd eat take-away then perhaps watch a movie or some American sitcom and go to bed early. A red edge of anxiety creeps into the back of my mind as I think about last night, how the change in weather prompted something in me, reminded me of how it used to be between us.

These appearances by the 'old Sam' are fleeting and becoming less frequent. Much of the time even the thought of him is heavy, weighted, like a bag packed with sand. He's taken to walking for hours on end with no destination in mind. He says it helps him think but when I ask about what he shrugs as though it were nothing important. He walks down to the industrial port where container ships pull in and seagulls wheel around, says he likes watching the cranes and men working as though the rest of the world doesn't exist. As though life's single all-important task were to shift large metal crates from one place to another like children's building blocks. He does these things and I'm beginning to lose patience or interest, maybe both. Last night Sam was a person from my past, someone I have missed, have even longed for.

I have been spending a lot of time watching Elliot build his boats. I am amazed by his efficiency and organization. The tiny tools are laid out on his desk like instruments on a surgeon's tray. The toxic smelling glue is applied to each surface in perfect shiny spheres before the adjoining layer is pressed firmly on. Under the desk his toes make small even movements inside his woolly socks but the rest of his body remains still. I enjoy looking at Elliot, the way his hair is pulled back loosely into a hair band and his glasses sit slightly crooked on the bridge of his nose. We talk. I tell him about my frustration with Sam and he tells me it's most likely a quarter-life crisis. He says he has only just come out of his and I may yet descend into one myself in the next few years. It's the 25 mark, he says. For the first time in your life you realise you won't be a young person forever. Your parents are white-haired and your friends are getting married and talking about having babies. The stupid thing is, you ask most people what the perfect age is, the age they would like to stay at all their lives and they say, 'Twenty-five, definitely twenty-five.' Elliot says that's the problem, you're in it and you know it should be great, but you also know you can't hold onto it.

I try to tell him that I don't feel like this. I feel too young still. I'm waiting for the day when I feel grown, complete. When the world and everything in it makes sense.

'Just you wait Eve,' he says. 'In a few years you'll take up some daggy hobby to get your mind off things. Something like building model boats.'

The trip home takes forever. The train crawls painfully between the last four stations, stopping for ten minutes at a time in no-man's land. I stare at the wall moving past ever so slowly. *Kaz 4 eva*, it says, *Rock Dog*, *Suck this Baby*. Finally we pull into the station and I step out into the warm air of the afternoon. Walking out of the underpass, I see a group of people gathered near the level crossing. The boom gates are down with red lights flashing and bells jangling. A shiny police car is parked with two wheels up over the footpath, and beside it is an ambulance with its back doors swinging shut. One policeman in a fluorescent vest is waving traffic into a side street and another is talking over a clipboard to a group of teenage girls. There is a small group of people gathered on the footpath, talking in serious voices. I walk slowly towards them and pass, with my eyes down, listening.

'A woman, well girl really.'

'That's what they said?'

'Yeah. Just threw herself in front. Right at the last minute.'

'Shit.'

'I feel for the poor driver, the train driver. Imagine it.'

‘God yeah.’

I walk home along the back streets with their terraces huddled together. Safe as houses, I think. On these days after rain I see things in full colour, bright with clean edges. I walk slowly and take it all in, things I pass almost everyday. Bicycles chained to balcony railings, a ginger cat on a disintegrating wicker chair, leaves with yellow tips hanging over fences, a family’s shoes lined up on a veranda, five pairs arranged in order of size. I glance in the windows of cars lined up next to the gutter and see various items on the passenger seats; sunglasses, street directories, a pile of textbooks, a silver fork. I want to feel part of the day, the street, the suburb, but I am apart from it somehow, separated by imaginary distance or a thin transparent film. It’s not hard for me to imagine the scene from a distance away, even further, a satellite picture of rooftops, trees, cars, narrow streets, back gardens. I inhabit that viewpoint and see a young woman walking, her thin legs caught in a childish gait, arms swinging, the wrists a knot of bones. She looks full of potential, walks with purpose as though she’s just set off towards some beckoning horizon.

I plan what I’ll say to Sam tonight at the pub, I’ll tell him about the girl who jumped onto the train tracks. But it didn’t make me sad, I’ll say. It made me realise something about myself. I realised the obvious - I’m alive! This afternoon the world was a different place, I will tell him. That’s what it can be for you too. I want that for you too, Sam. I wonder what sort of mood he will be in, and whether he’ll listen or understand.

The Palm Lounge has its double doors open to the footpath and music spilling out, driven by a steady drumbeat and muffled by the voices of the clientele. The lighting inside is dim and greenish, faces pale shapes with shadows, conversations mingled into one continuous hum with a streak of laughter flying out every so often. The plants I had always assumed were plastic have somehow grown taller and hang over the couches in tropical gestures. I scan the room for Sam, and head for a red sofa by the bar. Our meetings are always like this, I arrive early to get a seat and I wait. Even when I try to be late he is always later.

Walking past the local bars during the day, I often peer in at the empty rooms where the lamps are unlit, the carpets not yet vacuumed for the night’s trading, the outdoor chairs stacked messily inside the door. It gives me a pleasant feeling, confirms that the options for lifestyle and work are many and varied, that the ideas and rules I set for my own life are not as meaningful as I think they are. These rules were established long ago, as though they keep my life in order. They are not only rules about diet and exercise and not smoking cigarettes, they are silly things

too. One is that no television should be watched in daylight hours, another is that my drawing pad will never be put away, must always remain set up ready on the desk, even if I go days without doing any work. Elliot will only eat fast food on long road trips or late at night after hours of drinking. My mother's list is endless, and to break one would be cause for panic. Sam doesn't seem to have these rules. I see him carrying two pots of beer towards me, smiling like a cartoon. His hair is gone.

Since Sam started working full-time, he has tried more and more to dress down in his leisure time, as though trying to convince himself that he's still a carefree student on a modest wage. His shirt is an old uniform of some kind, an olive green polo shirt with small holes to one side where an embroidered crest has been picked off. He kisses my cheek as he plonks the glasses on the coffee table, spilling beer as he does so.

'Hey there,' he says sucking beer off his hand. I pat the thin carpet of pale hair on his newly rounded head.

'Wow. You look like a baby. A very tall baby.'

'Yeah after last night I felt...um...revived. Revived would be the word.'

He sits heavily on the spongy sofa, swivelling around to face me.

'So I got it shaved in my lunch hour. At the office they thought I looked like...anyway, that's beside the point, the point is who *cares*? You can't have it too long and you can't have it too short either.'

'Well you look very fresh. I forgot how nicely shaped your head was.'

'Yeah, the bump of knowledge. Apparently it's a family thing.'

Sam balances a pouch of tobacco on his knees and sets about rolling a cigarette. He really looks quite exposed without his curls, his neck especially looks fragile and slender like the branch of a young tree. There is a small scar behind his ear, a neat silver line where no hair is growing. I take in the details with a new interest, he is changed but still the same, there is more of him on display than before. His forehead is broad and smooth with the hairline symmetrical, dipping slightly in the centre to a form a point, in a way that reminds me of the cap worn by some birds. He talks with the white stub of the filter stuck to his lip.

'When people ask me how I am these days the first word that comes to mind is *bored*. Just bored,' he says dryly, then presses his leg against mine and smiles. 'Aside from well, you know.'

I should ask him about his day, but I'm reluctant to hear his stories from the office, the boredom, the frustration, the older workers who whinge about their health, the window he stares out of, longing for fresh air. I have heard these stories so many times that my response these days is a negative one, a swelling sort of anger that I can't channel, so I become agitated and

want to be alone. Sam has downed his beer in record time and heads back to the bar, leaving his perfectly rolled cigarette perched on the side of the ashtray, as yet unlit, a clean white thing. I think of the small strings of tobacco on the sheets of my bed this morning. This small detail and from outside, the smell of rain.

As he reaches to take the jug from the bar, Sam's tattoo slides out from the sleeve of his shirt, and again I'm reminded of last night, the warmth of his torso against mine, the way we knew each other, moved together. The tattoo is a marker, a stamp of belonging to a certain place at a certain time. In our case it was the beach and we were in a state of enjoying each other so intensely that the landscape, for me, was temporarily reinvented and no memories existed in that place, as though nothing had occurred there before we arrived. The tattoos were my idea. I wanted something new, to take away with me.

Sam had a single black line around his upper arm, just a thin one like a line drawn with a felt tip pen.

'How could I get sick of this?' he asked. 'How could this go out of style? It's a line.'

I designed a seashell in my sketchbook, a circular one like a spiralling shell viewed from above. The tattooist etched it onto my hip in blue ink while I stared bleary eyed at Sam and out the window to the quiet seaside shopping strip behind his head. I remember seagulls pulling at a potato cake on a bench on the footpath. The tattoo turned out beautifully, neat and clean-edged like a stamp pressed in ink and applied to the skin. It's on my right hip, looking natural as a birthmark, blue as a vein. Sam liked to kiss me right there. The tattoos were not just about having fun, adopting a sort of light-heartedness about change and about the body. I also wanted to place some sort of claim on time. Needless to say I wasn't successful.

What is it anyway? Time. Both a thief and a giver, fast and slow. We put so much effort into trying to control it, then occasionally we swim through it as though through water; easy, no impact. I think the reason Sam is sad has to do with time. It's the feeling of wasted days flying by and being powerless to stop the motion. So I think I do understand why Sam is sad, yet still I can't help but wish he would lighten up and rise above it. He talks about watching all the faces, yawning and staring on the train with him in the mornings.

'It's bloody awful,' he says. 'The feeling that everyone is just putting on a brave face, pulling themselves together, making the best of it. The effort involved in keeping the surface acceptable, pleasant, cheery. And really, for me, the effort it takes to even get up in the morning is sometimes all I can muster for the whole day.'

We have these conversations a lot. I begin by trying to reason and cheer him up, but I always end up shrugging, sighing, ordering another coffee just so I can hold onto something warm. A section of his dark cloud edges over above my head.

If he calls the following day, I usually say I'm busy, and to be fair, I often am.

Now Sam is rolling another cigarette, his leg bouncing on the spring of his foot. He is talking about work but I have tuned into the past. It occurs to me that when I first met Sam, he was something I'd never been able to be, not an optimist *or* a pessimist because he rarely stopped to dwell on big ideas which could drag him down. Once upon a time he was like that.

I take too big a gulp of beer and swallow painfully. He goes on.

'I mean there are plenty of worse things to be doing than sitting in an air-conditioned building everyday, sure. That's what people say to me, like I should be thanking my lucky stars.'

It suddenly seems very hot inside the bar, the breathing presence of people, the dirty carpet underfoot, the beer I've lost appetite for turning warm in my hand. I crave the night outside with its clear neon lights and black sky.

We walk on the footpath past cafes and bars, the smoky air of the Palm Lounge still inside our clothes. Overhead are the lights of a plane heading towards the airport in the west. Sam holds my hand as we walk up the hill but I am irritable and let my fingers hang loosely without taking grip.

I kiss Sam goodbye outside the Noodle House and it begins to rain. As I'm walking up the side stairs, I turn to see him still standing under the bright light with a crease between his eyebrows and his shoulders slackened.

I smile weakly and wave.

I am afraid of being dragged downwards.

I am afraid of missing out.

I am also afraid of being unkind.

This morning the footpath is scattered with the crisp curls of dried worms. I walk. I like walking through the backstreets where houses are lined up staring out at each other across the roads and cars wait patiently against the curb. There's one house I call the mansion. It seems like a childish word, mansion. *Rich people live in mansions*. Not this one though, with its cracked stone walls and tired velour couches lined up along the top balcony. The windows are always flung open with sheets of tie-dyed fabric billowing out if there's a breeze. Wind chimes clatter like cutlery and coloured statues peer out from behind the weeds in the front yard, goggle-eyed frogs, a plastic skull and a set of garish gnomes in football jumpers. Most of the other houses in these streets are a third of the size of the mansion, Victorian places with large thick-framed windows weighed down by heavy roofs and decorative verandas.

Our flat faces the main road where the trams trundle back and forth from the city. The shop below the flat used to be a laundrette but is now a noodle takeaway shop, one of many in a franchise. The place has no odour, even once the cooking starts. Vegetables and strips of meat are arranged in stainless steel trays behind glass. They look more like plastic imitations of themselves, brightly coloured and neatly sectioned. Despite the sterile appearance, I eat the meals most weeks, on a Friday or Saturday night when we have run out of food or I can't be bothered cooking. At least, as Elliot says, it's clean.

This has become my neighbourhood. From the slope of the hill the city buildings can be seen jumbled together, sometimes obscured by fog or a brown stain of pollution, sometimes they have the cold clarity of mirrors.

The seasons are rotating again. The mornings are cooler now with a pale sheen of fog and the sun behind furred at the edges. The trees, I suppose, are not quite so green, with the leaves beginning to brown just at the tips. But more than any of these things, it is something in the air, not so much a scent but something altered in the atmosphere. Autumn. The change of seasons suggests a new beginning but also seems to call upon all the years before, the associations and familiar feelings. Sometimes it feels as though previous years are running alongside the present, occasionally nudging into real time with snippets of memory. Whatever it is, I always end up thinking about love, looking at strangers I pass in the street, watching men in cafes from behind my book. I don't know what it is I am looking for, what exactly is lacking in my life. I have Sam to love, to touch and kiss and hold onto through the night. But he knows me already.

I would like to be discovered.

What is love all about anyway? I ask myself.

As a teenager there were boys who started in me a small flame of yearning. They were the boys who started fires in parks on weeknights, leaving circles of ash smouldering as the sun came up. I saw them wandering through residential streets, looking in at the houses with their yellow squares of light and smoking cigarettes they stole from Safeway. I fantasised about the smell of their unwashed hair, their child's skin, the swear words leaping viciously from their tongues, their fragile red hearts under their ribs. I admired the flair with which they wore their school uniforms, with the modifications of 'cool,' the grey slacks one size too large, torn at the knee and frayed at the hems, the white shirts untucked and missing buttons with flecks of biro along the sleeves. I was in awe of the openness with which they were angry and afraid of the world. The ease with which they fell in and out of love with girls, their willingness to give themselves over in the seedy darkness. Their desire to burn things.

The other girls in my social group hated these boys openly, and preferred the tanned athletic types who spent their lunch hours on the basketball courts. They were laughing girls whose voices overlapped each other, whose expectations I played up to knowingly, who idealised certain boys and turned away in fits of laughter when one approached and said something. The boys I attached myself to were long-haired with quiet deep voices and smooth slim torsos. Boys whose second-hand clothes smelled of unchanged sheets, familiar and safe.

I was drawn to the smokers at the back of the oval, watched them secretly behind my fringe which never sat right. I loved the way they did things, butting themselves up against authority, scribbling frantically in the margins while most of the class was figuring out equations. Occasionally I would see one of these boys bullying another student and I grieved, sometimes for days. I grieved for the hurt and humiliated but also because the boys had failed to live up to my romantic ideal. My heart was disappointed.

My friends weren't interested in these boys except to ask about their naked bodies, sections of which I had seen, although I put on a casual air when I answered their questions, as though I saw them in their entirety all the time. The truth is, I wasn't interested in these girls either. The group was a safe raft for a girl like me to stay on as I floated through school. I knew this. I perched on the edge of their conversations about diets and magazines, feeling separate and a little concerned they would discover me as a fraud. On the weekends I spent time alone, dreaming about some boy or other, drawing my still lives and listening to music that carried me out the window to another place. I was more concerned with finding a companion than having a pool of people to call up when I was bored. And I was rarely bored.

I would walk home from high school alone, my friends heading in the opposite direction to catch the train or bus. I'd follow the leafy backstreets to my house, cherishing my own company. After the noisy corridors, rigid timetable and breathless conversation of the school day, I could finally be alone with my thoughts, favouring the quiet residential streets over the main roads. There were certain houses I enjoyed passing whose friendly facades I still remember clearly now, older houses, stone or weatherboard, with rambling gardens and verandas at the front. I imagined myself living in these houses. There was one place with a very large front window looking in on a living room, the details of which could be seen quite clearly on overcast afternoons when the sky was dark. On the facing wall of the room was a rectangular, bevel-edged mirror positioned so it reflected the scene outside the window. Crossing the road at this point, I would see myself first approaching, then slowly passing the house, my back pack hanging low on my back, my legs encased in white socks that looked like bandages. I watched this teenager with intrigue, found her to be both too old and too young, too naïve and too rebellious, too thin and too fat.

I started university with the same vague insecurities about myself, sitting quietly at the back of the class or lecture theatre, absorbing the lessons in silence. As shy as I was, I was skilled at reading people and recognised in Sam, from the moment I saw him arguing with the receptionist at the arts building, someone I wanted to get to know. It wasn't so much his appearance, but something about the thoughtful pauses he left in his conversation, the fact that I couldn't predict what he would say next. I stood by the coffee machine that dribbled out sugary hot chocolates and watched him as my paper cup slowly filled.

'But I thought I was enrolled, you see. So I have been going to classes.'

'From our point of view though Samuel, you are not enrolled, despite attending the classes.'

'It just seems a bit twisted...I mean, I am officially enrolled in a photography subject somewhere on the seventh floor...but I haven't been to a class yet.'

'Yes?'

'So I know nothing about photography, but I will probably pass and have it listed on my transcript.'

'And?'

'I know a lot about film studies, and have even submitted an essay...but I can't pass that, or even have it acknowledged.'

'That's right Samuel.'

'Okay...But don't you reckon it's a bit twisted?'

We took the same short fiction class, Sam confidently putting forth his ideas while I looked down at my books, face burning, shuffling through papers as though I had lost something. A few weeks into the semester, Sam read a piece of his own work aloud, and I spoke for the first time in that class. My voice came from nowhere. I needed him to hear me. There was a line at the end of his piece that I will never forget. *Biting into a ripe peach, you may find it either sweet and juicy or floury and dry.*

'I like that,' I said stupidly and cleared my throat as the faces of my classmates turned towards me. 'That line is really memorable. It makes me trust you...as a writer.' There were murmurs of agreement, and Sam's smile sailed across the room towards me. My shoulders dropped in ecstatic relief. He heard me.

We bumped into each other at the café on the break between our two workshops, and didn't go back to class at all. As I sipped my coffee I greedily took in the various aspects of him, his wavy hair, his brown forearms, the casual way his clothes seemed to hang off his slim frame. I didn't

know if he was handsome, but I couldn't take my eyes off him. He seemed both boyish and wise, both fragile and brave. He was also funny and very sensitive, perhaps even more so than I was. After this we sat together in lectures and doubled over with laughter at private jokes. We saw movies and drank coffee and rode our bikes down backstreets like kids. Sam taught me how to roll the perfect cigarette. I showed him my sketches and small watercolour paintings. When we started sleeping together, it was such an easy thing to do, like getting into a car on a rainy day. His bed, a single, was pushed up alongside a wall that bloomed with rising damp in a terrace house beside a laneway. Under his narrow child's doona we would rest our heads on the one pillow and pull the covers back and forth in our sleep. Mine, a double mattress with two pillows, was situated in a weatherboard house from whose front windows you could watch trains hurtling past day and night. After we made love he would smoke and I would lie against his chest, amazed that all my lonely teenage years had moved forward to this sequence of heavenly days and nights, when each shift in weather or temperature, each slow intricate transition of light to dark and back again, seemed impossibly beautiful, and each word passing between us was like a small gift carefully wrapped and tied.

Sam, where did that happy boy go? I look at him now with a mixture of weariness and frustration. Love is there too, I'm sure of it, occasionally glinting brightly like metal in sand. But there's so much sand!

Elliot is standing by the large arched windows in the front room, drinking coffee and looking down over the street. The boat he is currently working on remains untouched on the desk. I sit cross-legged on the floorboards in a slanting rectangle of sun and sip strong black tea.

'You follow the sun like a cat,' he says smiling.

'I love it,' I reply, pressing my palm on the warm wood and closing my eyes. It is Saturday.

'I heard you and Sam the other night.'

'Oh god really?' My eyes spring open and look at him.

'Uh huh. You sounded like a cat too.'

'Oh shit. I'm sorry Ell.'

'Don't worry about it. I'll get you back.' We laugh and all feels relaxed, the trams clanging on past in the street, voices drifting up from the footpath. The morning is bright and furred at the edges like sun glare on dirty glass.

'Actually I met someone last night,' Elliot says, joining me on the floor. I shift a little to let him into the square of sun.

‘His name is Henry. He does graphic design. He is a fair amount taller than me.’

I ask all the expected questions and I see Elliot is excited, more so than I have ever seen him. He tells me that Henry is a friend of a girl he went to school with, how he bumped into them outside a Japanese restaurant and the three of them ended up sipping on miso soup and talking. Then she left. The raft of sunlight slides slowly across the floor and we move with it.

‘He has one of those voices,’ says Elliot. ‘With a little grain of gravel in it. You just want to listen to it forever.’

Later on when Elliot has gone out, I gather up my canvas shopping bags and make a list. We usually split our weekly shopping into two lots because neither Elliot nor I have a car. We have perfected the task, each of us taking care of different items, though the tins we have to share between us because they are too heavy. I write my list on the back of an envelope that has beautiful blue designs over its interior, tiny decorative wheels arranged in rows.

Eggs

Bread

Toilet paper

Dishwashing liquid

Spaghetti

Tinned tomatoes

Cheese

These items I can purchase. I can carry them home and consume them. But the list in my head and heart goes on and on forever, coiling in on itself or streaming out in the wind. *Love*, it begins, *happiness, friends, direction, laughter, sunlight, love, love, love.*

Sam tells me about his brother Jonathon, the way the pair of them would act up, break petty rules, make prank phone calls, throw a tennis ball back and forth between their beds as they talked at night. I listen with interest as the world of siblings is revealed to me. I imagine having a brother or sister, another person in my family to spend time with and talk to, someone to break the ice, share the load. An ally.

‘There was one time when we were about four or five,’ says Sam. ‘We went through this weird phase where we wet our pants.’

‘A lot of kids do that.’

‘Yeah but we only did it behind the garage, as a kind of gag. We liked the warm feeling in our pants. We just looked at each other and laughed.’

I think of my own childhood, my quiet good behaviour, my private games in the garden and secret projects in my bedroom. The way I pored over books and pictures, objects I found outdoors. In my memories I am often alone or tagging along silently behind my mother, but before this time, things were different. I stumble upon memories of my father, windswept, open-air scenes in which I am smaller, brighter, happier.

I see a large hand holding stones, shells or strange insects out for me to see, the fingernails lined with dirt. Dad’s SLR camera with the silver switches and levers, the long telephoto lens in a separate tubular black case. A bunch of keys with a brass compass attached. Sometimes there are only a few keys and other times there’s a jagged fan-shaped bunch. I don’t know what the keys are for, the car, the house, the shed, a bicycle lock, an office down near the coast somewhere. The compass was a gift to my father from my mother when both were young university students. I liked to walk with the compass and watch the tiny gold arm inside spinning slowly as though underwater.

These images of my father are just glimpses, I can only see him this way. After he died I looked at a photo, the only one I had managed to keep, though I knew not to reveal it to my mother. It shows the brick wall of a motel, and my father in front, leaning down to remove his boots. He is glancing at the photographer, captured in the second before he smiles. His hair is messed up by the wind, his face sunburnt. He wears a red t-shirt and khaki shorts and that year-round tan on his legs. This figure has become my father, this expression, this outfit, the specific shape of his hair. I know there is much more, but this photo I can trust.

For the next few weeks it seems every day brings rain. Gutters flow with small grubby streams, the nature strips are sodden as wet towels underfoot and the birds are noisier than the traffic. The smell of rain is so ever-present that I forget it altogether; it’s just there, like the sky itself. Sam has taken leave without pay and stopped going to work. He calls me every morning.

‘What are you doing today?’

‘I’ve got class.’

‘Uh okay.’

‘But we could maybe have coffee later on?’

‘Yeah call me.’

The line cuts out with a clunking sound. I wonder what he does all day long. I know he walks a lot. He’s mapped pathways all over the inner city suburbs. Sam invades my thoughts

constantly but lately I've been trying to clear my mind of him, push him away to leave room for brighter thoughts.

Sometimes I get him drinking in an attempt to bring back his old carefree self. We go down to the Palm Lounge or to the Green Door across the road, an old pub in the process of an extreme makeover. There are new light-fittings and tables but the carpet still has an RSL flavour to its design, and there are five poker machines in a dark room off the front bar, lined up like gaudy washing machines behind vinyl-covered stools. Old men drink silently at the bar every night of the week. I buy jugs of beer and make conversation which most of the time goes nowhere. Even alcohol these days fails to spark him up. What it does more than anything is make him horny. He leans into me, stares at me with a faint smile around his mouth. He walks me home in the dark, up the side stairs to my front door and transfers all his weight onto me in what is supposed to be a hug. Most of the time I say goodbye with a promise to call him tomorrow and try not to watch him walk down the stairs with his arms hanging. Other times I let him in. Because I love him, in a way, and because I like to feel needed. Necessary to someone.

In the city it is autumn and I watch all the handsome boys walking around the university in woollen jumpers and faded blue jeans. This university must be the windiest place on earth, with its narrow channels between stone buildings, wide unsheltered courtyards and tunnels framed by decorative archways. The wind doesn't so much howl as shriek. I constantly shift my art folio from one hand to the next as I make my way around, tucking it tightly against my body, trying awkwardly to prevent it from blowing out at angles. I envision myself blown into people or carried into the air as the folio is whipped up by the wind.

Stepping into the warm controlled air of the arts building is a relief. It has the same atmosphere as a library where voices hush upon entering and the pace of things seems to slow down. I sit on the high stools of the studios and spread my images across the desk, arranging them, seeing how they alter depending on their position. During classes I excel at the exercises. Create your own colour wheel. Replicate this image. Make a diorama. I like the boundaries to be clear. A set of criteria against which I'll be marked. It's the less structured activities I struggle with, when the teacher decides to be more experimental. Listen to this piece of music and paint for twenty minutes. Choose a poem from this book and interpret the words visually. Be intuitive. Usually I end up drawing a version of something in the room and add some moody details in line or colour but our teacher, Candice, is never fooled. A tiny woman in a paint-spattered lab coat who wears earrings the size of teaspoons and pointed elfish shoes, I imagine she lives in a tree house with a small bearded man.

‘Eve, you’re thinking too much. There’s no *flow* to it, no movement. What you’re doing is *trying* too hard. Let yourself go a bit hey? Just *go* with it.’

Candice has a habit of treating students like young children who need to be encouraged and enthused. When she talks to me I nod silently as though her ideas are ones I’d never thought of before. Eventually I notice she gives up on me and stops commenting altogether. This is both relieving and disappointing.

Sometimes in the break from class I have coffee with Lisa. She wears skirts, knee-high boots and fitted tops and has the sort of body men look at, curves swelling against her clothes. When I’m with her I feel myself fade away into a safe sort of corner where all that is expected of me is to listen. I enjoy her company. She demands nothing of me and compliments me for no reason whatsoever. We sit in one of the university cafés and talk about men. She is seeing someone four years younger than herself, and it causes her some embarrassment, especially since he still lives at home with his parents. Often the conversation is centred on her life, but this is more my fault than hers. I am skilled at diverting attention from myself.

‘So Eve, I saw Sam the other day on the tram, are you guys on together these days?’

‘No, just friends. How are things between you and Josh?’

‘Pretty good. *Great* actually. Except people assume I’ve got some sort of issue, you know, like I need to mother someone or I’m domineering or something. Even my *mum* said something about my maternal instinct being too strong. *Please!* Hell, I just like the guy. I mean, I wish they’d stick to their own affairs. Or maybe their lives are just too boring. Maybe they’re jealous because he’s so good-looking. Well, he *is!*’

In class Lisa is more serious and creates large life drawings using black ink. I envy her talent. Where my own life studies are flat and static, hers are alive with movement, as though the figure isn’t posed, but has stopped for just a split second. She has her mind set on being a successful artist and has an exhibition coming up at the end of the year at a gallery in the city. It’s a series of sky-scapes in greys and vivid blues on canvasses so large she stands on a chair to reach the top half. On first glance there is the suggestion of figures in the clouds, shadow curves of flesh, limb-like shapes, but after a while the paintings become just sky-scapes once again. Lisa rents a studio in the basement of the uni arts building and often goes down there after class to paint. I look at her paintings leaning against the wall and each one is something you could enter, first your eyes, then your body would follow. I wish I could create such spaces. My images remain on the page like illustrations.

The art classes are held in large adjoining rooms with high ceilings and wide grubby windows. The floors are smooth linoleum spattered with paint, the sort of floor that lets out piercing squeaks under the footsteps of running shoes. One of the rooms is set up with long

tables and high stools, while the other is where we assemble ourselves around life models or still life arrangements. We all peer around our easels in deep concentration, following Candice's instructions to focus on negative space and to draw only what we see, not what we imagine to be there. This suits me well.

There is a strong smell upon entering the studios, turps, linseed oil and paints. In an attempt to dispel the fumes, small fans whirl above the stainless steel troughs where we wash out our brushes. Candice recommends we take a walk in the fresh air during the breaks or anytime we're feeling light-headed. I take the smell home with me, in my clothes and hair, as reminder of what I do. I wear my spatters of paint with pride.

Many of the students in my art class are outspoken and articulate and have big ideas about artists' responsibilities and the role art plays in society. I listen silently and wonder how my sketches fit into the bigger picture. I decide they don't. Despite not saying much in the classes, I spend the tram ride home with thoughts and images swirling around inside my head, as fluid and sinuous as diluted paint applied to a sloping canvas. I feel on the verge of something. I close my eyes and rest my head on the glass, impatient to get home and open my sketchbook, but often by the time I arrive at the flat the feeling has passed and I feel abandoned, deflated, emptied of inspiration.

More than ever, though, I do frequently have an urge to draw. It hits me in the middle of the night when I can't sleep, and I end up sitting in the front room drawing Elliot's boats. I shift the models this way and that to challenge myself by altering the perspective. I focus on the tiny details, the plaited cotton of each small rope, the wood panelling in the cabin seen through each perspex window. The concentration involved in completing this one quiet task relaxes me. On some nights Elliot is still awake working so we talk, often absently while we each focus on our activities.

'What is it about boats?' I ask.

'I like building things. I'm good at detail.'

'But still, you could be building model cars or planes.'

'Yeah, okay.'

'So why boats?'

'Well...I guess they remind me of the sea. The water.'

'So it's about the sea.'

'Maybe, but mostly it's using my hands. Putting in the hours, arriving at a finished product. It's satisfying. What are you smiling about? Eve?'

'Oh nothing. It's just that with me, it's all about the sea too.'

I've started to work on smaller pieces of paper, anything I can find, different textures and thicknesses. I use things I find around the house as subjects; ornaments, my wallet, keys, jewellery, teacups, cutlery. I place the objects on the desktop and adjust the position of the lamp to create effects with light and shade. A soup spoon tilted away from the light cups its own shadow, an earring with a filigree bauble encases a segmented sphere of darkness. I sketch these objects using charcoal or lead pencil or felt-tipped pen. Often I draw shells from my old collection, relishing their knobbled surfaces and smooth interiors, the bowls of shadow they hold, the stretching irregular silhouettes they cast across the desktop depending on the angle of the lamp. Though on the page there is an image of only the shell itself, for me they evoke an entire landscape, which I struggle, in words or images, to describe.



At the beach house, Dad carries bags and holiday items between the car and the house, whistling a tune with no melody. The hairs on his legs are golden against his perennial tan. In the shade of the kitchen my mother unpacks groceries, cheerfully naming each item aloud before placing it in the pantry or the fridge. I explore, opening drawers and wardrobes, looking for useless objects, traces of people who've used the house before us. I find mothballs, three ballpoint pens joined together by a rubber band, a cake of grey soap with a texture like sandpaper and a cupboard full of board games. The house has spongy linoleum flooring, except for the lounge and bedrooms which are carpeted in shaggy grey wool with criss-crossing tracks left by a vacuum cleaner. There is a smell of wood and soap and dampness I find comforting, makes me feel safe as an object in a drawer. On the other side of the screen door is the backyard with its evenly spaced squares of concrete and dry grass sprouting in the strips of hard ground between them. I jump from one square to the other in my slapping thongs. The garden stretches out flat like a small paddock with yellow-headed weeds standing upright along the fence line. If you stand on the woodpile against the back fence you can see the blue ribbon of the sea and smell the weedy breeze as it blows over your face.

We walk down through the trees on narrow sandy pathways to the beach. I run ahead to stop the bull-ants climbing into my thongs, each footstep sinking into the cool, powdery sand. My mother carries our lunches in a plastic bag and a thermos with cordial swishing around inside, her face shaded by a floppy sort of hat like a flower. Every so often I call back to Dad, who stops intermittently to take photos of foliage, or insects. This is his place. There is a wooden building in the parkland behind us which he calls 'the office,' with browning chunks of apple laid out on a tray for the possums and maps covering the walls inside. There's a lot I like about the office, the animal stickers on the windows which light up like stained glass during the day, the long tubular chimes with their echoing bass notes out on the veranda, the small radio and the male voices conversing quietly inside it. I also like Carol with her wide bottom and frizzy hair who wears a green uniform just like Dad's and lets me arrange coloured pins in patterns on the corkboard. Dad has promised to take me to the office in the morning.

The small beach at the end of the paths is too rocky to swim in, the water veined with white foam and swelling against the ledges and crags. I take off my thongs and head up near the dry grass of the dunes to run circles and churn up the soft sand while Dad takes photos. We lay the towels out closer to the rocks where the sand is firmer and eat salad rolls dusted with flour which sticks to my lips and fingers. I pick the wet circles of tomato out of mine and pass them to Dad who opens his roll like a clam and snaps it shut smiling. The wind tries to steal our hats.

'Not so warm really is it?' says my mother, flicking at the gulls with her long thin arms.

‘It’s just the wind.’ Dad and I say at the same time.

‘Jinx you.’

‘Jinx you too.’

‘You can’t do that Dad. Anyway you can’t speak until I say your name.’

‘Which name, Richard or Rick?’

‘Richard.’

‘There you said it. Can I keep talking now?’

After lunch we walk up into the shrubbery to the edges of the National Park and Dad takes us over a wide yellow road and through more shrubs to the main beach where there are people sitting in pairs or groups. The beach is not crowded like it is in the school holidays and despite the sun, it’s not very warm. My mother has zipped up her thin cardigan against the air, but my father, with his golden skin and hair, is never cold. We see an elderly woman walking into the water, a bloated body on thin legs strung with veins, she doesn’t even flinch at the chill of the sea, just keeps walking out, then suddenly spreads her arms and dives into a small wave. Dad says he sees her here almost everyday, even in winter. As we continue our walk I turn to see her further out each time, a pale spot in the blue, appearing and disappearing as she swims. She shrinks smaller and smaller until it seems inevitable that the blue ocean and its tendrils of white will swallow her altogether.

At night when the News comes on and my parents settle in front of the television, I open the cupboard full of games. My favourite is *Operation*, where I can be the doctor and use tiny tweezers to remove organs, bones and foreign objects from a cardboard man who, despite being naked, has no private parts. If I am clumsy with the tweezers, I get buzzed and the patient’s nose lights up red. There is also a game of snakes and ladders with counters the size of drink coasters and a large felt playing mat. There are other games I don’t know how to play, but I like taking out the coloured counters and plastic dice and shifting them around the patterns on the playing boards. What I like about games are the small sounds involved, the delicate clack of the counters hitting each square on the board, the precise clatter of sharp-edged dice rolling over a tabletop. Some nights Dad plays with me, but secretly I know he finds it tedious, I’ve seen his eyes drift away from the table and stare at the windows or the small television talking to itself in the corner of the room. I don’t appreciate that he tries, instead I am angry at myself for not making the games more fun.

On some nights the surf is so loud I have trouble falling asleep. Also, the curtains with their thin weave of orange and brown cotton do little to block out the white stare of the moon. If

I sit up in bed and pull the curtains aside, I can see the ghostly image of the back yard at night, the same yard as in daylight but with all the colours drained out. With my cheek pressed against the glass, I see the table by the backdoor and my dad sitting on one of the benches in his green cardigan, staring out into the sky. The light from the bedroom where my mother lies reading her novels casts a warmer glow over him, like a weak sunbeam on his back but his face is turned upwards. Unlike the city sky with its few struggling stars, here they're sprayed thickly over the darkness in swirling shapes and the moon is a giant disc. My dad looks towards this vision but at the same time seems to be staring straight through to whatever it is on the other side. I've seen him take on this look quite a lot, on Saturdays when we're sitting down to lunch or in the lounge room after dinner when the television has lost his interest.

'You're miles away,' my mother will say. 'Hello, anyone home? Ri-ick.' My dad will then turn blinking back to the present and smile with his mouth only. On these beach-house nights, I've often been tempted to tap on the glass to break his trance, to see him turn and smile. But I continue to watch until the grey yard with its neat shapes and the figure of my dad inside it becomes static as a photograph or a painting. When my mother's lamp flicks off and the yellow glow disappears, he still sits there silent in the cold. Eventually I lie down again and fall asleep.



I dream of Sam. Not once but several times. He changes form, and sometimes he has no form at all, just a sensation close to my skin or a warmth wrapping around me.

I dream we are sitting in a boat out on the sea. The water is calm as a sheet of silk pulled tight at each corner. I hold his face with my hands and am happy.

I dream I'm in the arms of a grand old tree, bowing over the city lights. Then I am under his clothes, between his skin and his shirt, inhaling his smell. The moon is sifted through the weave of the fabric.

I wake early with a pounding headache as the first tram of the day trundles down the hill to the city. Padding over the floorboards towards the toilet, my nose begins to run like a tap and I realise with a subtle twinge of pleasure that I am sick. Sick enough to skip today's class. I slide back into bed, switch off my alarm and fall into a heavy sleep. I don't dream of Sam. I don't dream at all, just switch off to blackness. When I wake it is mid morning, the grey light seeping in around the edge of the curtains, all the noises of the street below wafting up through the air. Despite my nose being blocked on one side, and my head pulsing dully, I am full of positivity about this unexpected day off.

I prop myself against pillows like I used to as a child with the flu, lean my sketchbook across my knees and attempt to draw a section of my room. The winters of my childhood were punctuated by days spent in bed, just like this, but with a pile of books and a glass of lemonade. I remember trips to the warm medical clinic with pale green walls, my mother and I both sitting awkwardly in the quiet privacy of the consulting room. The doctor was a kindly man with grey hair and thick warm fingers with which he'd gently press sections of my face to check my sinuses.

'Does it hurt here?...Mmm...What about here?...Okay.'

Or feel for inflamed glands under my chin.

'Ah. A couple of golf balls under here...Mmm...is that sore there?'

After my examination the doctor would try to make conversation with my mother, just to fill the silence while he wrote out the script.

'A cold one this morning, the coldest July morning for five years they said on the radio. Felt like it too. Still raining out there is it?'

I remember the pictures on his wall. A black and white photograph of a mountain capped with snow, a diagram of a male figure, featureless but for a delicate system of red and blue

arteries like the roots of plants, and a collection of children's paintings in murky clumsily mixed colours. I enjoyed going to the doctor and secretly thanked my body for trying to show my mother I needed looking after, and when days later, my glands went down, my ears began to itch and my head cleared, I was gripped by fear of school and the world outside my bedroom.

In the afternoon I move to the front room of the flat. It has three arched windows with flaking frames and velvet curtains that are never drawn. The desk I sit at is pushed up against the sill of the middle window. To make room for my sketchbook, I carefully shift a half-built yacht to one side. It sits on a metal stand to make it easier for the craftsman to access the underside. The little sails and ropes are still in plastic packets. Elliot's tools are in a cigar tin; tweezers, tiny pliers, paintbrushes with tips finer than a sharpened pencil. He likes small things. Smaller versions of big things. He is forever rubbing his fingers together so that little flakes of dried glue fall off like skin.

Elliot has lived in this flat for over three years, me, just over two. We were first flatmates, then friends, and now this little apartment with him inside is home. I haven't once felt unsafe here, despite the drunk voices drifting up from the street in the early hours of the morning, the junkies occasionally screaming at each other from moving trams. When it's warm I sleep with the windows open, the streetlights and city noises drifting over my bed. The city offers the closeness of people and I am happy to be amongst it.

I remember how the isolation of coastal and country towns would disturb me during our family road trips. I remember passing cows in the paddocks alongside highways. Grazing peacefully in the sun and looking up all at once at the toot of a car horn, their broad handsome foreheads and large eyes, the entire scene struck me as perfectly arranged and perfectly paced. On our stopovers on hotels at night, I would often feel unsettled at the thought of those cows, in that same environment, but in the dead of night when the roads were quiet and the air was cold and dark. I imagined them standing there, grey silhouettes, static as cardboard cut-outs and felt a subtle shiver patter up my spine. A similar thing happened on our beach holidays. During the bright days, populated by people and gulls, my parents and I would walk down narrow pathways to the beach, just sandy tracks through tea tree scrub where bull ants and the occasional disoriented crab crawled in the undergrowth. At night I would lie in the sparsely decorated bedroom of the beach house and imagine those tracks running down to the shore lit only by moonlight, the only noise being the rumbling of waves rushing in. I imagined the moon perched somewhere above the landscape, clean as a coin, staring, as though waiting to witness something terrible and secret. The image in my head was so frightening I felt my bed to be too close in proximity to that place. The next morning, of course, I walked down the tracks in my bathers and thongs without a thought.

Those road trips of my early childhood seemed, in hindsight, to give shape to the years that each passed by as a slightly altered version of the one before. My night-time fears kept me awake in unfamiliar houses or motels, sometimes to the point where I would call out for comfort. My mother would come in and ask sensibly what I was afraid of, then smile at the ridiculous nature of my fears.

‘You’re safe as houses,’ she would say. ‘Nothing ever happens in a sleepy little town like this one.’ Her amusement comforted me, and I would fall asleep with the reassurance that I was letting my imagination run away with me. The nebulous predators I feared were busy tormenting people in the big city, while I was tucked away in a small room by the sea, unseen and unimportant. Sometimes even I struggled to comprehend the nature of the fears that kept me awake. They had no specific shape, just an atmosphere, like the sea whose glittering daywear was stripped off with the sun going down, and its dark shifting underside revealed through the night. I listened to it roar from my bed and felt unsettled. My dad was more adept at dealing with these abstract fears.

‘Do you know what Evie,’ he would say, gently, because the tone and volume of my dad’s voice was lowered with the lights. ‘All along the pier out there are fishermen, sitting in rows with lights next to them. It is a nice thing to see, if you ever want to go down. They sit there through the night when it’s good for catching fish.’ And I would fall asleep happily, imagining the fishermen with their bright lights and jackets and beanies, keeping vigil until morning.

As soon as the sun came up again, I would bounce out of bed ready for the new day, excitedly pulling on my holiday clothes, waking my parents, and helping with breakfast, eager to get down to the water or hit the road for the next leg of a journey.

All those places we visited, scattered over the map, are so distant it’s as though I dreamt them up. Did I really sit in the back of the Subaru while my parents chatted in the front seat, passing caramels and butterscotch lollies, listening to cassettes and talkback radio? I remember the clicking of the seatbelts into their sockets, the engine smell of the car, the patterns made by my fingers on the velvet-smooth seat-covering, the grey curl of plastic at the corner of my window where a layer of tinting had begun to peel off. These vivid details seem disconnected from the actual locations, the actual year and date of each holiday, as though my memories are too specific and focussed, just chips of reality that will never hang together as a whole.

Sam smokes a joint on my bed, staring at the ceiling. Around the central light is a ceiling rose that has always looked to me like an oversized, plaster coated biscuit, the Arnott’s Assorted ones with cream in the centre. The indented patterns are very similar. I tell Sam and we laugh

together childishly. Sprawled over the cushions and messed up covers of my bed we have watched the afternoon pass by peacefully outside the open window, my tea-tin clock tapping away insignificantly on the mantelpiece.

‘What would you do,’ Sam says, attempting seriousness. ‘If you were just walking down the street and saw someone coming towards you with the same face? With your face.’

We both begin to laugh again.

‘Sounds like a scary movie,’ I say.

‘But seriously, can you imagine what it would be like?’

‘I think I would scream and run the other way, or just look down and ignore it.’

‘Would you do that? Or...,’ Sam sits up and passes me the joint. ‘Would you look into their eyes, your own eyes, smile and say, *oh there you are.*’

I look at Sam’s squinted serious expression and for a moment I consider his question, but laughter takes over and I lie next to him, both of us hysterical. I lay my head on his chest, shifting a little so I can hear his heart, the steady distant thudding of it, and begin to doze. I drift in and out of some wonderful dream where I’m being carried a great distance over some endless undefined shoreline.

I lie awake beside him, a bright ribbon of light rippling across the bed, belting us in. The late tram dings its bell down on the street. The yellow of the streetlight, I realise, is warmer than the cold white glare of the moon. The city folds itself around me. Safe as houses, I think.

The next night I lie with him too. And the next. He sleeps restlessly, legs kicking back covers, arms flung across the pillows or reaching out to pull me close. When I wake in the morning he is staring wide-eyed at the ceiling. I roll towards him and try to drag him back to sleep but he is standing up, pulling on his jeans, rolling a cigarette.

They talk about fireworks. I run my hand over Sam’s round head. *Is this enough?* I ask my heart. *This small flame?*

I turn the question round and round in my mind, searching for an answer. In the early morning I pad over the rug in my bedroom, down the hallway floorboards and find the suburb cluttered outside the bathroom window under a brittle white moon. I fall back into bed and feel suddenly at peace. I stop worrying. I stop questioning, for a while at least.



It is the worst storm we've had for ten years or more. The gum trees across the road hurl their green hair around like wild dancing women, arms flying in all directions. I am on the living room couch eating cool slices of cheese from a white plate. The storm wails, the heating hums. I have been told to sit back near the centre of the room in case of a hailstone, golf ball size, shooting through the windowpane. My mother stands near the window with her back to me, a dark silhouette against the glaring sky, white with a grey ripple of cloud edging in from one corner, hail falling diagonal. In the driveway, our car is battered by hailstones, dints appearing in the roof and doors. My mother isn't too concerned about the car, only about Dad. He is over an hour late. She attempts light-heartedness.

‘Wow, how about this rain, hey.’

I make yellow stars from my cheese slices by eating them from the outside in, nibbling at the corners first then at the edges like a mouse. I arrange the stars in patterns on the plate before eating them last. I am trying not to think about Dad driving up the coast road under the darkening sky, wipers waving frantically, passing semi trailers that heave waves of water on both sides. My mother puts on one of her classical music records and turns the volume up loud to compete with the noise of the storm. This is meant to relax us both. I close my eyes only to see the violin bows jabbing through the walls of rain and hail, and they feel as though they're jabbing at me. It is a relief when she turns the stereo off.

Hail eases to heavy rain. My mother moves away from the window to the yellow light in the kitchen and the noises of food preparation begin. The fridge is opened, the vegetable crisper is pulled out and pushed back in, a firm suction noise as the fridge is closed again. There is a small whoosh of gas and the flare of a match as she lights the stovetop and places a heavy saucepan on the ring. She begins to chop some sort of vegetable in steady, even strokes.

The two tall lamps, one on either side of the lounge room, are flicked on so that their warm pink light falls on the furnishings so the room feels like a soft-walled haven in the centre of the storm. In regards to what's going on outside, I imagine the worst. I close my eyes to see the Subaru at an angle on the side of the highway, headlights glowing through sheets of rain, bonnet crushed into a grimace, and through the driver's window, my dad slumped over the wheel, eyes closed with streams of blood trickling from his hairline to his chin. I shudder away these images.

It's worse for my mother; I know this. She paces for ten seconds at a time then busies herself with preparing dinner. Occasionally she enters the lounge room to stand beside where I sit and plays with the hair at the back of my head. I offer a cheese star. She takes it and chews, smiling, but her heart isn't in it. She is thinking about the way she's been yelling at Dad lately. I hear the conversations from my bedroom or from the back garden. They are mostly one-sided,

as though my mother is talking on the phone; there is a pause as the other voice speaks, then my mother speaks again. Often Dad's voice is too quiet to be heard, but more often than that he doesn't speak at all.

'It's like this wall, right here. *All* the time. I don't know *where* you go!'

Pause.

'You're right here. You're sitting right in front of me. But you're *somewhere else*, Rick. Where *are* you?'

Pause.

'What do you expect me to do? What do you want me to *do*?'

I think of the way birds sleep by tucking their pointed faces under one wing and fluffing their feathers for warmth. I watch the dancing trees outside the window and imagine all the birds in the crooks of the branches, pressed against the smooth bark trying to avoid the rain. Or are they all safely in the shelter of the gutters and eaves of houses? Have any young ones fallen from their nests, which are thrown around in the wind like boats on a rough sea? Will their small twisted bodies lie half-submerged in puddles tomorrow morning? The fate of these imagined birds fills me with anxiety.

The chopped vegetables hit the pan and sizzle. Smell of onions. The lights of my dad's car slide over the front yard and the driveway, illuminating the rain. I run across the carpet to the hall and the front door. By the time I've turned the clunky deadlock to pull it open, Dad is bounding up the steps to the front porch, hair flat, face dripping, and the hairs on his bare legs bristling in the night air.

'I made it Evie. What a drive.' He dumps a heavy backpack and pulls the door on the weather. I take his large cold hand in my small warm one.



I run out of money entirely, stay home for six nights in a row until payday. Elliot cooks me meals, Sam brings Indian food over. Late at night I sit at my art desk and I draw draw draw and find I have retreated into another corner of my mind. Pencil shavings and silence.

Lisa cuts my hair short, in line with my earlobes. She tilts my head gently forwards chatting.

‘Actually,’ she says afterwards, looking at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. ‘Your face is shaped like a heart. I have never really noticed before.’

And I feel suddenly ready for the world again. I take my heart-face down the hill to the café strip, smile at the young man behind the coffee machine.

Later on I am in the city with Sam. We walk past an image of an owl stencilled in black on an alley wall just behind the café strip. It is heavily stylised with large weary eyes and a curved stature, its oversized talons locked awkwardly around each other.

‘Look at that,’ says Sam, pointing.

‘It’s beautiful,’ I say, taking his hand. He presses me against the brick wall of the alley, right beside the towering owl image. His mouth moves lightly over my neck and around my ears, sending bright little shivers down to my toes. I look up at the handsome owl, the heavily patterned wall, the section of sky stretching between the two terraces on either side of the alley, and see a magpie soar directly overhead. I wonder at the likelihood of seeing that very bird in that very section of sky from that particular alleyway, right at that very moment. It seems like some sort of miracle.

My mother had a book of owls. It was a large heavy thing with glossy photographs on one side and text on the facing page. Along with the other tall books that wouldn’t fit in the squat compartments of the bookshelves, it lived in the cabinet under the stereo system. There was a book made up of grainy black and white photos of cricketers, an atlas with beautiful blue and beige maps and a series of books on landscape photographers. I often looked through these books, in the evenings while my mother was cooking tea, or while my parents sat in the lounge room drinking wine and listening to music or watching television. The books were uncomfortably heavy on my lap and so I was happiest on the rug, lying front-down and leaning on my elbows with a book opened in front of me. With the atlas I would run a finger slowly over the smooth page, over oceans, islands and countries, across the fine lines criss-crossing the Earth. My father would point out Australia, this odd chunk of land bitten at the edges and I wondered about distance and time and the general size of things. The world of our house, suburb, state and country seemed both to shrink and expand in my mind. The ocean I had swum

in and walked beside lost its shape, leaked over its horizons and continued on forever. The atlas thrilled and unsettled me.

The images in the photography books were familiar and strange. Like photos from the family album but altered, the light dimmed, contrast increased, composition improved. The landscapes presented in these books were textured and moody, rotting trees cowering under banks of cloud and craggy headlands braced against crashing waves. The images with their clean white borders called for a sort of internal calm and gentle movement so that I turned the pages with care from the top corner, applying only the faintest pressure so that my fingerprint wouldn't mark the paper even for a second.

But the owl book was my favourite. The one I pulled out most to look through, and also the one whose images entered my head and found themselves a place near the front of my mind. It was something in the knowing, startling expression of the owls, their proud chests, their vigil over the night. I fantasized about these owls, wise and strong and caring. At night I would imagine a wing draped over me, and a smell of bark and leaves, not eucalyptus or pine, but something else, like the imagined scent for a picture of a tree. I remember climbing the liquid amber in the backyard at dusk, hoping to find my owl perched up there waiting. I watched the house below, my mother's movements around the garden, the straw disc of her hat hovering above her body as she cleared away her gardening tools. The branch I sat on was thick and dipped a little near the trunk, creating a perfect seat while my arm rested on the trunk for balance. My legs dangled. Often I would stay in the tree until darkness set in, the streetlights lighting up all at once like a string of fairy lights switched suddenly on. The windows of the neighbouring houses would begin to glow yellow, revealing the colourful details of their interiors, people moving around inside like characters from television shows. It was as though they were removed suddenly from time and place and from sound.

There are no images of the sea painted on the laneway walls. The city feels far far from the water, though on the map it is close to the coast. Occasionally I see a gull.

Spiders seem to have taken over my mother's laundry. Each corner, doorjamb and windowsill is strung with white webs and the brittle carcasses of flies. The spiders themselves appear only occasionally, when the light is flicked on at night or when their hiding spots are disturbed. Their bodies stick to the ceiling like sinister stars, eight legs splayed. My mother has made no effort to remove them or their webs, though I have seen her shriek and flutter her hands at the sight of one moving. I check the gardening gloves carefully, holding each one by the fingertips and shaking. Through the window I see my mother standing hands on hips on the paving, pondering

the arrangement of her new garden beds, three small circular spaces bordered by grey stones. The plants we just bought still sit in their plastic pots on the outdoor table. She begins to position the pots on the freshly turned earth in the beds.

Driving to the nursery was an unwelcome shift in time. I sat in the passenger seat while my mother drove the old yellow Toyota and I was a young girl again, a teenager. I stared out the window in a blanket of anxiety watching the familiar details of the area pass, the string of car yards on the highway, the orthodontic clinic where my plates had been fitted, the shopping complex, the petrol station, the old high school with a bright new sign. The nursery itself was new and free from association. I pushed the low trolley over the crunching gravel while my mother expertly navigated the aisles and aisles of plants. I saw a few of the green-shirted nursery staff smile and nod in her direction but it was unclear from where I stood behind her whether she acknowledged their greeting. She was a regular, but not the sort to offer more than a succinct smile.

The afternoon is cool and still. I dig neat holes in the soil with a short handled spade, burying worms when they appear wriggling. The soil is dark and moist with a wholesome farming smell. Earth. This is earth to grow things in, rich in nutrients. My mother has created a system of compost and worm farms and manure to create this environment for her plants. I look across at my tree, thriving, arms outstretched to the sky, hands full of stars. How is it that any maternal instinct she has goes into these plants?

She did not want me around after my father died. She was scared of me perhaps, of what I possessed. A heart full of memories. A head full of questions.

My mother knocks each plant out of its pot and gently breaks up the roots before placing it in the hole I have dug. She smiles when she catches me watching her, then looks down again at the soil. A mother, I think, but not the sort to offer more than a succinct smile.

Coppin's Hotel has three levels of rooms each with its own bar and DJ. Sam and I climb the stairs, heading for the third floor where there is a balcony hovering over the street below. Halfway up the stairway, he stops, turns towards me and kisses me wetly with lots of tongue. He tastes of beer and tobacco and all the good times we have had together, and I hold his warm forearm with my hand, gripping it as though I need it to keep going. The balcony is empty but for some straight-backed potted trees and an assortment of coloured glass bowls with candles flickering inside them. We sit at a small metal table near the railing. Sam retrieves his tobacco pouch from his jacket and starts to roll a cigarette while I wind my scarf further around my neck against the chill of the night air. I press myself against him for another kiss but he sticks the small white filter to his bottom lip and looks at me.

'So I've realised something Evie. About life. It hit me like a kind of...revelation.' His words are slurred from drinking.

'Yeah?' I wait for the revelation expectantly.

'The thing is, people, most people are scared.'

'Uh huh,' I say, looking down over the street. Taxis stop outside the bar across the road, opening their doors for groups of girls in high heels, squealing with laughter. A drunken man on the footpath below waves up at me grinning. I smile back wearily.

'People are scared of all the shit in the world. They don't want know about it, so they fill their lives with other stuff,' says Sam, slurring his words.

'What stuff?' I ask, suddenly tired.

'Just distractions, you know. But...I reckon we have a responsibility to think about all the shit stuff. You can't ignore it, you know. There are people who are having a bad time, I mean a really bad time. People who are suffering. And you *have* to let it get you down, give in to it. Because it exists. All the shit.'

Sam lights his cigarette and looks up at the night sky. To the east the buildings are lit up brilliantly, covered in bright sequins of neon. How quickly a night can change. A moment ago we were having fun, smiling at the people dancing, breathing in the fresh night air, passionate about things. Where do these thoughts come from?

'Let's go home,' I say. But Sam decides to stay out for another drink, all by himself. I walk home alone, past laughing groups of young people, couples with their arms around each other. Approaching the flat I see it is dark and even the external light hasn't been left on, the side stairs are lit only by moonlight. As I fumble for my keys a rat scampers out from behind a bag of rubbish I had left on the landing, too lazy to walk it down to the bin. The rat scuttles over my shoes and I release a squeal, a pathetic noise in the night. A shiver runs through me and I don't want to sleep alone.

I lie in bed beside the open window, watching streetlights ripple over the plaster biscuit as the gap in the curtains widens and narrows in the breeze. Hours later Sam leaves a message on my voicemail.

‘I just watched this documentary on dancing bears. It was horrible. Just fucking awful. Can you call me if you get this? I’ll be awake.’

I delete the message and start to cry. I press my face right into the pillow and sob. Not for any reason in particular, not for Sam or the fate of the dancing bears. It’s just that sometimes the universe and its myriad details, vast and miniscule, gather in around my head and I can find no peace.

Elliot steps in the front door the following afternoon, gusts of city air billowing in around him. I am squatting in the hallway looking through my backpack for a piece of paper given to the class by Candice.

‘Hi,’ says Elliot. ‘Just had lunch with my parents.’

‘How was it?’

‘They have bought matching spectacles. Round ones with blue frames. They sat opposite me like a panel of judges.’

Laughing, we walk into the kitchen and set about making cups of tea.

‘Still throwing money at you?’ I ask.

‘Not so much. They were talking about how intelligent I am.’

‘Well, that’s nice I guess.’

‘Sort of. What they really wanted to get across was that they think I could be more than a French polisher.’

‘It’s true.’

‘I know that. Of course. But I like what I do. I like the time I have. My boats.’

‘Of course,’ I smile, pouring hot water into our red teapot with the chip on the spout. I watch the tealeaves swarm. ‘I don’t even know what my mother thinks about what I do. It’s not a concern of hers.’

‘That seems so *simple* to me,’ he says. ‘Not having to worry about disappointing anyone, impressing anyone.’

The strong black tea gurgles into our cups. I wrap my hands around the warm porcelain and listen happily to Elliot’s humorous descriptions of his parents at lunch.

All is okay.

I am the daughter of a ghost and a madwoman, I think.

I do what I can.

We watch the rain from inside Plunger café. Passers-by hurry along under umbrellas, and I happily take in the colours of their clothing against the grey light. Sam drapes his wet windcheater over the chair-back, his hair sprung into curls around his forehead and at the nape of his neck. A waitress in a red dress and sneakers sets a tray on the table and unloads various items of crockery. A steaming teapot, two cups with saucers, a milk jug, and a silver cup filled with hot water.

‘Jasmine green tea for two.’ She smiles at the tabletop and darts away. Sam opens the teapot and looks in, moisture rising in a cloud around his head.

‘So I had this dream last night. A full-on dream, one of those ones that keeps going and going and you wake up exhausted.’ Sam pours our tea, hot water dribbling from the pot and running down his wrist.

‘Shit, that’s bloody hot. It was set around some harbour with ships everywhere and workmen doing stuff. I was working there too I think, anyway I was really dirty. Then you came strutting into the picture and you were wearing this box thing on your back that allowed you to fly. I knew what it was as soon as I saw it, even though it just looked like a metal cereal box or something.’

‘Had you been watching Astro Boy reruns?’

‘Nah. Even this was a serious dream. You flew away after I said hi to you, just went straight up in the air with the little motor whirring. And I really wanted to fly up too but I had no motor. So I just stood there and watched you go up like a balloon. Up up and up. I woke up all stressed out.’

Sam unpegs the sugar dispenser and watches the smooth white crystals cascade into his tea. I struggle to respond to his seriousness.

‘So...what do think it means?’

‘Well it’s obvious. It means, Eve, that you’re going somewhere. You’re going somewhere and I’m staying put, or at least, it means that *I think* that’s what’s happening.’

‘Dreams are never that obvious. I heard one of those people on the radio who interprets dreams and she said they’re never literal or straightforward. If you dreamt I was flying away from you, then the last thing it means is that I’m flying away from you. That’s what she was

saying. It's more likely to mean you are scared of heights or something, or you need a haircut, which you don't.'

Sam stirs sugar into his tea, circling the teaspoon continuously.

'But I'm not just trying to interpret my dream. I *felt* it. That's why it was so disturbing. It illustrated what I was feeling. What I've been feeling already. For a while now.'

'That I'm going somewhere? And you're not? Where exactly do you think I'm going?'

Sam shrugs and stares into his cup.

'I just feel you're further away. Actually, now that I think about it. Everyone does. *Everything* does. Feel further away.' He brings his cup to his lips and empties the whole thing with one slow gulp, his Adam's apple bobbing. I sip my tea and find it is still very hot against my lips.

Out the front of the Snippets hairdressing salon is a sandwich board with a different message written on it everyday. Yesterday it read: *It's a great day in a great country!* This morning it's: *There's a lot of cactus in the world, but you don't have to sit on it.* I smile as I walk by, I must tell this to Sam.

With Sam, days pass by erratically. I never know what to expect. We go out drinking, smoke a little. We walk and ride our bikes a lot. Occasionally we go on proper outings in Sam's car. One sunny morning he drives us to a market up in the hills and we buy matching leather belts with patterns imprinted on them. We wander through the stalls eating pasties filled with potato and lentils, Sam chatting to the stallholders, asking them about their goods and I feel pleased to be by his side. We buy a carton of free-range eggs, some with wisps of feather stuck to their shells and plan to make an omelette for dinner at the flat. Driving home I shift my feet amongst the junk in Sam's car to find a comfortable position and crack all the eggs but one. There is no omelette.

We ride our bikes into a bar in the city where a man plays a child's accordion and sings show tunes. We drink and talk like old times. Around midnight we devour an enormous plate of nachos, sticky with cheese and sour cream. A woman of about fifty with a cavernous cleavage leans across the table and winks drunkenly at Sam.

'Baby,' she drawls. 'Baby, you know what it's about. I can tell. Come on baby.'

Riding back to Sam's apartment we laugh hysterically, standing up in the pedals, cold air on our cheeks. Cars toot their horns at our dangerous riding. Back at the apartment I take Sam's hand and look deep into his eyes.

‘Come on Baby,’ I say. ‘You know what it’s about.’

We fall into bed laughing.

We catch the train to my mother’s house, kicking leaves as we stroll from the station. My mother has made pumpkin soup with sprigs of parsley and swirls of sour cream. I make small talk. We have a long conversation about house prices that has no relevance to anything and holds no interest to any of us. Sam stares out the window at the birds in the bird feeder and something in his eyes, the way the outdoor light is reflected in the irises, tells me his heart has done that old downwards swoop. I ignore it. Finishing her lunch, my mother excuses herself and goes into the back garden, inviting us to come and see the way some vine has taken off and is growing in some particular way. Sam and I walk back to the station in silence. I kick at the leaves.

Some days he cries. I am unable to tell what starts it. His mood seems as fickle as the weather or the alteration of light out the window. I begin to feel uneasy, and take up chattering in the hope of smoothing things over, setting things on a roll. This becomes annoying even to me. His crying is grief-stricken, passionate, pressed pulsing into my neck or my chest. I stroke his hair, feeling sad and confused. I lie awake at night wondering about it.

Often I arrive home from uni to find him already at the flat, talking with Elliot in the kitchen. These evenings are good. We eat together and talk and watch television. Sam and I make love in my dark room.

There are other times when he disappears for days. I leave messages on his voicemail but he never returns my calls. I feel angry and hurt and *his* tears invade *me* through the night, soaking into my pillow. I am lonely and I wonder how he does it, tips the scales so that I am the one in pain.

He begins to go to work again, having used up all of his leave. For a few weeks he seems okay, calling me in the evenings to ask about my day, inviting me around to his apartment for a home cooked meal. He makes Spaghetti Bolognese with garlic bread and salad. We go to the movies on a Monday night when all the tickets are half-price. It is a French film about a young woman who begins an affair with her mother’s boyfriend. They have high intensity sex in various positions inside a spacious apartment with soaring ceilings and towering windows. Afterwards we have some of our own, quietly and gently lying face to face in my bed.

One Tuesday afternoon I arrive home to see Sam perched on the railing at the top of the side stairs smoking a cigarette. When he sees me he smiles a greeting, blowing smoke into the air, tossing the butt down onto the road, but as I climb the stairs I see he is stressed, something there again in his eyes.

‘Hey,’ I say.

'Hey.'

'Not working today?'

'I lost my job. I know I deserve it.'

'What happened?' I ask, letting us inside, dumping my folio in the hallway.

'I didn't turn up yesterday. I just couldn't.'

'Were you sick?'

'Nah just...'

'Just weren't up to it.'

'Yeah.'

'So you just didn't show.'

'Yeah and they called me at about ten o'clock to see where I was,' Sam says, sitting at the kitchen table. I fill the kettle with water and take two mugs from the draining rack by the sink. He tells me how he couldn't be bothered trying to think up an excuse.

'I just told her I couldn't come to work. I mean I've taken days off before but I always lie and say I'm sick. Everyone does that. But yesterday I couldn't be fucked with that, those lies.'

'So was she angry?' I ask, sitting down, placing the tea on the tabletop. Black with no sugar, both of us.

'Yeah. And you know, I understand why. I was pretty rude. Didn't give anything away. She just went all silent and cranky, like my dad used to. Then I didn't show up today either.'

'Sounds like you wanted to lose your job.'

'Maybe,' Sam shrugs and blows on his tea. 'But there's money to think about now.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Well they're gonna pay me for another three weeks. And I have some saved up.'

'At least your rent is cheap,' I offer.

'Yeah. Actually...' he begins, smiling at me. 'I feel a little bit relieved about it. Knowing I never have to go back there.'

'There's always a positive,' I say.

'Not always.'

'Maybe not. I've just heard people say that before.'

'Yeah but they're dickheads,' Sam says with an evil laugh. 'If some guy came into your house and shot your kids and your husband and your dog, you probably wouldn't be thinking to yourself, *well, there's always a positive*, would you?'

'I guess not.'

Elliot gives me hope. He is grounded and busy and optimistic, without having to say anything. It's just there in the way he approaches people and tasks with interest, takes time, asks questions, laughs a lot. I long to be like him. There is a small museum by the city port buying his boats, charging a lot of money for them. They take a hefty commission, but still he does well. He works into the night, with his jazz albums cruising through the air, the heater blowing noisily at his feet. Four days each week he works at his French Polishing in the workshop just a tram ride north. To me his life seems simple and happy and creative. Also he has Henry, tall, handsome and always ready to launch into conversation.

I worry a lot about my artwork. There are many drawings and sketches I cannot finish, many that end up scribbled over or scrunched up in the bin. Everyone in my class is working towards a final project in drawing, painting, printmaking or collage, filling their sketchbooks with cuttings, notes and ideas. Lisa is obsessively working and reworking a series of paintings on tall linen panels. Three quarters of each canvas is sky, dramatic with cloud formations and swirls of smog. One of the images shows a patch of clear blue so vivid it appears to be lit from behind. Candice raves about the work with enthusiasm, gathering us around where Lisa has spread them out over the tables.

'They are industrial, kind of gritty, but then...the skies are so dramatic. The style she has employed here almost calls to mind impressionist techniques, here and over here,' she says. 'There is a sense of vulnerability about the city under the weight of these clouds.'

We nod and murmur in agreement.

At the start of each class I set myself up at the same high bench at the back of the studio. Dusty light from the grubby windows behind falls over me as I work, spreading my small images around me, striving for that quiet zone, that crisp lens of focus hovering between my eyes and the paper. I achieve it about fifty percent of the time, often so successfully that I am startled when Candice or another student breaks into my space by asking me how I am or commenting on my work. On other days I just can't find it. Frustrated I sift hopelessly through my drawings, attempting to rework some studies but too empty of inspiration to begin anything new. On these days I often pack my things up quietly during lunch break and leave early, hoping not to run into Candice on my way down the stairs. On the tram I feel depressed, unable.

When I arrive home there are two sailing boats in the bath. They are white with coloured lines along the side, the sails like wings somehow, twisted in on themselves. Afternoon light from the louvered window falls in stripes over the little scene. *The sea!* I think, and the anxiety of the day is

lessened a little. I walk to the front room where Elliot is hunched over another boat about a metre long. It has no sails yet.

‘Elliot, they float. I like them in there, you should leave them in the bath.’

He looks up and laughs. ‘It’s kind of cool isn’t it?’

I sit on the couch and we talk until the sky grows dark enough for the streetlights and neon signs to begin flicking on outside.

After tea Elliot looks through my folio. We are sitting on the couch in the lounge room, the heater whirring, eating noodles from the shop downstairs.

‘They are so...*you*,’ he says.

‘Really?’ I study the images he has arranged on the coffee table, all of them small studies of objects drawn just with grey-lead pencil. A teaspoon, a broken abalone shell, a half-open box of matches, the plug from our bathroom basin.

‘They are delicate,’ he tells me. ‘It’s the fact that you *notice* these objects and then draw them with such care, as though they were fine jewellery or something.’

I feel my face flush with pleasure, but I shrug the feeling away.

‘Sometimes I think they are just so *small* or something. Insignificant. You could just scrunch them up like a shopping docket, put them through the wash.’

‘Exactly! It’s that fragility that I like about them.’

‘But what does it *mean*?’ I ask, and Elliot leans back in the couch and thinks about this. *I love you*, I think, *I love how you really think about things*.

‘It doesn’t have to mean anything. It makes you feel something. It makes *me* feel something. That’s more important I reckon.’

‘Thanks Ell.’

‘I’m just being honest.’

‘It’s nice when someone *gets* you,’ I say looking down.

The tall windows of the studios catch the yellow mid-morning sun. Candice patters over the linoleum in brown boots, sitting with each of us for ten minutes or so to talk about our projects. She spreads my images over the paint-spattered table. The grey objects seem to fade back into the surface of the paper and all the hours I spend in my study at home suddenly feel pointless. I feel pointless.

There are several drawings that stand out to her, however. The large brass key to our front door, the tiny bird skull and a few studies of seashells.

'These are strong,' she says, her small head cocked to one side in consideration. She shifts the images around, alters the arrangement and pauses thoughtfully.

'You know, Eve, these are really starting to work. I wonder if you could create a tiled effect, by grouping a lot of them, perhaps even repeating a few of the images over and over...or had you thought about reproducing the same object in a different medium. A few others are doing intaglio prints. Maybe an etching? Here, have a play around.'

I am given a steel plate, about the size of a greeting card and told to file the edges so the metal won't tear the paper as it is squeezed through the press later on. I work away with the small file, morning sun heavy on my back and people busily working all around me. I think of Elliot and his boats.

After lunch, Candice sets me to work on a steel plate coated in a kind of acid-proof varnish. I use a fine-tipped tool to sketch the image, the design appearing gradually, barely there on the surface. I find the method suits the way I work, the fine detail and linear mark making. I drop the plate into a bath of acid and watch it eat away at the metal to reveal my sketch.

Printmaking turns out to be hard work. The plates must be inked, the edges cleaned, the paper soaked, then the printing press must be cranked manually. On my first try, I peel the paper from the embedded plate tentatively, feeling sure I will have created an inky mess, but find the bird skull image centred and crisp against a background of flecked grey.

'Hey, that's great,' says one of the others walking past.

And later on, when class is over and our two voices resound in the empty studio, Lisa looks over my work of the afternoon, lined neatly in rows on the drying rack.

'This one almost looks like an old newspaper cutting, that dirty smudgy look, but the skull itself is almost like a photo.'

'Mmm. I do like it. And next to the drawings, it's kind of interesting.'

Lisa sits abruptly down on one of the stools and looks out the window at the afternoon sky.

'Hey, this is out of the blue. But, how important do you think sex is? In a relationship.'

I laugh, embarrassed and kind of flattered that she expects I would know.

'Because the thing is,' she goes on. 'With Josh, it's like amazing. Really good. It is so good all the other aspects of being together pale in comparison.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. So when I see him, we just go to bed. Otherwise it's kind of...well, boring.'

Walking to the tram stop I think of Sam, his quiet body rocking against mine, the well-paced routine of our lovemaking, the heavy sleep I fall into afterwards. The sadness of it. I actually surprise myself with this thought. Even the sex is *sad*. Mournful or something.

When I'm on the tram, the paint fumes from the studio seem to be trapped in my head, my hands are filthy under the fluorescent lights, paint outlining every crease and cuticle. I shove both hands into the pockets of my jacket and fall asleep against the window, waking a few stops north of the flat. I walk back as though in a dream, the traffic streaming beside me all humming engines and bright lights.

The following afternoon I am in one of the university cafes. The guy behind the coffee machine says the same thing to each customer as he is making the coffees.

'That fucking wind outside!' he says with a laugh. I listen to him say it again and again. 'What can I get you? Sure Honey. That fucking wind outside!' He is perfectly suited to his vocation, his busy hands operating the coffee machine, his friendly over-the-top manner, the flair with which he rings up orders on the register, these are all tools of his trade. And the coffee is very good.

There is a man in the café with his back to me, wearing a blue parker and red socks under too-short pants. I can see his hands, freckled and covered with coarse blonde hairs, turning the pages of a newspaper, lifting and lowering his steaming cup calmly. I study him from my sheltered position in the back corner of the café. His ginger-grey hair splayed in a cowlick on top, his ears pink and lightly furred, like petals. I like the quietness about him as he reads, head bowed peacefully, brown shoes flat on the floor, steady, somehow permanent. My dad would have been about this age. I try to add years to my memory of him, grey hairs amongst the fair curls, wrinkles around the eyes, creases across the back of his hands. I remember his palms, thick-skinned like leather, not the fine sort like kid-gloves but the more durable sort used to make belts or saddles. Outdoor hands. I imagine his tanned arms to be sprinkled with freckles and sunspots, bearing scars where a skin cancer or two have been removed. Life marks. I try to add these. After a while the man folds his paper in half, in quarters, rolls it up and stands to an impressive height. I watch him walk to the door, brace himself for the gusty air and stride out onto the footpath.

I look over the prints I have collected in my folio.

'It is as though I could reach down and pluck that shell from the paper it's lying on,' someone had said in class today. So much of my time in these classrooms I spend feeling inadequate, unable to develop my ideas into any sort of meaningful concept which could form

the basis of a significant artwork. But over the last week I have felt as though I have a unique skill. Sipping my coffee, I feel bursting with potential. All the drawings I have back at the flat, the textures I've collected, I plan to look through them when I get home, arrange them into some sort of order. All the odds and ends, the insignificant objects, the finer details that litter my life, my memories, seem validated now. Coherent. Meaningful.

The boats sailing across the mantel.
Elliot's glasses, smudged and lopsided.
The plaster biscuit on my ceiling.
The keys, the spoons, the jewellery.
The textures and patterns of things.
The shells from Dad's beach.

They hang together.

Some nights I think of my mother all alone in her house. I picture her cooking simple meals for herself, listening to classical music or watching nature documentaries. I imagine the leafy quilt of suburbs spread around the city and her house emitting just a few squares of light in the darkness. From my flat I am conscious of all the many lights running down the hill, the neon signs outside the takeaway shops, coloured lamps in the windows of the bars, the trams rattling past bright as convenience stores. When I moved out of home, my eagerness to start a new life in the city prevented any feelings of sadness and sentimentality I may have had. That old house felt hollow and stale, deficient in any positive energy, the residue of grief coating the walls and ceilings and hanging static in the air. The sound of my footsteps down the hallway rang out eerily behind me as I walked to and from my bedroom. I never talked about any of this with my mother.

I think of her moving quietly within the place and I feel worried, or some similar, more sharp-edged emotion. I look around the flat at the colourful disorder; Elliot's shoes kicked off near the front door, his boats displayed on the mantelpiece, a jacket Sam left here once and never remembers to take home, and I feel I've somehow betrayed my mother. I left her behind for a better life.

Occasionally I call her, but she sounds just as she always does; calm, cold and polite. I wonder if my calls make any difference to her whatsoever.

There is a party at a dilapidated Californian bungalow just down the hill from our flat. It's a fancy dress party but Elliot and I don't know that until we arrive to see a pirate having a heated argument with a Wonder Woman look-alike. They stand just inside the front fence facing each other, feet apart, eyes blazing with accusation.

'It's *not* like that. Anyway you're the one who has the issue with it. *I'm* cool with it. It's *your* problem!'

'What is that supposed to mean? That's so fuckin' typical. When are you going to *grow up*? I feel like I'm going out with a fuckin' *teenager*.'

We walk past the fight towards the house. Though my eyes are downcast I listen with interest to the cracking voices. The girl sounds as though she may cry. Such outbursts of anger, especially public ones, amaze and even excite me, because I am unable to yell in this way, to slam doors, stomp my foot or throw plates. There have been many occasions when I have fantasised about doing these things, but confrontation only makes me retreat, presses a finger to my lips, turns a key somewhere inside.

The front windows are wide open, showing squares of pinkish light and people standing in groups laughing and talking. Candles flicker inside brown paper bags along the front path, and on the veranda people sit on couches drinking and smoking. We scan the sailors, angels and superheros for a familiar face but find none. The air smells sweet. We make our way through the dim-lit hallway, stepping over people's legs and dodging drinks that are sitting on the carpet. In the lounge room I run into Lisa. She peels away from her conversation and throws her arms around me, smelling like wine and lollies and perfume.

'Eve, I didn't know you were coming...this is cool, this is cool!'

Lisa is wearing tight jeans and a black fitted top and has tied some glittery wings on in an attempt at a costume. Her handsome boyfriend waves a large hand at me and smiles from underneath his cowboy hat. Lisa grabs his arm and pulls him towards us.

'This is Josh. Josh this is Eve. She's at uni with me.'

Josh and I both smile our hellos and I realise I've lost Elliot. I hold up my six-pack to Lisa.

'I'm going to put this in some ice. I'll be back.'

I make my way over extended legs, around gesturing arms and towards the bright whiteness of the kitchen where Elliot is standing by a platter of party pies and sausage rolls talking to a group of boys. Though I call them boys I know they are men, all of them in their twenties like me, but does that make me a woman? This petite girl with skinny legs?

'And what about frankfurts, do you remember them?'

'Yeah yeah, I hated those things! But I ate them anyway.'

'The party pies were always the best.'

'And the mini sausage rolls.'

I watch the boys talking like boys, the voices growing louder and louder, their gestures more animated. They laugh as though swallowing some magic liquid, heads thrown back, mouths open wide, necks pulsing and hands pressed against their stomachs.

'Yeah man, parties these days just aren't the same. I mean ten-pin bowling birthdays? Horse-riding parties? You know?'

'Absolutely! Not the same. The good old house party tops them all.'

Elliot spots me and picks up his six-pack.

'Ice, ice! We need ice.'

One of the boys points to the screen door leading into the back yard. Outside in the small paved courtyard we find a pair of wheelbarrows filled with ice and drinks. We dig our stubbies into the ice, crack one open each and head back into the light and colour of the house. Elliot

slots himself back into the circle around the bench where the group of guys is now discussing computer games.

‘But still, Atari, has it been surpassed?’

I feel racked with guilt about Sam. I reason with myself that I didn’t lie to him, but of course I know that I may as well have done. This used to be just his scene. I listen to the boys in the kitchen talk and Sam’s voice slots in so easily to the conversation that it is almost lacking his contribution. Humour was one of the things that first drew me to Sam, his quick wit and capacity for fun, his ability to introduce the ridiculous to the most serious conversation. He had this way of throwing off the heaviness of words and laughing at what was underneath. I consider calling him to say that we just happened to hear about this party at the last minute, but there it is again, the very same feeling that caused me to conceal it from him in the first place. What if he doesn’t talk, or worse, is in one of those moods where he trivialises everything and makes people feel like they are wasting time with unimportant pastimes. No, I decide once again, better to be without him tonight.

In the lounge room, Lisa pulls me onto a couch and leans close to my face, her beautiful smile no longer painted so perfectly, most of the colour is smeared on her wine glass.

‘So what’s the story with you and mister mysterious guy with the long hair?’

‘Lisa, he’s my flat mate.’

‘I’ve heard that one before! Perfect, you’re already cohabiting! Anyway, he’s kind of gorgeous.’

I look at Josh on the other side of the room with his broad shoulders and large brown hands explaining something to a group of attentive girls. The shadow cast by his cowboy hat does little to hide his angular jaw-line.

‘Elliot’s not really your type though Lisa.’

‘God no, but he might be yours.’

I take a swig of beer and think about this. I surprise myself that I’m thinking about it at all. Lisa peers over at Elliot and the group of guys in the kitchen and goes on.

‘What I mean is, he’s gorgeous in that open-fire-house-in-the-hills sort of way.’

‘What?’ I can’t help but laugh.

‘You know, that bring-me-a-cup-of-herbal-tea, let’s-go-camping sort of way.’

‘Lisa! You’re insane!’

‘You *must* get what I mean. He’s gorgeous in that rainy-Sunday-play-me-a-tune-on-your-old-guitar sort of way.’

We burst into fits of laughter, leaning forwards on the couch. For me it is one of those moments when I feel fleetingly like all the girls I knew in high school, the kind constantly connected at the palm. For Lisa, it is just the way she is.

I push through the crowds to find Elliot leaning against the fridge and talking to the handsome Josh. I slot into their conversation quietly. I admire Elliot, who in turn, admires Josh. In the presence of Elliot now, I feel embarrassed by my talk with Lisa. The very fact that we know we could never be partners allows Elliot and I the freedom to have the friendship we have. Also, I am suddenly very aware of his homosexuality. I watch and listen to him talk, looking for any signs of it. ‘Camp’ness. A lilt in the voice, something feminine, but I find nothing. Even his hands, capable of such intricate work, are broad with square knuckles, like the sort designed to mark a football, but on a smaller scale. Though his shoulders are narrow and his facial features relatively fine, there is nothing feminine about him. I continue to watch and even look for signs of flirting, but there are none. They are just two young men talking at a party. I join the conversation and time passes in that wonderful liquid way it seems to after alcohol. Small details become defined and fascinating while the larger ones blur into insignificance. The stud buttons on Josh’s cowboy shirt demand my attention; small silver rings around reddish plastic discs like sucked lollies. As he gestures and moves slightly, light enters the buttons one at a time as though they’re battery operated and each one contains its own internal bulb. They flash on and off like fairy lights.

The night continues in full colour, conversations go on for hours, voices become melodic, bordering on singing. People ask me about Sam. I tell them he is feeling sick and stayed home in bed. The truth is I doubt he is in bed, or if he is, he’s unlikely to be sleeping. He doesn’t do much of that these days. I imagine him walking, head down and slow past a variety of backdrops; graffitied factory walls, sleeping suburban houses, sickly yellow-lit train platforms. Each backdrop is empty but for his figure. I suddenly feel irrationally lonely. I retreat back behind my face and watch the noisy scene that a moment before had seemed full of happiness and action and some sort of potential.

Later on Elliot and I find ourselves outside, both of us suddenly very tired, too tired to walk back to the flat. We are sharing a corduroy beanbag on the concrete with a small dog sleeping between us. Elliot managed to get a joint from somewhere, and we pass the warm spark back and forth between us. People are dancing in the kitchen.

‘Ell, have you ever been in love with a girl?’

‘Once. Just once.’ Elliot drops his head back onto the beanbag and smiles at the sky.

‘Becky Moran-Smith. We were both new kids at school, started in the same week so we formed this bond.’

He drags on the neatly rolled joint with squinted eyes. I rest my head on his bony shoulder.

‘What was she like?’

‘She had this smell about her, a shampoo smell. I remember that. She was chubby, very chubby now that I think of it. But then, it was probably only puppy fat.’

‘How old were you?’

‘Oh, it would have been grade three, maybe four.’ He smiles and hands me the joint. I begin to laugh.

‘And she’s the last girl you ever felt anything romantic for?’

‘Yeah. Only her.’

‘She must have been a special girl.’

‘Oh she was.’

I dream I am swimming in the ocean with Elliot. He is first submerged then rises up into the sunny day with his hair flattened over his head, his face glistening. I duck-dive and open my eyes under the water, something I can’t do in reality, but in the dream the salt doesn’t sting and I am free to explore the cool cloudy world under the surface. I swim towards Elliot’s torso, pale with strange silvery scars running in all directions like the tracks left by garden snails. I reach out to run a finger over the raised marks, only to find the skin suddenly smooth and, when I refocus my eyes the scars are gone. I push my face forwards through the water to kiss Elliot’s skin but find he has come down to meet me, smiling with gentle bubbles rising out of his mouth. I kiss him, inhaling the satiny bubbles, tasting the salt on his lips and tongue. We hold each other, turning, in the ocean. When I wake I feel breathless like I have forgotten to come up for air.



We eat fish and chips in our motel room, the three of us sitting on the double bed with the scratchy quilt cover. The rain on the roof is deafening. We are in some small town somewhere on the coast and the weather has turned for the worst, holing us up indoors for the evening. We eat from brown motel plates and drink from brown motel mugs but the chips we eat straight from the paper wrapping. The topic I am interested in at the moment is my parents as young people, and I ask them questions relating to this. It haunts and thrills me to think of a time when I did not exist. I imagine my parents taller and smoother and laughing continuously arm in arm. I know from photos that my mother was long-necked and graceful with shoulder-length sandy hair, and that even then she scoffed at fashion, opting for practical boots over clicking heels. My father was handsome and brown and squinting into the outdoor light. I gather facts and file them away in my head.

They drank red wine once straight from the bottle on the sand.

They once lived in a flat right near the city, with an oven that started a fire.

Dad used to ride a bicycle around the university.

They both used to drink a lot and they both used to smoke cigarettes.

My mother used to read novels on the train.

My Dad's school-friend died in a car accident and Dad didn't leave the house for days.

My mother bought him a camera to cheer him up.

My mother had a friend who wasn't a dwarf but almost was.

My mother once fell down a slippery embankment and broke her wrist.

Someone knew someone who had been pecked on the bottom by a hen nesting in the outdoor toilet.

They used to go camping in a small orange tent that let the rain in.

My mother didn't like babies before she had me. My father dreamed of having six children and a big house near the ocean.

These facts from the past are fascinating to me, like snippets from an exciting film I am not allowed to watch. I press for more and more information, expertly steering my parents from one topic to the next. I see my mother's face light up as she talks. She touches my father's arm lightly, wipes a smear of tartare sauce from his lip with her thumb, pours more wine into his mug.

'That enormous man over the road, ' she laughs. 'Remember him Honey? That time you tried to pump up his bike tyres?'

'They were flat as anything.'

‘What about the enormous man?’ I ask. ‘Was he very tall or just fat? Did he live alone in the house or with a wife? Was the wife also fat?’

After a while I notice my parents tire of my questions and my mother begins packing up our dinner, gathering the brown plates, scrunching up the paper wrapping with the last few crunchy chips inside. My father gets that faraway look in his eyes and I know he won’t be talking for a while. I join my mother at the small motel sink and help with the dishes, drying each plate carefully with a tea towel thin and useless as a tissue. My father puts the television on and positions his pillows against the headboard to watch, but his eyes stare past the screen, past the brick wall behind and out over the ocean to somewhere else entirely.

Suddenly I am aware that we are far from home.



Elliot isn't sleeping much. I often wake in the early hours of the morning to see the light from the front room falling across the floorboards in the hallway. He is in love. The initial painful, joyful realisation of it. Henry stays over a few nights each week. They cook dinner, chaotically, jovially, spreading spices, vegetables and fresh herbs all over the bench. I envy their togetherness and sometimes call Sam in an attempt to capture that old glowing feeling. We go out for dinner to cheap Indian or Vietnamese restaurants and share a six-dollar bottle of wine. I get drunk on the wine, a sleepy heavy sort of drunk which makes the hike back up the hill seem like too much effort. Sam holds my hand and drags me upwards. When I arrive home I want to talk to Elliot, load my feelings about Sam onto him, watch him work, but these days he is usually watching movies on the couch with Henry or already in bed, the two of them, door closed all the way.

In the mornings I hear Elliot walking Henry to the front door. There are two pairs of footsteps, one in shoes and one barefooted. I try to distract myself from the pang of jealousy I feel at the thought of the two of them together. Not the sex, but the intimacy of spending the night together, talking in bed then falling asleep side by side, waking in the morning, all guards down.

I begin to wonder if I'm in love with Elliot, in some sense. As much as I could be, knowing he is gay and knowing so much about him already, his daily routines and private oddities. Perhaps that's what it is, this feeling of jealousy. There is only one part of Elliot's life I'm excluded from, and against all reason, I feel shut out because it doesn't involve me. Afraid. I'm afraid of being left behind, forgotten. Sometimes I miss his gentle, easy company as though it was already gone, or become out of bounds to me. What is that? Do we all carry this anxious child inside our hearts and minds? The child terrified of abandonment.

But I still dream about Sam, ridiculous intense dreams filled with yearning. He appears differently in each dream, bigger or smaller, bulkier, featureless or clear as a photograph. He doesn't want sex out of me, nor I from him, but the dreams are always humid with touch and closeness, with sensation. I dream of his smooth bare torso and its familiar curves, blood pumping underneath the terrain. We are somewhere soft like a bed but also outdoors and it is night time. There are no stars only walls of water falling around, but we somehow remain dry. I know everything without even opening my eyes. I inhale his smell of skin and hair. We nuzzle like animals, searching for something. The rain pours on.

I wake filled with an aching love for him, but by the time I see him, this feeling has evaporated, dissolved into the new day like morning mist over an open field. I wonder what the dream means, if it's trying to tell me something. I don't tell Sam about the dreams.

Clear blue sky. I stare up to find it is endless with no discernable depth. It just keeps going. But then, I think, the colour is so even that it could also be completely flat like a painted canvas. Elliot and I sit cross-legged on the dry grass.

‘Sometimes on a day like this I hear the droning of light planes, even when they aren’t there,’ I say, squinting. ‘It’s just the sort of blue sky that a light plane should be flying through.’

The gardens sprawl out around us, sloping down towards a central lake where black swans float serenely over the surface. Beyond the patch of green is the city, as sharp and upright as ever, familiar as a painting that has hung on the wall of a house for decades.

‘My dad worked in one of those buildings,’ says Elliot. ‘But I can’t remember which one. He took me there once when I was about nine or ten. I threw up in the lift.’

‘You were never going to be a businessman,’ I laugh, leaning back on my elbows and stretching my legs out in front. I let my head fall back and the weaving branches of a tall tree slide into my view of the sky, the contrast of black bark against blue. It feels good to be outside of my head, to feel small and insignificant in the world.

‘I remember the day I realised I wasn’t the centre of the universe,’ I say, sitting upright again. ‘I must have been about five or six. The whole class was standing on the edge of the school oval, under these pine trees, watching an older group of kids running in a race. A girl won by a mile and all her friends ran up around her squealing like she’d won a medal in the Olympics. I suddenly thought, wow, they all have lives just like I do. We all carry our own lives around, and each person is the centre of their own story. So there’s a billion stories going on at once, running alongside one another.’

‘I remember having that realisation,’ Elliot says smiling.

‘You realise that the people around you aren’t just secondary characters in your own story.’

‘Well they are that too.’

‘Yeah, but they would go on doing what they do whether you were around or not.’

‘It’s kind of scary at first...’

‘But then it’s such a relief. To know you’re not that important.’

There is a young woman down by the lake throwing bread to the swans and holding the hand of a toddler. The boy squeals with delight, stamping his feet as the swans snap up the chunks of bread. The woman squats to the boy’s height and lifts him up just as a large swan rises flapping onto the bank in pursuit of more food. She carries him away from the water, laughing, stopping to pick up his canvas hat that has fallen on the grass. The child rests casually on her hip

like a koala in a tree. I wonder if the child is old enough to realise he is entirely separate from his mother, despite their constant connection. He hangs there like an extension of her body, as though there is no possibility of her arm slackening and him tumbling hard on to the ground. The sight of them stirs something inside me. I begin to wonder if we ever achieve such a state of complete security again, and immediately realise it would be impossible. How could we when friends leave us behind, parents die, lovers fall out of love? I turn to Elliot and crazy thoughts run through my head. I want to touch him, throw myself at him and hold onto him, but he starts to talk and brings me back here, in the gardens, in real time.

‘When I was younger, still a kid, I had these visions of myself as an adult. I saw myself in a big old Victorian house with pianos and bookshelves and a sprawling garden. I was very clever with just a sprinkling of grey in my hair.’

‘I like the sound of that house. I’d like to live there,’ I say. ‘I had those visions of myself too. I dreamed up this studio looking out over the sea and galleries in all the coastal towns selling my paintings, but I think I had a less idealistic idea too. You know, living in a run-down house, grungy but nice. I never really saw myself as being wealthy or successful, but I wanted to have time for my art. That has always been the main thing for me.’

‘It’s funny, I always thought that once I was an adult I would be totally independent, and not need to rely on anyone. But the truth is, I could never be alone. Now, being in love seems just as important as all the rest. More *essential*, to how I cope with things.’

‘I’m okay by myself. I always have been’, Elliot says, pulling at the grass. ‘But I never thought I’d meet anyone who understands me like Henry does.’

‘*But it’s not as simple as that*, I imagine myself saying, *I mean, **we** understand each other, you and me.*’ And instantly I am ashamed to think I could have said that aloud. The thought humiliates me. To think there’s even a part of me that could be so simplistic and naïve!

‘Do you know what I would like?’ Elliot says. ‘I would like to be in a travelling band. Just driving around in a big old bus, kids and everything.’

‘Like a gypsy.’

‘Yeah, stopping in small towns for a while, then moving on. Moving on, maybe that’s it. I like the idea of always going somewhere. Not many people could say that they were always going somewhere.’

‘I could only take that for so long. I get very attached to places and things. I feel like where I am says a lot about *who* I am. I know that’s superficial.’

‘No, in a way I think you’re right.’

‘So anyway, what would you play?’

‘What?’

‘In the travelling band, what instrument would you play?’

‘Probably drums. I’d like to have the chance to throw my hair around a bit.’ Elliot pulls the elastic from his hair and shakes it so that it falls around his face. He laughs in that deep-voiced way.

‘You look very beautiful like that actually,’ I say, smiling. He laughs again, pulling his hair back into its ponytail and I turn away, embarrassed because I meant it, a little more than it came across.

We catch the tram through the city fringe and up the hill towards the flat. By the time we reach the café strip the back half of the carriage is nearly empty. We sit facing each other by the greasy window, its scratches and smear marks lit up by the afternoon sun. We trundle past the cafes where groups of people are sitting at outdoor tables drinking and eating, as though celebrating the perfect sunny day. It occurs to me that I spend a lot of my time looking through windows at the animated gestures and silent conversations of people I don’t really know and who don’t know me at all.

‘How’s it going with Sam?’ asks Elliot.

‘Oh, you know.’

‘Not good?’

‘It’s just, he’s so caught up with worrying about stuff. And I guess I am as well, to be fair. What’s happening to us? Aren’t these supposed to be the good old days?’

Elliot laughs as though this was a joke, but I go on.

‘I don’t want to look back on the good old days to find they weren’t actually that good.’

My mother has filled the birdfeeder with seed, a perfect dry mound of granules. The birds come right away, four of them frantically pecking, nudging each other out of the way and flapping their wings as they hop from one spot to the next. My mother stands outside the back door watching with a smile on her face, as though she is extremely fond of these birds. For all I know she may be. I watch her standing there holding the plastic seed container and try to see her as a stranger would, observing a thin, long-haired woman in an oversized gardening shirt. She looks like a person so easily startled that no one would dare trying to get her attention, a person to tiptoe around. But of course, that’s just the way I feel. A stranger would probably find her perfectly pleasant, an earthy, practical person who likes to be outdoors. She turns to come inside, but, seeing a weed growing through a crack in the paving, squats to pull it out, expertly grabbing the

stem right near its base and twisting. She tosses the weed into a bucket, which I assume is just for this purpose, and enters the house.

I am washing dishes at my mother's sink, my hands inside plastic gloves and immersed in warm soapy water. I wipe our lunch plates in a circular motion with a dishcloth. They are the same plates we have used since I was a child, cream-coloured with two blue lines running along the outer edge. There was a whole dinner set with coffee mugs, bowls and two sizes of plates, though the set is no longer complete. When I was about five or six, certain items inexplicably began to explode inside the cupboard. The first time we heard the crash we searched the house for a fallen frame, vase or mirror, before eventually opening the cupboard to see sections of a plate or bowl scattered around. After that, I would run excitedly to the cupboard right away.

'It happened again!' I would yell to my parents. 'It's one of the small plates.'

My dad once called a radio station during a science segment to ask a scientist about the exploding dinner set. I sat in the lounge room listening to the radio, my heart beating with excitement to hear Dad's voice through the speakers, while he used the phone in the kitchen. I remember the confidence of his voice chatting with the radio professionals, sounding a little deeper and more jovial than it did in reality, but I can't remember the scientist's explanation of the exploding plates.

My mother picks up tea towel from a hook next to the fridge and starts to dry one of the gleaming plates.

'Remember these used to explode?' I say, looking up from the sink. She looks at me with a vague expression and continues drying the plate.

'Don't you remember?' I ask again.

'Yes,' she says finally, picking up another plate. 'I think I do remember that.'



Next door is the noisy Beech family.

‘Listen to those boys,’ says my mother. ‘Well it’s lucky I had a quiet girl instead. Thank goodness for that hmm?’

Sometimes on the weekends I climb the liquid amber in our back garden and watch with fascination the boys playing in their backyard at such high volume and energy. They race across the lawn grunting like machines, pointing water pistols like cowboys, falling down dead in screams of pain. The two older boys fight ferociously, spitting, biting and thumping each other with sharp objects, bending each other’s arms backwards until they surely almost snap. The little one totters around without pants, eating fruit or pushing small trucks over the ground. Gypsy the dog sleeps stretched out on the grass and sometimes there are puppies too because the Beech family breeds dogs.

Each time a litter of pups is born Mrs Beech calls over the side fence and I am invited to visit. The boys regard me thoughtfully as though I am a person they would like to play with but are too shy to begin, like a cousin they haven’t seen for years. Soon after I arrive, however, they ignore me, leaving me to their mother while they return to their games. Mrs Beech takes me down the dark cluttered hallway in the centre of their house.

‘Ignore the mess Honey, you know how we live. Not quite as organised as your Mum hey? No way not in this house.’ Mrs Beech has short hair white at the roots and copper at the ends, the fine shiny sort that falls flat over the ears, though she uses hairspray to mould the fringe into a kind of wave. I look into the boys’ bedrooms off to each side. There are boxes of toys stacked in the corners and coloured items scattered over the floor; shoes, toy cars, boats and aeroplanes, plastic cups, butcher’s paper and pencils. One room has wooden dinosaur skeletons hanging from the ceiling. Stuck to the semi-closed doors are sticker collections and handmade signs which say things like *KEEP out or Els!* and *Enter at yor own RISK!* in pointy writing.

The pups are always kept in a cardboard box that a television came in out on the back veranda. When they are first born they are blind and nuzzling in their bedding of old jumpers and newspaper, smelling of wee and some dry grain like wheat. Gypsy has a loose underbelly, hanging heavy with milk from feeding so many puppies. Most of the time she lies on a beanbag next to the box and stares at me with wet tragic eyes while I pat the pups. I stare back and silently promise not to take one away, though I would love to tuck one inside my windcheater and have it as my own, let it sleep under my doona and take it to school in my backpack. I plan these things in my mind.

The boys give the pups names which they tell me proudly, pointing at each soft featureless head. I notice that the names don’t change much from one litter to the next. The

black ones are always Phantom or Jet, a pup with markings on its face will be Patch or Spot, the occasional white ones are Snowy.

After I've looked at the pups, Mrs Beech makes afternoon tea for me in the kitchen under a warm yellow light. I like being in the kitchen because it has a heater in one corner with actual wood burning behind a glass door, like some kind of television set showing only fire. The smell of it fills the air. I sit at the long wooden table and am given weak lime cordial and a saucer loaded down with lumpy cookies which crumble as soon as I bite into them. Mrs Beech has tea with the teabag still in and the tag hanging out over the top of the mug. She asks me questions which I answer.

'So Honey, are you enjoying school this year?'

'Uh huh.'

'Got some nice friends to play with at lunchtime?'

'Uh huh.'

'And your teacher is real nice and smart?'

'Yep.'

'And your Mum's doing okay?'

'Uh huh.'

I sip my cordial out of the cup and look at the flames inside the heater while Mrs Beech jiggles her teabag up and down. I feel her eyes on my face, as though she's waiting for me to say something important. I don't know what this is so I keep staring and it's as though the heat from the fire has reached my face because I feel it warming up and gaining colour like a scone in an oven. When Mrs Beech finally speaks, my eyes blink free of the heater and can look around the room again.

'Honey I was wondering if you ever get sad about you know, everything that's happened.'

I let the cordial run down my throat cool and green and try to think of the right answer but Mrs Beech goes on.

'Because it's good to have somebody to talk to about stuff, you know. I know you and your Mum can help each other out but you may want to speak to someone else, you know. What do you reckon?'

'Uh huh.'

Mrs Beech sighs because this was not the right answer.

'Are you sad Honey?'

'Yep'

'Do you miss your dad?'

'Yep.'

‘But you know that he loved you very *very* much don’t you Honey?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘ And that what happened had *nothing* to do with you?’ I finish my cordial and think about this. Mrs Beech is jiggling her teabag again and her face has leaned right over the table as though we are sharing secrets, as though she’s looking right inside me. I had never considered that Dad’s death could have had something to do with me. I begin to think that Mrs Beech saying this means that in fact it had everything to do with me. I feel short of breath. Did Dad somehow drown because of me?

‘ I wasn’t there though,’ I say quickly.

‘ You weren’t where Honey?’ Mrs Beech reaches out and puts a warm dry palm over my hand.

‘When he drowned.’ At this, the skin between her eyebrows creases up and she leans back in her chair to look at me from further away.

‘If only we had all known Honey. If only we had known.’

I stare right at Mrs Beech’s face and make the features blur together like a smudge.

‘Uh huh.’



Sam's hair grows back in a soft even pelt. On a Tuesday morning I walk down the hill to the tram stop, lopsided with the weight of my folio, and catch a glimpse of him at the window bench of one of the cafes. He is leaning close to his notebook writing frantically, chasing some idea. *There you are!* I think. I leave him to it and jump on the next tram.

There is a war going on in the lounge room while I am trying to sleep. The gunfire is constant, bursting in volume at intervals, speeding and slowing like a car on a racetrack. I hear the clunking of machine guns reloading, the screams of men falling, other soft padding sounds which could be distant fleeing footsteps or raindrops hitting the thick leaves of tropical plants. These sounds seem strange in our quiet flat, especially on a Tuesday night. I stare at the plaster biscuit awhile, feeling irritable and frustrated. Earlier this evening I had waited in the front room for Elliot to come home from work, hoping we could visit the Noodle House and have a takeaway dinner for old time's sake. It has been a while. When he did appear at the tram stop across the road he was with Henry and, selfishly, I felt hard-done by and a little angry. I feel it again now. I swing my legs out of bed and pad up the hallway to the front room, dark but for the greenish light from the television screen. The gunfire is louder than ever. I stand in the doorway looking at the pair of silhouetted heads facing away from me, then the two profiles as they turn to each other and connect, becoming one dark shape. It is a long hard kiss. I turn away quietly and make my way back to my room. I realise I have never seen two men kissing before, it seems ridiculous that I haven't, but it's true. I feel quite affected by it. The strength of it. The symmetry. I lie in bed with my hands against the warm skin of my stomach, restless, but no longer angry.

I take the train to my mother's house on a brilliant afternoon. All around me is peppered with foliage and small tufts of cloud, drifts of music from shops, cars and houses. I had a craving for my old picture books, still arranged in a low bookshelf in my old bedroom. My mother makes toasted cheese sandwiches in the griller and tells me about a native tree.

'Eucalyptus caesia it's called, or silver princess, silver lady, something like that. You have probably seen them. The branches are white and they hang down with small nuts on the end.'

'So will you put it out the front?'

'Yes. In the bed near the tap. I've cleared out that clump of old azaleas.'

'Good. I don't like azaleas.'

'Mmm. I'm trying to create something different out there, that's all.'

‘Uh huh.’ The sandwiches are placed on the table on the exploding plates. I pull at a string of melted cheese spilling out the side. This is comfort food. I remember being served cheese sandwiches when I was feeling unwell, those and soft-boiled eggs eaten out of the shell with a teaspoon. My mother takes neat curved bites out of her sandwich and I notice small creases are appearing around her lips as she chews. I mention my books and her eyes become cloudy.

‘Oh yes. They are still there. Of course,’ she says, taking my plate. ‘Here, I’ll clean this up.’

I stare around my old bedroom with its dusty light fitting and sturdy wooden furniture. The chest of drawers still has a spray of shiny stickers on the side that used to be pushed up against my bed. The stickers are familiar; daisies with smiling yellow faces, a bubble-toed red sneaker, various coloured fish with glimmering scales, a koala on a surfboard. The edges of some have peeled back into slim rolls, the underside coated in black dust. I suppose it should be surprising that these childish stickers survived my teenage years still in place on the furniture, but I spent most of these years secure in the knowledge that my friendships existed only outside of this house, and I myself wasn’t so concerned with pin up boys from magazines. In the living rooms of other girls’ houses where parents would order in pizza and we’d all watch videos on the couch. I wonder now how different things may have been had I invited friends to visit me. What would they have made of my mother in her gardening jeans with her awkward silences? What would she have made of them? Laughing girls whose voices overlapped each other, whose expectations I played up to knowingly, who idealised the boys on the basketball courts and turned away in fits of laughter when one approached and said something. And what of my boyfriends? The ones I attached myself to, long-haired boys with quiet deep voices and smooth slim torsos.

The coloured spines of my books give the impression of permanence, as bricks in a wall. I kneel on the carpet and begin to look through them. Some of the glossy, less-read ones still smell miraculously brand new, their illustrations vividly giving off an inky scent. Others, my old favourites, are dog-eared and torn in places, the pages soft like cotton rags. In one of the books is a circular illustration showing the ocean and an arcing horizon line with boats strung along it. A school of silvery fish fans across one side of the circle. As I study it I realise how familiar I am with the details of the picture, the fluid lines making up the fish shapes, their weed-like tails and fins, the bubbles clustered around their mouths, the faint outline of a seahorse disappearing into the circular frame. I feel a childlike impulse to dive right in, the old escape offered by an image on a page. Another world offered. A way out.

I begin doing laps at the local swimming pool. My stroke is at first clumsy, my breathing unregulated and gasping. After each lap I rest panting for a minute before inhaling deeply and pushing off again, hands pointed, hoping to fall into some sort of rhythm. Despite my lack of technique, I am thrilled to rediscover the peaceful world of underwater. Soundless and blue-tiled, it seeps into my ears and glides over my skin like silk, soaks into my hair slow and cool. After ten laps I am exhausted and let myself sink down at the deep end to look around at the pale slow-moving bodies. An old woman moves slowly from one end to the other using a careful, measured breaststroke, her legs kicking outwards with great precision. In the fast lane a young man powers through his routine, his hands diving determinedly, feet making small but strong kicks. I watch his long body and study his technique, hoping to pick up some tips. I watch as he rolls sideways with each breath, and plan to try this next time. In the shallow end a woman holds her hands out to a small child about to jump from the edge, inflated floaties puffed out on his arms. I remember the rubbery smell of the floaties I used to wear. My mother would blow them up and slide them on before sending me down the sand to my father, tanned and tall and waiting in the shallows.

The four of us carry meat and salads down along the train tracks to a barbecue in the courtyard of a narrow terrace. Henry and Elliot take over the cooking as soon as we arrive. How do they manage it? They lift the mood instantly. Some others from uni are there, a couple of guys who share the same wardrobe and whose names I never remember, a girl named Bridget with piercings in her nose, lip and brow. She mentions that she likes my work. I shamefully realise how self-absorbed I must be – I don't even know what medium she works in. Sam drinks and mopes along the fence, smoking continually. He leaves as the sun goes down. I stay well into the night with Henry, Elliot and a small group. We walk home wasted, wonderful, the stone of anxiety temporarily lifted.

Sam calls me in the morning. He hasn't slept.

'I would have stayed but this guy was shitting me, talking about the housing market and crap. And you guys were having so much fun... I couldn't get there.'

I hang up the phone and sit by the front window looking down at the sunny Sunday morning on the street. On the footpath below a child is singing. I lean close to the windowpane

but the singer is under the noodle shop awning, a tray of corrugated iron littered with bird droppings and cigarette butts.

‘Ooo baby baby,’ goes the voice. ‘It’s a wild world. Hard to get by just upon a smile.’ And the small figure appears, a girl of about eight or nine made tall by roller-blades. She rolls carefully beside her mother, legs wide, hands poised beside her hips in a dancer’s gesture.

‘Always remember you like a child, she sings. Her mother takes her hand as they cross the road. The song stays in my head for the rest of the day.



There are three shells, a long spiralling one like a unicorn's horn, a small round one and one shaped like a fan. I have placed them at angles to each other on the kitchen table, shifting them this way and that to arrive at the final composition. A fine dusting of sand has spilled out from inside the shells which I sweep into a pile with my hand; the soft stuff from the old beach.

My mother is re-potting African Violets on the table outside the back door. I see her in a rectangle of sun with a line of small pots in front of her, wearing those gloves that smell like a lady's handbag. The stereo is playing Mozart at high volume, as it does every Saturday morning when there is feeling of something starting afresh, though nothing ever does. I hear the music almost like strings of colour beaming into my ears. On the paper, I start to draw lines, then more and more lines to make the shells. The pen scratches the paper like an insect or a sharp tool used by the dentist. I keep going, making the noise as much as the picture, trying to recreate the shadows and the smooth texture of the shells. But when I lean back to look at the drawing, there are so many lines I can't see the shells anymore. There are more shadows than shapes.

I flip the page of my sketchbook and start again on the clean white paper. I begin with thin outlines and darken the shadow parts by tilting the pen to use the side of the nib. My mother comes in smelling of soil and puts her gloves on the bench.

'You should see my violets Eve. Do you know about African Violets? They need to be on a windowsill, in the light, but not too much light.' She pours a glass of water from the tap, drinks a bit and puts the glass down next to the sink.

'They need just the right amount of water at just the right time. Eve? What are you doing? Oh drawing...they're nice shells.' Her voice drops when she says this. She doesn't ask me where I got them because she knows already. She also knows that I know she knows. Mum puts her gloves back on and heads back down the hall.

'Think I'll re-pot the pittosporum into that blue pot, what do you think? Hmm?'

I look down at my new drawing. The Mozart colours stream out through the air. I lay down lines again, line over line until the shell shapes disappear under the black ink. I don't stop until a patch of the paper tears right through under my pen.



One Friday night Sam and I drive across the city. The radio in his old station wagon only tunes into AM stations and maintains a constant crackle. We are heading across town where the industrial suburbs are set around the water, with their village streets, small cafes and restaurants. We don't really talk. It's easy between us and I am conscious of enjoying his company, like old times. I think of a night years ago when we were first getting to know each other, a hot night we spent in the city gardens, drinking beer on the edge of a fountain. I remember his hair smelling of leaves and above us the black sky going on forever and the world felt full of possibilities. I am excited to be heading towards the sea, even the grimy city port. I take in the cars passing by, the lights of the city streets, Sam's hand changing gears, my stomach grumbling for food. I wind down the window to let the cold night air in and lean out a little, blinking into the wind.

We eat at a pasta restaurant just across the park from a marina where small white boats crowd around the pier next to a short curve of sand. The city gulls are worse than the ones at the out of town beaches. We watch them through the glass as they screech and fight and dive for food scraps on the footpath. The elderly waiter convinces us to buy a bottle of white wine, larger than usual size, and cheaper than any of the reds.

'This is great value for you,' he says. 'You cannot do better than this chardonnay for the romantic couple.'

We drink out of thick wine glasses, cloudy from too much washing. The wine tastes a little like jelly and smells of olives, sickly sweet as it passes over the tongue. Sam screws up his nose.

'I know fuck all about wine, but I know this stuff is no good.'

We laugh and eat gluggy pasta in sweet sauce and garlic bread glistening yellow with butter. Outside the wind picks up and it begins to rain hard against the window. The waiters rush out the front, taking the white tablecloths off the outdoor tables and tilting the chairs so they won't collect water.

'I love the sea when it's stormy,' I say. 'It's sort of terrifying to look at. It frightens me to think I'd be out on the choppy water in a little boat.' There is one memory of the ocean in winter that seems to surge forwards and partially block out the others I know I must have. There is a dog, a lean muscly dog, its coat slick and shiny with water, bounding joyfully through the shallows, releasing a staccato yelp every so often, perhaps prompting its owner to throw a ball or stick. I am tucked inside a jacket, downy like a sleeping bag, it comes all the way over my head and knots under my chin so that only my face is exposed. My cheeks feel like ice when the wind sweeps in over the water. The cloud cover is whipped into peaks and swirling formations with

blue-grey underbellies and above the horizon are the vertical smears of distant rain. A man's hand rests on my shoulder, squeezing infrequently and emitting a pleasurable warmth through my torso. I lean against my dad's legs and watch the dog, laughing at its boisterous movements, its obvious excitement. There is thunder, like a wooden ceiling cracking sharply somewhere, echoes chasing each other across the landscape. I am carried to the car, buckled in. Through the window I watch the dog from this new distance, small, only about as long as my finger. Spatters of rain begin to hit the glass and dribble downwards. The car moves away with me inside it.

'You know what would be great?' Sam's voice interrupts my thoughts. 'To be at the top of a lighthouse in a storm.'

'Especially a really wild one.'

'You might get struck by lightning.'

'I think they would have that covered,' I say. 'Lighthouses are designed to operate during storms.'

'Yeah. Wouldn't be a bad way to go though.'

'I've heard it's like being burned from the inside out.'

Sam raises his eyebrows at this. 'Ouch. You know they say the most peaceful way to die is...' He stops short and stares at me awkwardly.

'What?' I prompt him. 'Drowning? You can say it Sam, honestly, I'm not *that* precious.' We both laugh and sip our wine. The friendly waiter arrives to collect our plates and Sam congratulates him on the quality of the meals. My thoughts are drawn back out the window to the water and sky, two halves of a scene. I have also heard that drowning is peaceful, but I find it hard to believe, and anyway, who are they surveying to reach such a conclusion? I can't imagine anything more terrible than being unable to breathe, struggling frantically for air, water entering the throat and lungs. It wasn't until I was in high school that I considered the reality of my father's death, the struggle, panic, pain and fear. At the funeral all those years before, I seem to remember there being some consoling talk about Dad loving the ocean, as though this indicated he was now at peace, having died out there in the water. I used to imagine him sinking heavily like a stone statue, eyes closed and arms crossed ceremoniously over his chest; in my daydreams I could even nudge the corners of his mouth slightly upwards into a faint smile. I tell Sam about my childish fantasies of death.

'That makes sense,' says Sam. 'How else would a kid be able to deal with death? In storybooks and animations, people always die silently, just close their eyes and fall down.'

'Like death was just a very long sleep.'

'I used to play those war games with the other kids. If you got shot, you might press your hand to your chest or something, then just drop to the ground and lie there on your back with

your arms stretched out. You would get up when you were bored and start running around again.'

Sam and I talk about childhood, how it seems a lifetime ago, but then, when you get talking about it, you realise how much information you have retained. Like a part of you is still there, in that world. We make our way through the wine. Desserts arrive. Chocolate mousse in tall, top-heavy glasses with a swirl of whipped cream on top. Sam's knees meet mine under the table when he shifts in his chair.

The boats moored alongside the pier rock from side to side with the swelling of the water. I see them as a collection of parts, sections to be constructed then joined together, just like Elliot's models. I tell Sam about Elliot and Henry, the way they are together, the kiss I saw in the hallway. I realised afterwards that I had never seen two men kissing before, though it seemed ridiculous that I hadn't. I found it a beautiful thing, not strange or jarring, but real and honest and perfect in its symmetry. Sam seems almost uninterested in the conversation and I wonder if he finds the idea of homosexuality confronting. He has never mentioned this before. We finish the wine. I realise I am quite drunk and have been chattering on for some time, drifting irrationally from conversation to the internal goings on of my memory and imagination. I pour a glass of water from the jug on the table, trying to avoid the lemon slice and furry-looking seeds floating on the surface. So many thoughts have passed through my mind that I'm shocked when Sam continues our conversation of half an hour before.

'Apparently just before you get struck by lightning all your hair stands on end,' he says, staring out the window towards the water. The rain has cleared, rinsed the grimy sky to a cold grey.

I am suddenly tired and fed up. I long to be back at the flat falling into bed, the heater humming in the front room. Or else I long to be in someone else's company, someone with plans and ideas about the next day and the day after that, someone who is fresh to me and to whom each new day is fresh.

I am afraid of being dragged downwards.

I am afraid of missing out.

We walk down to the water over the wet sand, a chilly wind brushing our cheeks. Across the bay, the city skyline is lit up in right angles and parallel lines. There is no one out here on the sand. It's too cold. My stomach begins to churn.

'I suppose if I loved you I'd want to be with you tonight.' I say this in my head, not out loud. Sam pulls his woollen beanie down over his ears. My own ears feel cold enough to crack

like china. Behind him the waves are rolling in loudly as though something significant is taking place underwater, a low rumbling. I feel for a moment as though the land itself is moving, shifting slightly, before sliding quickly out towards the horizon. I begin to feel dizzy and hold onto Sam's arm.

'I think I had too much of that wine. I should never drink white wine. It's horrible. I don't even like it.'

There's a headache gripping one side of my forehead, like a heavy metal cup with suction. I close my eyes and sit heavily on the sand. It's damp and cold but I'm too drunk to care.

'The thing is', says Sam, sitting beside me. 'I am so attached to you. I know you so well that nothing makes sense without you. Is that bad?'

I put my head on his shoulder and the ocean tilts to the right. If there were boats on the horizon line they would slide down, like the plastic ones inside those souvenir pens. Sam is stroking my hair gently.

'And on top of all of it,' he says softly, right next to my ear. 'I love you. I'm in love with you. And it's really starting to hurt.'

I'm having trouble keeping my eyes open. Each time I try, the sand beneath me starts a slow rotation and the landscape is set into a spin. I taste the wine on the back of my tongue, turn away from Sam's warm body and vomit on the sand. I'm sure it's even coming out my nose.

'I'm sorry,' I say between heaves. 'I'm sorry, it's that awful wine.'

Sam rubs my back as the retching subsides. This scenario may have once been funny but Sam isn't laughing or even smiling kindly. I realise guiltily that I have been a disappointment, that he may have wanted something to begin again tonight. I suddenly feel humiliated. And ill, very very ill. I stand unsteadily and scrape a layer of sand over the vomit with my foot.

'I'm sorry,' I say again. 'You're serious and I'm ridiculous.'

A few days later I walk around the sports oval on a firm track beaten down by shoes. The grass is lush and long with wide ribbon-like blades. It grows thickly, leaning to one side, then parting like a man's combed hair to lean the opposite way. I walk on pressed leaves, moist and fragile, their star-shapes overlapping each other, points folded over like paper. I pull my beanie down over my ears, the right of which is starting to ache with the cold. It is a feeling from years ago. A precise pain somewhere between my ear and my back molars, it glows momentarily then dies.

This afternoon there is sunshine, not weak filtered light, but genuine sun falling across the field in soft-edged beams. It appears in just a few moments, and as if on cue, birds start to sing. I never come to this park in spring when the magpies swoop because the gums around the

fence line are filled with birds, but I don't mind the small dark ones which circle me as I walk, tweeting so quietly that if a truck goes by on the road or the wind picks up, I can't hear their cries at all. They cruise easily through the air in arcs, dipping down every so often to grass level. There is a common thought that only the elderly and the insane walk in circles, but I do it on occasion, young and sane. A stooped man walks slowly on the other side of the oval, two small white dogs in tartan jackets trotting alongside his feet. We are both circling the field in a clockwise direction, I don't know why but it would feel wrong the other way, like swimming against an invisible current. I'm uncomfortable on realising I've obeyed some unspoken rule. I didn't even have a chance to consider my options. I just started to walk.

I've heard a theory that each time a person arrives at a stretch of beach, he or she will always turn and walk in the same direction. Some people always turn left and others always to the right. What rules are these? Perhaps there's some fear that if you go against your instinct, something terrible will happen, your life will lack its former order. But it troubles me. What if the sand is whiter and sunnier and less crowded to the right, yet I must turn to the weedy, pebble-crusted, left side of the beach?

I think of a class I had in primary school, a subject called 'Health Studies' which encompassed various topics from stranger danger to the pyramid of food groups. The teacher was a chubby woman with gold chains hanging from the frames of her glasses and a quiet voice barely exceeding a whisper. She didn't sit behind a desk at the front of the room but constantly circulated among the small groups of children she'd arranged. At the beginning of each lesson we would work on our 'happy list', a section of the blackboard containing a jumble of pale coloured words written with sticks of satiny chalk. The larger writing along the top read 'What makes me happy' and underneath the list grew: eating ice cream, playing football, my mum, Christmas day, swimming, the school concert, my dog, winning the grand final, watching television, etc. By the end of second term the list had spread over half the blackboard and had to be erased and started again, though most of the same ideas were recycled. It seemed happy things were a given. They existed in just the way a person would imagine them to. I made occasional contributions to the list but only in the sense that I knew what to say, just as I knew the way a word should be spelled from the sound of it coming off the tongue. These happy things were present in my life, they passed by one by one in logical sequence like ducks in a shooting gallery, colourful and expected. But the background upon which these items were superimposed was static and hollow, a never-ending shoreline under an overcast sky, silent except for the occasional pleas of gulls.

In the same superficial way that I contributed to the happy list, my mother and I punctuated the walks home from school with details of our separate days. The words guarded

against the silence that often arced between us. The walks were long and followed one main road, then a zigzagging series of tree-lined streets. We would comment on the houses, the ones we liked or didn't, the gardens that were overdone or had been 'let go' by the occupants. We achieved, on those afternoons, the closest we came to a genuine intimacy since my father's death. Though it was never acknowledged by either of us, there were moments when I'd dig my hand into her loosely closed fist and swing our arms in an excited attempt at casual togetherness.

Once we arrived at the house, my mother would return to the garden and fill the air with something from her classical music collection. I'd eat my afternoon snack at the kitchen table, open my tin of coloured pencils and draw until the fading light forced her to come inside. Drawing offered me a private space where I could silently work, finding satisfaction and peace in my task. I suppose drawing became for me what gardening was for my mother, not just a distraction from the grief we both carried but a realm into which we could disappear, all the while congratulating ourselves that we were spending time doing something productive.

The man and his dogs have peeled off the oval to follow a path through the shrubbery behind the football clubrooms. The brilliant sun has slid behind a cloud and it is winter again. I push my hands deep into the pockets of my coat and consider the happy list, the teacher's motivation for creating it. Did she take the idea from a teaching manual or was it her own? The list suggests that children need to learn to identify the things that make them happy. Or is it just that they need to learn to focus on these things to stay positive in life? Either way it is concerned with learning something that people seem to assume exists entirely of its own accord. If technique is so important, why didn't we have a 'sad list' so we could have identified all those things that make us sad? I wonder whether that may have been more helpful. Once they had been identified, we could learn not to concentrate on these things or even avoid those that could be avoided. Perhaps we could learn to instinctively choose the sunnier side of the beach.

There were no pallbearers at my father's funeral, only a metal trolley on concertina legs that was wheeled in one direction while the people moved away in another. I'm not sure what happened to my dad's body after we all left the church, but I suppose he must have been cremated. There was certainly no burial. Despite these missing details, there are parts of that day I remember as vividly as if they were still acting out in the corner of my mind, like a roll of film, playing over and over.

I didn't own a black dress so the one I wore to the funeral was greyish blue and looked like a uniform of some kind. In style it was more of a pinafore with a bibbed section over the

chest attached by a wide waistband to an a-line skirt, thankfully without pleats. Its only saving grace was the print fossilised into the fabric, a design of tear-shaped leaves which could only be seen from a certain angle, in a certain light. My mother had absentmindedly set the dress out on the carpet with the skirt flayed out to one side in a pose that was almost dance-like. It wasn't the effect she was after.

The day began with frost and the clatter of the garbage truck. My mother and I were awake in our separate rooms, both of us silent, but for my mother blowing her nose at frequent intervals. I got up and walked down the hallway to her room, slipping between the chilly sheets on my dad's side of the bed, but it seemed my mother was already halfway standing up and heading for the bathroom.

'Time to get ready, Evie. I've put an outfit in your room for you. Good girl.'

I lay on my dad's pillow which smelled of his man smell, despite the fresh pillow slip my mother had put on it, and listened to the garbage truck growing quieter as it stop-started its way down the street. There were men yelling words I couldn't make out. All of a sudden it seemed the house around me was set in motion and I felt an overwhelming urge to vomit, a wave swelling and lapping inside me. The water service hammered in the walls as my mother started the shower. I ran to the laundry where the second toilet was and threw up, though there was barely anything in my stomach. Clear frothy liquid. I cried. I cried so loudly my voice bounced off the ceiling and fell back towards me, over and over again. There was a circular movement of air and sound with me in the very centre, howling. The house around me felt changed, colder, much larger; it was rigid with absence, unable to breathe. My bare knees began to ache where they rested on the cold tiles and I was alone. I thought about death. The physical aspects were haunting me. My dad's brown skin turning pale and bluish, his mouth through which words, thoughts and ideas used to enter the world, now silent and still, no more than a container for teeth. Arms that used to do things, useful things, hands that tapped the steering wheel and offered small treasures, legs that had travelled so far, on so many daily journeys through bushland, over sand, wooden planks, carpets and concrete. All the footprints they would have left! I would like to see the trails they left on a map, winding around and crossing over each other, some proof of life. I thought about the future stretching forwards like a bare tree growing, and myself climbing through the branches, alone and exhausted, all the while wanting to let go and lean backwards into freefall. It struck me bluntly that I would have to grow up into a teenager, a young woman, and then an old one. This required strength I couldn't fathom, I hadn't even the energy to begin searching for it.

By the time my mother emerged from the bathroom, I was calmly slipping the grey dress over my head. She came in to my room to help me with the small buttons running up the side, and spoke of the arrangements of the day ahead. I looked down nodding, hoping she would comment on my swollen eyes and red nose. She didn't, though she must have noticed.

The service was held in the echoing open space of a church, not the old sort with steeples and towering arched doorways, but a modern building with brick walls and a low stage covered in cream carpet. There was a spicy wood smell, like the inside of a seed or a nut. Around me were lots of faces I knew but they all seemed to blend into similarity, like white masks hovering, all sharing the same blank expression. The coffin was positioned in front of the stage on the strange metal trolley and there were flowers on top in shades of beige and cream, clustered into a diamond-shaped bunch. It was just a rectangular box made of glossy reddish wood with little silver handles in a few places and I remember thinking it looked far too small, almost like a child's coffin. I couldn't imagine my dad, the large expanse of his hugs, shoulders so broad they used to carry me, fitting inside. Various people took turns to stand behind a pedestal on the left of the stage and speak slowly with lots of pauses and the occasional drooping smile. I can't recall what was said. No one applauded after the speeches, though my hands raised above my lap and stopped mid-air just in time. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do.

After the service, people returned to our house to drink tea poured from a silver teapot and eat pale cupcakes baked by my father's sister who had flown in from Darwin. My grandparents were there as well, brown leathery people I had rarely seen. They also lived somewhere hot and very faraway where doors were left open all night and sandals could be worn all year round. My grandmother smelled of soap or lotion and had a wide floral lap on which I sat and watched the people filling our living room. She had a checked handkerchief of the sort a man might use, and wiped at her eyes and nose until it shrunk into a tight ball, moist and crumpled in her hand. I was nine, too old to sit on anyone's lap, but I longed to be small again.

My mother busied herself with pouring tea and placing flowers in vases, jugs and jars. So many bouquets of flowers had arrived that the house took on the cool celery-like smell of a florist shop. I followed my mother around the kitchen, suggesting containers for the bouquets, but there was a new distance between us. It was as though she had stepped backwards away from her eyes, into such a dim corner I could barely make her out. She didn't seem to see or hear me.

At some point I escaped into my bedroom and closed the door over. I lay on my bed and stared out the window at the beige afternoon sky and hoped it would rain. Somehow I felt if it rained I might feel better. I wondered what drowning would be like, not being able to breathe, tired limbs giving up their struggle finally, sinking and then floating like the dead branch of a

tree, waves swelling up and rolling past. I thought of all these stages but when I tried to put my dad in the picture, none of it made any sense to me. It didn't seem real. None of the events of the past week seemed real. I listened to the adults talking in the living room, just a murmur of serious voices, and behind them, an orchestra playing quietly inside the stereo. I sat at my desk under the window where my sketchbook was open at a picture I had drawn a week ago, a horse with its front legs raised stiff like a carousel animal and around its body, clouds floating. I had copied the horse from a picture book illustration and the proportions were almost right, with the back legs a little short and the neck perhaps too fine. The clouds gave the picture a dreamy effect, as though the horse was a magical creature that galloped around in the sky, carrying angels from one kingdom to the next. Suddenly the drawing seemed absurd and childish, stupid to the point where I couldn't look at it without cringing. I turned my sketchbook to a fresh white page, smooth as a clean cotton bed sheet and flecked with tiny grey fibres, and decided I would draw something real.

I still have most of my drawings in a cabinet in my old bedroom. I went through so many sketchbooks, ruled notepads and ribbons of perforated computer paper, wore so many pencils down to useless stubs, rubbed so many erasers away into tiny grey crumbs that I wonder if I did anything else with my time. I would set myself up at the desk in my bedroom or at the kitchen table surrounded by my favourite things; clean sheets of white paper, a wooden pencil box and the small tin I sharpened my pencils into. I often admired the fan-shaped shavings with their rippled rims of colour and woody smell, and at the bottom of the tin, the bright filings which stuck to a fingertip like a tight-fitting cap. So many drawings, but the one I created on the day of my dad's funeral stands out even now as a successful image. It is a study of a starfish, dried and brittle with pockmarks over its surface, two of its arms stiffened into a position of reaching out and upwards in a gesture that suggests longing or helplessness. On that day I was trying to accurately depict the starfish, but later I saw that I had captured something I wasn't aware of at the time. The starfish appears to be reaching out of the paper, straining against its static existence.

The thing about death is that once you strip away the ceremony, the spiritual consolations, the poems inside the sympathy cards, what you have are the facts that no one wants to know about. Most of us encounter death translated into evenly spaced words and dream up our own ghostly imagery, something translucent and flowing like water or clouds, but it seems that no matter how hard you try to avoid them, the other images come anyway.

No one wants to be the person opening the door of the abandoned fridge to see the crumpled child inside, forever unsettled that a game like hide and seek could have this sinister

consequence. Yet there are people who face death everyday, like the polite driver of the hearse. There are the people who clothe and paint the faces of the dead in funeral homes, attempting to add life to wilted skin, smearing on foundation, dusting with powder. Skin I imagine to feel like raw pastry, when it's spread over the base of a dish, waiting for the pie filling to be poured in; cool, smooth and dry.

How are these people affected by seeing death firsthand? Do the faces, wounds and smells of the dead stay with them, haunt them at night when they are trying to sleep? Are the tears of the mourners forever like salt on their own lips?

Under the yellow glow of the lamp, I am slowly ruining a drawing. On the desk is a bird's nest I found under the trees lining the sports oval, tightly woven and tapered at the bottom. The shadow cast across the desktop from the nest is long and tear-shaped with tattered edges. On the paper, the nest is flat, fussy, with too many lines carelessly arranged. I think about Sam. I wish we could sit on the carpet and happily go through drawings. I wish he would bring me some new stories he is working on, or tell me to read a book he is excited about. I want to untie myself from his sadness, but how can I abandon him there? My old friend!

I walk up the hall to where Elliot is chopping onions at the kitchen bench.

'I'm ready,' I say.

'Hmm?'

'For the travelling band.' I pull out a chair and sit heavily. Elliot laughs and keeps chopping. There are two dusty looking beetroots on the table. I have the fleeting thought that I would like to draw them. I pick them up one in each hand, absentmindedly trying to work out which one is heavier.

'What's it going to be, singing juggler?'

'Honestly, don't you sometimes just want to be *away*?'

'For sure. But not now. Henry's coming round for borscht.'

'Borscht?' I put down the beetroots. 'I have never cooked a beetroot. So much nicer to see them all dirty like this, right from the ground, rather than fluorescent pink in tins.'

Elliot begins to peel the skin from the beetroots in smooth burgundy curls. I leave him to his cooking and return to my room to find my drawing flat and disappointing on my desk. Still the yellow glow of the lamp, the fine weave of the paper is inviting as it always is. I tear off the page and begin again. Down the hallway Henry arrives and I hear the two of them speaking with Russian accents. If I don't end up leaving the city with the travelling band, it's nice to know there is borscht at home.

The pool! I lower myself in at the deep end, the shadowed end without the bright lights. I push myself off and begin my strokes, falling more easily now into a steady rhythm, the arc of each breath and the silky cloud of each underwater exhalation. The muted sounds fold and press around my ears and I feel I have escaped. My dad didn't like public pools. He couldn't see them for what they were, only saw that they came a very distant second to the ocean. But I take pleasure in the cleanliness, the chlorine smell, the constant comfortable temperature of the water. Once I'm swimming I lose all sense of north, south, east and west, cannot guess in which

direction the city is located. I am somewhere else, travelling back and forth in a bright blue oblong. I have escaped.

Sam arrives at the flat early on a Monday morning. He is wearing his work clothes, a blue business shirt and black trousers, shoes that should be shiny but aren't.

'I was about to get my usual train at my usual time,' he says. 'But I couldn't, so I walked over here. Sorry, I know it's early.'

We sit by the window in the kitchen drinking coffee I brewed too strong. The sky outside is overcast with low-hanging clouds and a yellowish hue. A pigeon lands on the sill and lets out a series of warbling coos, its throat vibrating gently, then flies away leaving a wispy grey feather behind. I tell Sam about the assignment I need to do for Candice, how the ideas aren't coming easily, despite the exercises I set myself, the time I set aside. For a while he genuinely seems interested.

'You're lucky to have a dilemma like that,' he says. 'You worry about your work because it *means* something to you. You don't need to pretend it's important, it just is.'

After a while, Sam starts to talk about trying to keep up. He says he feels as though he's running alongside a train that is always going to speed ahead and disappear, and he has visions of himself panting on the platform, bent over with his hands on his knees.

'I feel bent up that way all the time. That exhaustion pose. Like I've run too hard and am all out of air.'

I think about the night we had dinner near the port, how it began so well and turned drastically downhill at no specific point, as though a certain energy just petered out between us. That same shift occurs now, and I can't pinpoint why. Then Sam straightens in his chair and stares me right in the face, swallowing hard.

'But really Evie, I wanted to check with you if something was alright,' he says, turning his coffee mug round and round. 'It's just, I never know what's going on with us. You see I met this girl the other night. A really nice girl. And we, last night we slept together. I wasn't sure if that was okay with you.'

I feel as though something has thumped full force into my chest, like a disoriented bird hits a window. All the millions of aspects of the day have halted and are suddenly concerned with this one moment. I look at Sam's face, his eyebrows raised over awkward, apologetic eyes. It has never occurred to me that this may happen. My instinct is to throw my arms around him and plead, the tears already itching at the back of my eyes, but I blink and remain calm.

'I wish I'd known,' I say quietly.

‘Known what?’

‘That you were looking around for someone else.’

‘I wasn’t *looking* Eve, it just happened.’

‘It didn’t take you long to jump into bed. It doesn’t seem like you.’

‘I’m sorry Eve.’

‘Shit you say that a lot these days. You don’t have to be sorry. Just do your own thing. Go on, do it.’

I stand up, scraping my chair over the floorboards and tip the rest of my coffee into the sink. When I turn around Sam is standing too, grasping the back of his chair with white fingers.

‘Can you please go now?’ I say calmly. ‘I have a class in an hour.’

‘I’m sorry Eve,’ he says again, and disappears into the hallway. The front door opens and closes politely and he is gone. The day is changed.

In the art studio I sit at a corner bench at the back of the room behind the printmaking tables. I feel as though I’m wearing my insides on top of my clothes. Raw. I expect people will notice me glistening painfully. I lean over my sketchpad and add detail to an old drawing. It occurs to me that I may be ruining it but I don’t care. Lisa comes over to chat. I listen and smile but she can tell my heart isn’t in it.

‘You look tired today,’ she says. ‘Are you okay sweetie?’

‘I’m fine. Just not feeling too good,’ I reply, lifting a hand to my forehead awkwardly.

‘You should go home if you feel that rotten. No one will mind.’

She rushes off to talk with Candice about one of her paintings, telling me to take care and touching my arm lightly.

Somehow the class passes without impact. I have brief conversations with a few of the other students as they head to the sinks at the back of the room, but mostly I’m left alone with my drawings. Candice meets one-on-one with people about the work they would like to prepare for final submission and doesn’t approach me until the end of the class.

‘We’re out of time but next week we’ll talk about your stuff. With you we need to think bigger, broader, do you know what I mean? Less time leaning over your sketchbook and more time throwing stuff around. Okay?’

I end up on the same tram as a man from my class called Nathan. He is older than me, perhaps thirty, with short wheat-coloured hair and a pinkish skin tone. We barely know each other but to say hello. We hold onto the overhead handles and talk awkwardly about studying art and the inevitable prospect of graduating. As the tram trundles slowly down the hill our conversation

becomes sparse and eventually we run out of ideas altogether and stare out the windows in silence. I wonder about the girl Sam spent last night with, how they met. Was it like this? If Nathan were to ask me to have a coffee with him now, I would go with him without a thought. Not because I am searching for company, or because I'm attracted to him. I'd go with him because it would touch me to know this stranger wanted to get to know me. Maybe it is as easy as that. Nathan smiles goodbye at the city library tram stop and I watch him dart across the road with his art folio slung crookedly over his back and disappear into a crowd of people.

Walking home, I wonder what it is I want from Sam. The rules we set have never been spoken aloud, but still I feel betrayed and somehow misunderstood. I think again of our night at the port, Sam's old enthusiasm appearing again just momentarily, offering the irresistible prospect of returning to something that used to be. The future is so much harder, its edges are blurred and variable, but the past is crisp as a photograph set in a frame, the boundaries clear. Possibilities, of course, are limited.

I try to picture Sam's 'really nice girl.' I imagine her with straight hair and a dancer's sharp posture, a figure I would draw in my sketchbook under the heading 'nice girl'. I wonder what she thought about Sam's untidy flat, the concave couch, the mouldy shower-curtain, the single bed with just one deflated pillow. Did she spend the night? I imagine their kisses, the warmth and moisture of them, but I only know *our* kisses, Sam's and mine, the precise sensations, the way our mouths fit, our eyes align.

On the footpath is a small dead thing. I almost step on it and shift my foot just in time. It's a baby bird, just a bloated little body covered in greyish skin, the face all beak and glassy eye. The tiny skull would have crunched under the sole of my shoe like a seashell. I look closer as I walk by. The wings are just wrinkled flaps with a fine central bone hinged and folded halfway. Such intricate details, I think, so perfectly formed and yet this bird is too small to have ever flown. Most of its life was spent inside an egg.

The phone rings late at night. I leap out of bed and run down the hall at the prospect of Sam's voice on the end of the line.

'Hi Eve,' comes a soft male voice. 'It's Henry. Is Elliot about?'

I lie in bed listening to the phone conversation. It is full of intimacies, heavy sighs, long pauses followed by private laughter. On his way back down the hallway, Elliot stops at my door.

'Still awake?'

'Uh huh.'

'I forgot to tell you Sam came over earlier. He was acting a bit weird.'

'How do you mean?' I ask, sitting up in bed.

'Just different. Sort of overly happy, really wired. I thought he may have taken something, but it was the middle of the afternoon.'

'What did he say?'

'Just that he wanted to talk to you.'

'Okay.'

'Did you guys have a fight?'

'Sort of.'

'You alright?'

Elliot's silhouette in front of the yellow-lit hall begins to blur at the edges and I start to cry, in slow grief-stricken gulps. I cover my face with the warm mask of my hands.

'Hey,' says Elliot, sitting on the side of the bed and leaning to hug me. 'Hey, it will be okay Evie.'

I press my face against his warm neck as though the skin there will absorb my tears.

'Can I get you something? Water or something?' he whispers into my hair.

'Could you just slide in here with me?' I want to ask. 'And hold me. Just this once Ell.'

But I don't.

I thank him and roll over to face the wall.

How about this? I dream it is the day of my wedding but I have forgotten to buy a dress. I phone my mother in a panic. People are starting to arrive at the reception place, gathering in groups, drinking champagne with strawberries floating in the flutes. I dash out the back way to buy a dress but find only strange boutiques where the dresses are outlandish with medieval bodices and striped taffeta skirts. I am rolled into one of these garments, a crinkled scroll of fabric. I hate it. I change back into my jeans and run back to my wedding. People turn and look at me, confused by my jeans and runners. My hair is greasy. I don't even know who I am supposed to be marrying.

At the pool I sink to the floor-tiles and cross my legs. In order to stay down here I must hold my breath. I hold it for a long time, until the pressure in my head increases to the point of pain. It feels as though something is bulging at the back of my eyeballs. I push myself violently towards

the surface, up and out, hold onto the edge panting. The teenaged lifeguard looks up from his magazine and raises his eyebrows at me. I shake my head at him *I'm okay*.

Sam has gone to the mountains for the weekend. *To get away* he says, *and think about everything*, but I suspect he has taken the 'really nice girl' with him. I am yet to see her in the flesh and still envisage her as a book illustration, standing straight-backed with a neatly cut fringe, the features general and distant. Elliot has been attempting to help me cope, though I know his thoughts are concerned almost entirely with himself and Henry, and his advice is uncharacteristically shallow.

'Just behave in whatever way seems right,' he says. 'If you're angry, be that. If you're hurt, be that.'

But how can you know what is right? I have been pondering this question for days now.

I have been thinking about the past, how it clings on and drags behind in the dirt, leaving tracks and patterns. Elliot tells me not to think about time at all because it doesn't really exist anyway, it's just a way for people to organise themselves. Spend time doing things that keep you in the present, he tells me. So I draw. I become pedantic about accuracy, frantically erasing clumsy lines, sharpening my pencils until the tips are fine as needles. Leaning over the paper under the yellow glow of my lamp, I inhale the smell of lead and wonder half-heartedly if it is harmful. I have heard of lead poisoning.

I start collecting textures by laying a thin sheet of paper over a surface and taking rubbings with a soft pencil. I begin to notice the textures everywhere, filigree-type curls on the brass deadlock of our front door, embossed art deco designs on the strips of tiling under the mantelpiece, an oriental scene carved into a cheap circular pendant. I remember doing similar rubbings of coins when I was a child, aiming for a perfect clean-edged image of the queen's head in profile. At a loss to know what to do with all my rubbings, I slide them into an old manila envelope and leave it in the drawer of my desk.

I continue creating images, almost obsessively, each evening until late. I draw and compile my rubbings as though I am a detective working on something important, collecting evidence, studying photographs of a crime scene. I immerse myself in the immediate environment, the rectangle of the desk, the orb of yellow light from the lamp, the smooth texture of the paper, soft scraping of the pencil. There is a part of me that wants to be shut away in a room drawing, where the expectations of me are nil and there's no one to impress or disappoint.

I swim twenty laps. Twenty-five. Thirty. Thirty-five. My heart pounds steady and peaceful. I imagine it as a sea anemone in the cage of my ribs, a sponge pulsing in a liquid environment. For a while I feel as though I could never grow old.

I meet Lisa at the Palm Lounge next to a bell-shaped lamp that gives out a tropical greenish light. She hugs me and I am enveloped in a cloud of perfume and blonde curls.

‘Josh is going to meet us too,’ she says. ‘And maybe some others.’

We sit side by side on a brown couch, each with a pot of beer. Lisa tells me she has hit some sort of block with her painting, and is losing motivation for her project, despite Candice’s constant encouragement.

‘It’s like my head has moved on to something else, but I’m still in the middle of the work,’ she says. ‘Last week I forgot how to paint. I did! I sat looking at the paintings I’d already done and couldn’t work out how I’d created those images. I couldn’t even mix colours!’

‘I don’t know why you worry...your stuff always feels significant,’ I say. ‘I just recreate things I see.’

‘But I think what’s more important for you is selection. You know, the strength is in what you choose to depict...and then how you arrange the images together. Like that strip of drawings on that rough paper, the one Candice made us look at. It’s all about the shape and angle of the objects at first, but then the perspective is thrown out by the one landscape image. I really like that one.’

‘Thanks. I was happy with that one too,’ I say, embarrassed a little, but injected with a new energy because my work feels validated, appreciated by Lisa, who creates wonderful paintings. I tell Lisa about Sam and the ‘really nice girl’, surprising myself by sounding nonchalant, rational, as though it doesn’t worry me. I say it has been coming for a while now, that we have grown apart.

‘I can’t imagine it,’ she says. ‘I always think of you guys as Siamese twins, joined at the hip.’

I head to the bar for another round of drinks, thinking about her comment. We were that way, like Siamese twins, and that’s why I feel as though a part of me has been lopped off. Not that I miss Sam so much, maybe I’m just afraid of not being his top priority anymore. I think about him in the mountains with his girl, and begin to crave details. Are they staying in a hotel room or maybe one of those cabins with interiors of wood veneer? Did they drive in his car or hers? I envisage her to own a hatchback. My imaginings continue in illustration form, the

mountains steep with curved tops and carpeted in green foliage, picturesque in the most literal sense.

When I return with the drinks, Josh and another man have arrived.

‘Eve this is Ollie,’ Josh says, putting his hand on his friend’s shoulder, but the two of them have turned towards the bar before I’ve had a chance to say hello.

Ollie turns out to be Josh’s cousin, thirty-something. He has clear blue eyes and a strong nose and seems entirely too cool. He spends a lot of time staring around the bar nodding slightly, as though saying silently, *here we are then, yes here we are*. Conversation doesn’t come easily. Ollie responds to my questions with brief, lazy sentences and general comments that lead nowhere. I find out he designs sets for a theatre company and has moved from Sydney to begin a course. At first I find him rude, but soon begin to suspect he may be shy. Perhaps a bit of both.

Josh and Lisa have started arguing, in the joking sort of way a couple does, more for the benefit of onlookers than each other. It involves a lot of touching and grabbing of hands and high-pitched giggling accusations. They challenge each other to a game of pool and Ollie and I are left alone with half a beer each and our flimsy scraps of conversation. When he leaves for the bar without asking me if I’d like another drink, I feel rejected. I worry he is thinking this is some sort of blind date Lisa has arranged, but he returns with two pots and places one in front of me, and, when I thank him, he throws me a warm smile.

Having joined forces after their mock argument, Josh and Lisa’s pool competition is ongoing, pair after pair offering to take them on. I glance up every now and then to see Lisa leaning over the table in concentration or standing with one hip stuck out while waiting for her turn, her blonde curls shining brightly under the low hanging lights. As Ollie and I drink and talk, my thoughts of Sam begin to flatten out and empty of emotion until I feel almost freed from my anxiety, temporarily at least. I ask him how Melbourne compares with Sydney.

‘One thing I notice is, in Sydney people are more serious about what they do. Creative people. They are not afraid to own it. Here, it seems like everyone talks their stuff down, like they’re embarrassed about it.’ He pauses before going on. ‘Like you. You say you like drawing, you’re into it enough to study it, but at the same time you shrug it off as though it were just something to pass the time.’

I laugh out of embarrassment. ‘I suppose I’m wary of taking things too seriously.’

‘But why not take it seriously? It obviously means something to you.’

‘Yeah, of course. But I don’t know how it fits in to the bigger picture or...how worthwhile it is...or...’

‘See what I mean? That wouldn’t happen in Sydney.’

I see Ollie with his confidence and directness against the backdrop of Sydney's graceful shapes and clear skies. I spent some time in Sydney with Sam, strolling around the shimmering curves of the harbour, catching ferries from one port to another. The sea there wasn't like the sea I knew which churned deeply, changed colours and scents by the hour and stung your wounds with salt. The harbour seemed glamorous and silver-flecked, constant and vivid. The water smelled different, as did the double-decker trains we travelled on. Though the memories are happy and sunbathed, it occurs to me now that we never really understood the city, could never grasp being there, we just glided over the smooth blue surface of it without piercing the skin. I try to explain this to Ollie but find myself hopelessly inarticulate, and a more than a little drunk. He listens to me with a smile at the corner of his mouth.

Waiting for Ollie to return from the bathroom, I shift in my chair to study the flocked wallpaper, sharply pointed leaves climbing towards the ceiling, the pattern repeating itself across the wall. I wish I had some paper and a pencil to make a rubbing. One of the leaves, I notice, is not a leaf at all but a bird, one wing splayed like a fan, head dipped. I run my finger over the velvety patterning and the fine criss-crossing texture in the paper itself. Sitting beside me on the couch, Ollie joins me in admiring the wallpaper.

'My grandma has a room with walls like this,' he says. 'I used to love it when I was a kid.'

'I love textures,' I say stupidly, but I can think of no words to expand on my comment. I turn to reach for my beer but find myself suddenly close to Ollie's face. He kisses me open-mouthed, slowly, as though he has no fears that I might pull away. The noise and action of the Palm Lounge fades and I am suddenly consumed entirely by his face, his warm mouth, the frantic rhythm inside my own chest. Afterwards, I look around expecting people to be staring, but find people talking and laughing as before, Lisa and Josh still at the pool table under the white lights. I look at Ollie's clear intelligent eyes, just starting to smile and I lean over again. Something about the kissing, the way he does it, makes me feel powerless and empty of thought so that I give in entirely to sensation. His newness, unfamiliarity. This is what it must be like to arrive in a foreign country and, as Elliot says, to feel suddenly like a different person.

Waking up with Ollie, I am startled to realise I have slept beside a stranger. I have never done this before. His body smell is new to me, something about it reminds me of river stones, or the rock-cold water from mineral springs. He is lying on his back, looking around my room and I feel stupidly shy. I feel the need to hide all the personal details of my room, my tea-tin clock, the mermaid print above the bed, a poem I wrote in first year uni and tacked to the wall, three charcoal drawings of shells with bright windows of watercolour, a pair of striped knickers poking

out the top of a drawer. I wish I could pull a curtain around the bed as they can in hospitals. When he swings his legs out and stands to dress, I turn away from his nakedness and pull the doona up over my bare shoulders. I hear Elliot moving around in the kitchen and hope Ollie doesn't want to stay for breakfast.

'Do you want to use the shower?' I croak out the first words of the day.

'No thanks. I should get going,' he replies, throwing me the same warm smile of last night, and instantly I feel better. There is no bad feeling, only awkwardness. I watch him tying the laces of his shoes, notice he uses a different method to me, first making two loose loops then crossing them over and under to create the bow.

'Thanks Evie,' he says, sitting lightly beside me on the mattress. 'That was a great night.' He kisses my forehead, swift and warm, and walks out of the room, all broad shoulders and confident strides. I stare at the plaster biscuit on my ceiling and listen to the front door slam. I feel my heart swoop downwards and settle again. The word I think of is sorrow. My eyes fill with tears, not for Ollie, but for Sam, whose body is as familiar to me as my own, whose skin I have pressed my face against hundreds of times, whose legs have tangled with mine through the night, whose mouth I long for with a new thirst.

Biting into a ripe peach, you may find it either moist and juicy or floury and dry.

I dream up a dimly-lit bar with filthy carpet, dense with spills. I am sitting on an enormous expanse of sofa which shifts beneath me like a waterbed. I sink into the velveteen. There are palm leaves hanging over me from a plant behind, and as much as I try to brush them away, they keep falling back to obscure my view. Through the fronds I catch sight of Sam drinking beer, waving at me happily. Happily. I smile back and gesture at the sofa cushion beside me, but realise I am now enclosed in a smaller room, viewing Sam through a rectangular hole in the wall, about the size of a television screen. I see Elliot has also entered the space and my heart leaps to see them together, my two best friends. I gesture again at the sofa. Everyone seems so happy, the air smelling like a fairground, like the sweet moisture of sucked lollies. I watch them laughing and drinking, and I laugh too, from my spot on the sofa. I see Elliot reach out a hand to the side of Sam's face and lean in to kiss him. Sam kisses back hungrily, one hand still politely holding his pot of beer. I watch them loving one another, my two friends, and I lie back in love with both of them.

For the next week I just want to be at home. I skip my classes. I don't know what's gotten into me. I don't want alcohol or crowds or music or even romance. I wear woollen socks I find at the back of my drawer, make herbal tea in a pot and drink cup after cup while reading novels on the couch or in bed. Elliot asks me, with concerned eyes, if I'm depressed. I do think about it, but tell him honestly that I feel quite okay.

'I just feel inside myself.'

He laughs and starts to respond but his pocket begins to buzz. I can tell from the tone of his voice that it's Henry. The way he says *oh hi*, in the same way that you would pet a beautiful animal; tender and respectful.

Sam calls and we chat. I tell him I am busy with uni work and feeling a little under the weather. He says it's a strange term, *under the weather*, because in a way we always are. This reminds me of Lisa's paintings with their swirling skies and the city overwhelmed underneath.

'Anyway, let's catch up on the weekend, Evie.'

'Sure. I might be a butterfly by then.'

'What?'

'Oh don't worry. Just a little cocooned at the moment.'

I go to bed at 8pm, sleep long heavy hibernation until morning when I hear Elliot slam the front door and trot down the side stairs. I force myself up and see that it has been raining again, with the sky showing ragged openings of blue. Half an hour later I am riding on the path alongside the train tracks. There are potholes puddled with rain and city litter glinting all over the place. My heart pumps away inside and my ears ache from the cold. I pedal to the top of the rise just for the pleasure of standing tall in the pedals and flying back down.

Lisa sends me a text message. Ollie wants to have another drink this weekend, the four of us. I think of his clean smell, his eager mouth and I feel nothing, only a puzzlement that he was for one night in my bedroom, in my life. I text back; *I can't, sorry. But say hi to him for me. Evie.* As I slip my phone back into my bag it begins to vibrate and ring. Sam.

'Evie, it's me. How are you going?'

We meet up at the Green Door and drink red wine, just for a change. It stains Sam's teeth and lips a purple colour. I don't ask about his girl, just tell him what is happening in my life, the swimming I have been doing, how I'm increasing the distance every time. Sam tells me about being taken to the pool as a toddler, how the infant pool was evacuated and drained after he had an accident in there.

'I can't remember it, thank god. But Mum said she was really embarrassed.' We have a laugh and order a few more glasses of wine.

'Your teeth are stained,' Sam says.

'Yours too.'

'Still pretty though. Still really pretty.' Sam leans over the table and looks closely at my face. Anticipating that he is about to say something about his other girl, I feel compelled to jump in first.

'It's okay you know, about you and this girl. I felt really hurt at first, and angry. But it's okay Sam,' I say, hoping to sound genuine. 'I don't stake any claims on you.'

Sam looks down and clears his throat.

'Lauren...well, she's not really suited to me. It was just a stupid thing, and I'm so sorry I hurt you.'

'Don't worry about it.'

'If it had been the other way around, I would have totally freaked out,' he says, standing up to go to the bathroom. As he walks away I say the name to myself, feeling a fine thread of jealousy curling around the syllables. *Lauren*.

Outside the arts building I run into Lisa. Her eyes are glistening and pink-rimmed and when I ask how she is she begins to cry, childlike and sniffling.

'I broke it off with Josh,' she says. 'And I don't really know why.'

We sit on a bench around the side of the building, empty but for students locking and unlocking their bikes as they arrive or leave. Legs crossed and facing each other, Lisa and I talk about love and how it never seems to make as much sense as it should, or at least, as we imagine it should. It's not that we expect it to be easy, we say, only not so damn confusing.

'What does it mean if it only feels right *sometimes*?' Lisa asks, blowing her nose into a wad of tissues. 'If you are only *in love* a few days out of the week, you know. Sometimes he says something that makes me think, what the hell am I doing with this guy? But you know, other times I am rolling on the floor laughing with him for *hours*.'

I don't know what to say to Lisa. I tell her what I've been pondering; if you question something too much, it stops making sense, like spelling.

'You know how when you are trying to work out the spelling of a word, once you write it out ten times and study all the variations you have made, even the correct spelling stops making sense, looks completely wrong. But if you leave it for a while, then look at it casually, without the expectation that it may be wrong, it looks perfectly okay again.'

'We think too much.' she says, sniffing.

'Absolutely.'

Finding a seat on the tram I wave through the window at Lisa standing at the lights, her mass of curls blowing wildly in the university wind. There are fresh tears welling up in her eyes. I try to remind myself of the signs outside the Snippets Salon. *There is a lot of cactus in the world, but you don't have to sit on it.*

Sometimes it's like we can't help but sit on it.

Sam and I sit cross-legged by my bedroom window. It is late afternoon. Close to five, according to the tea-tin clock. We have been sitting here for hours, looking through my old sketchbooks and the life drawings I've stored inside postal tubes. It is strange discovering images I had forgotten about. Some of these drawings I spent hours on, at home or in class, concentrating solely on the aspects of creating a successful image. Yet over days and weeks and months these chunks of time have been all but forgotten. Only the drawings remain. There is one of Sam, a dirty charcoal sketch on butcher's paper. He studies the portrait.

'I don't like this one at all,' he says, 'It's not the drawing; the drawing itself is good. It's seeing myself as just a face,' he says. 'It's like, without a body, I can't place myself anywhere, I'm disconnected.'

'I know what you mean, but I don't think it's that. It's just that the expression is wrong, the eyes aren't looking at anything.'

'It makes me anxious,' he says, sliding the drawing underneath the loose piles of papers between us. He begins to roll a joint. The light from the window is weakening, the sky outside a flat bluish grey, just a sprig of rounded leaves from next-door's fig tree interrupting the smoothness of it. No clouds and no birds. A match flares close to Sam's face as he lights up.

'I love twilight,' I say.

'You always say that.' Sam passes me the joint.

'Well I do.'

'I hate it,' he says, blowing smoke upwards.

'How can you hate it? Sam, how can you say, *I hate twilight?*'

'It's just that I feel depressed at this time of day.'

I stare out at the fading, peaceful sky, then at Sam as he drags on the joint.

'I love watching you smoke,' I say, 'I know that's bad, I mean, you should quit. Cigarettes anyway. But the way you inhale with your eyes squinted, it's like you're *really* thinking about something. Involved in that thought. Or you are about to come up with something. A great idea.'

'I've never had one of those, Evie.'

'What is it with you?' I say, sliding the pile of papers away and shifting closer to him. 'You've *never* had a great idea?'

'Nope.' Now he is teasing me. I look into his sad green eyes, the marbled irises shining, a chip of light in each one.

'This joint was a great idea.' I say as I drag on it, turning my face to the side and winking. '*Really* great. That jacket, that colour on you. Putting it on this morning, *that* was a great idea Sam.' The joint is done, stubbed out on the window sill, thrown into the courtyard below. I move onto my knees and kneel in front of him.

'Coming to see you was a great idea,' he says taking my hand.

'Uh huh.' I straddle his torso, resting on his lap and kissing him. His hands grip my shoulder blades, and pull me towards him. I feel he is hard already. He pulls me down on the rug, rocking his hips against me, letting out small groans inside my mouth. We make love in the quiet flat, the city spread out gracefully on all sides, the sky fading, fading, our eyes locked together when we come.

When we are done the sky is almost dark, the leaves of the fig tree just ghostly silhouettes out the window. I see Sam has tears in his eyes. This seems devastating to me. I kiss his eyelids gently, taking the tears into my mouth. They taste like the sea.

'At night, when darkness has really set in, I'm okay,' he says, almost whispering. 'But I hate seeing the day just disappearing, you know, sinking down and gone forever. I usually just shut the blinds and turn on the lights and forget it's happening.'

I pull my knickers on and stand up, my bare legs suddenly cold. I draw the curtains over the window and cross to the doorway to flick the light switch. Under the yellow light, Sam pulls his jeans over himself and sits up, reaching for his tobacco pouch. Down the hallway I hear a key crunch in the front door and Henry and Elliot's voices laughing, talking over one another.

It is night-time now anyway. The day has well and truly disappeared.

Later on I eat a meal of risotto and green salad with Elliot and Henry. We sit around the small laminex table in the kitchen, listening to one of Elliot's jazz albums and drinking red wine. The air in the kitchen is warm and happy and smelling of good food and I feel relieved that Sam has

gone home, that I am freed from his sadness and can enjoy this dinner. I try not to wonder what he may be doing now.

‘More salad Eve?’ asks Henry, his large hands holding the bowl towards me. Elliot tops up the wine glasses and it seems we are on to the second bottle already. Henry tells me he met Elliot’s family today, drove out to the hills and sat in the kitchen drinking tea with his parents.

‘Actually I was really nervous,’ he laughs. ‘Especially when I saw the house. It’s enormous!’

‘Yeah,’ I agree. ‘It reminds me of a million dollar tree house. You know, with all the bare wood and that little narrow bit going off to the side?’ I have been to the house a few times, once for Elliot’s birthday dinner and once to help shift the couch into a trailer and back here to the flat. I remember my first impressions of the place too, the stylish angles of it appearing from behind the towering trees around the driveway. Elliot once told me his parents had offered to buy him an apartment when he moved out of home and I was astounded that he had knocked back their offer to rent this place, with its thumping hot water system, creaking floorboards and mice in the walls.

‘You don’t understand Eve,’ he had said. ‘If they had bought me a place I would have been under pressure to keep it a certain way. They would have come around every Saturday morning to clean the windows. Here I can be who I want and live how I want.’

Henry continues with his story about Elliot’s parents, explaining that they seemed to be competing for his opinion on a painting they had recently bought for their lounge room.

‘It was this tall canvas with five horizontal lines, almost like tree-trunks but more hard-edged. All creams and browns. I actually really liked it. So did Ell’s mum but his dad, he wasn’t so sure. I didn’t know which side to be on.’

‘But you handled it perfectly,’ says Elliot, turning from Henry to me. ‘He told them that it suited the room then complimented them on their decorating taste.’

‘They thought because I was a graphic designer I would know a lot about contemporary art. If they saw the logo I just designed for this company called *Pampered Pooch*, they would probably not be so impressed.’

‘*Pampered Pooch*,’ I laugh. ‘Is that a mobile dog wash or something?’

‘It’s a dog-walking service. You know, for the busy professionals who are moving in all over the place.’

‘Yeah. I saw a documentary on these two guys who do that in New York. They walk about eight dogs at a time.’

‘Of course it would be two guys,’ says Elliot. ‘I bet they were gay. That’s so gay.’

We all begin to laugh and I see Henry flash Elliot a look across the table.

‘It’s so fucking gay,’ he says with a lilt in his voice. ‘Camp as a row of tents.’

The three of us have a great night together eating and drinking in our little kitchen. After dinner Elliot puts on another of his jazz albums and we all do the dishes, dancing around like some ridiculously happy family.

Sam calls after dinner to ask if I want to go out drinking, but I have had so much red wine all I want to do is sleep. I don’t tell him this, I just say I’m tired.

‘Sorry about before Evie,’ he says.

‘Hey, don’t worry about it,’ I reply, and I do genuinely mean it. ‘I just hate seeing you sad like that.’

‘It’s just...’

‘Twilight.’

‘And the rest.’

‘Things getting you down?’ I hear Henry and Elliot in hysterics in the lounge room, two strains of throaty laughter overlapping each other. Henry pops his head into the hallway and holds out an unopened bottle of whiskey, eyebrows raised. I shake my head.

‘What’s going on at yours?’ Sam asks.

‘Henry stayed for tea.’

‘Oh.’ Sam cuts the word short and I know what he is really trying to say. He wants to ask me why he wasn’t invited to stay for dinner. I adopt a casual air.

‘I *was* planning on having a quiet night.’

‘Yeah I know.’

Enough! I think, that small figure inside me stomping her foot, clenching her fists till the knuckles glow white. Enough of your attitude Sam! Enough of the way you turn my bright days dull, the way you pity beautiful things, the way you make love with tears in your eyes and stretch out the nights until it hurts. Enough of your morbid thinking and crazy mood swings, the way you fail to notice my efforts to cheer you up and care for you. Enough of the way you take no responsibility for the way you feel, or for the way you bring me down. I tell him I need to go.

‘Why? Whatcha doing?’

‘I just have to go that’s all,’ I sigh.

‘Whatever,’ he says and his voice falls away. The conversation hits the floor.

I remember a summer night when Sam and I rode into the city to see a band someone had told us about. It was early on in our friendship and we hadn't yet started sleeping together, but we were well and truly on the way to being in love. *I* was absolutely in love. We rode fearlessly down the tram tracks, singing and talking, cutting through the warm air like paper planes thrown from a high window. We locked our bikes to a signpost in a narrow one-way street and made our way to a dimly lit bar, first just a door in a wall, then a magical cave with velvet hanging over the walls and little candles flickering on all the tables. The band turned out to be just two people, a guy on guitar and a girl who played crazy fiddly solos on a viola. As I watched I wondered if they were lovers, having this mad little conversation with each other each time they played. I thought that would be exciting. I mentioned the idea to Sam, whose face in profile I couldn't keep my eyes off, each time I glanced his way I turned back a second later for a longer look. It was dark and I could get away with it. He sucked away on his cigarettes like some beautiful cowboy. His bare forearms were smooth with a long lean muscle under the surface, his hands broad and capable and aged a little beyond his years, the palms creased like worn leather.

'If they are lovers,' he had said. 'They must have a crazy sex life. If her viola playing is anything to go by.' He shot me a smile and I shifted along the bench towards him, full of courage all of a sudden, intoxicated by alcohol and music, the guitarist's voice grinding along. I said it simply and without reservation.

'I love you, Sam. I want to be with you.' When he didn't answer I said it again. 'I love you.' I had never said it before. He raised his eyebrows in surprise and opened his mouth a little, his tongue glistening in there. He leaned in towards my face and from then on it seemed we were kissing, kissing and we kissed all night. I can't even remember riding home.

Sam! I want to feel that again.

What does it mean? What does it mean to be once like that and now like this? Like I am now.

One night after dinner I ride to the pool, seeing it lit up warmly in the cool night, the tall windows foggy as I approach. I lower myself in at the deep end, thrilled by this simple act of sinking into the water under bright lights while all is dark outside. There are only a few other swimmers and since I have a lane to myself, I swim directly down the centre, not having to worry about slowing someone down or hurrying someone along. I glide over the black line running along the bottom, finding my rhythm easily, losing track of my lap count. As I pass through the middle section of the pool, when the brightest of the overhead lights are directly above me, my

shadow appears on the pale tiles of the floor, a graceful shape following me. I swim until the lifeguard meets me at the end of the lane to tell me it is almost closing time. I look around to see I am the only one in the complex.

I dream the grid of streets in my neighbourhood expands so that I must walk greater distances to and from the flat. The trip down the hill seems to go on forever. All the shops and cafes are large and noisy with expansive balconies and towering windows. Faces are all familiar but no one seems to know me. I am heading to Sam's place but I never make it.

Sam goes out for Vietnamese with Lauren. It seems they still keep in touch. When he tells me I feel awkward and a little jealous; just a twinge of it. They are only friends he says.

'We don't, *you know*,' he says, just like a teenager. 'Not anymore.'

Lisa comes over one evening to help with my project. We spread my tiny pictures over the lounge room floor. Lisa separates five of the drawings from the rest and sets them in a row.

'I think you should work these somehow into these over here,' she says reaching for my messy collection of rubbings.

The images she has selected are simple studies of objects; a key, a teaspoon, a length of coiled string from Elliot's boat making still inside its plastic packet, a broken shell, and the tiny bird skull from class. As Lisa looks through the rubbings and I see that collectively, they suggest something more interesting, just as the objects, when grouped together, seem to take on some significance or suggest some thought or emotion, something much larger than the items themselves.

'It's as though,' says Lisa. 'Just by giving these objects such special attention, you are giving them meaning.'

'I just like drawing what I can see. I don't want to make any statements.'

'But you can't avoid it. What you see, other people might not notice.'

Elliot and Henry cook us a lasagne, large slabs of it served on white plates with tufts of green salad. We eat on our knees in the lounge room talking over one another. At 10.30pm, a pizza deliveryman knocks on the front door with an order that isn't ours. The four of us end up gathered around his delivery docket, trying to work out the correct address.

'I think that says 20 C, not 200,' says Henry.

'So that would be at the bottom of the hill?'

'Maybe it's a street number,' says Lisa. 'And then a *flat* number. But then...nah, it is 20C. I think Henry's right.'

The pizza boy laughs shyly and disappears. We open a bottle of wine and discuss all the terrible part time jobs we have had, pamphlet dropping, telemarketing, scooping ice cream, waiting tables. Half an hour later, the pizza boy reappears to awkwardly ask Lisa out for dinner and we leave her in the hall while the three of us laugh silently in the lounge room.

'He is only sixteen!' she says when he has finally disappeared. 'Sixteen!'

There is more laughter, more wine.



My dad stays longer at the beach house than my mother and me. For the last few weeks he has walked and walked along the shoreline, disappeared around the headland and left us paddling in the shallows. On one of his walks he finds a gull with a torn wing and takes it back to his office in a cardboard box, places towels gently around it, though he knows it will die. I hear him telling my mother that teenagers most likely injured the bird, tried to kill it as a joke; it has happened before, he says. Overcome with grief, I press my face into the soft beach house pillow and feel wet circles form under my eyes. Dad doesn't cry.

I suggest board games, fish and chips, making sand sculptures as we have done before. But Dad goes walking, or sits silently at the outdoor table and drinks tea, his eyes sliding along the sharp edge of the horizon. My mother becomes short tempered and quiet, busies herself with cleaning and crosswords, while I collect shells and other objects from the sand and rock ledges. Smooth dark stones that glisten when I first pull them from the rock pools, but become matt and ordinary once they have dried.

I must get back to school. My mother and I leave on a Sunday when clouds are swirling in over the water and a cold wind drags the smell of seaweed into the town. We plan to pick Dad up the following weekend and bring him home with us. He stands on the concrete path out the front of the house and waves goodbye, his hair blowing all over, his strong brown legs planted solid. I wave through the car window as we drive away. All the way home I think of the bird in the box, dying quietly. I close my eyes and imagine myself tossing it up into the sky, it's wings snapping open suddenly, expanding to their original breadth, new and undamaged once again. I wish I had this power.

My grief for the bird is excessive, but perhaps not. Perhaps I have a sense of loss already. I will never see my father again.



Sam and I sit on the cold metal palings of a park bench. The air has turned cold. The park, with its avenues of stately trees and lamps flicking on one by one, seems strangely deserted, though only a few kilometres south the city purrs. Clouds of insects swell and writhe gracefully around the newly lit lamps. Sam smokes in that way he does, face tilted slightly up, eyes squinted, the weight of the world pressing heavily on his forehead.

‘Don’t you ever feel like you should be doing something great?’ he asks, words released in wisps of smoke.

‘What do you mean ‘great’?’

‘Something that will change things, something to make people remember you after you’re gone. Something important.’

I lean forwards to pick up the dry leaves and crunch them in my palms, then sprinkle the flakes back onto the ground. The leaves smell of something much bigger, like a forest. I think about my dad and what he left behind. There are the albums filled with his photos, the clumsy sloping handwriting on the backs of them. Before they were locked away, I had gone through one of the albums, sliding each photo from its plastic sleeve and turning it over to read the scrawl. I found it incredulous that not only the images but the writing, the fine strings of words, remained after my dad was gone.

‘I know what you mean, but then what does it matter anyway, after you’re gone? When I think about my dad...’ I begin, but Sam cuts in.

‘It matters, Eve, because...because otherwise what are we all doing here? What’s the point of it all?’

I turn away from Sam for fear of him noticing my frustration. There’s a sparrow perched on a rubbish bin, its small talons hooked over the metal lip, head swivelling in staccato movements. Most of the birds have disappeared for the night, tucked away in trees or gutters or other places I don’t know about. I feel hurt that Sam cut me off.

‘The point is just that there is no point,’ I say.

‘Oh...fuck that attitude Eve.’ Sam’s voice has turned quiet and rimmed with anger. His words are spaced out, carefully released into the air between us. ‘That’s a fucked up attitude. A cop-out attitude.’

I feel tears rising in response to his harshness. A surge of anger rises in my chest and for a moment I feel the disbelieving ferocity of a child hard-done-by, features clenched, preparing to throw a tantrum. I try to speak calmly.

‘What? I’m trying to help you Sam. I’m trying to help you here. And that’s all I do.’ My words come out thin and stretched so I stand up for emphasis, or power. ‘It’s all I fucking do.’

There's *no* point to it all Sam...and that means you can do whatever the fuck you want to do,' I say, beginning to yell now. 'And there's freedom in that, if you can just *see* that...I'm *trying* to help you.' I turn and run through the park with its black shadow figures of trees and signs and benches, half expecting Sam to call after me, but I hear nothing, only my feet slapping the concrete, my own sobs and uneven breathing whirring around my ears. I run past the service station, the pizza shop and back home to the arched panes of yellow light, hoping to find Elliot in the front room working on his boats, but the flat is empty. I suppose he is staying at Henry's place.

I dream there is a dead bird in my bed. It is not my usual bed but an enormous expanse of mattress like one in an expensive hotel room. I feel the bird against my bare thigh, something soft with a scratchy edge. Snapping my leg away I pull back the covers to see it; a city pigeon, its flattened head turned to one side, one vacant eye bulging, a wing bent the wrong way at the joint. Though my impulse is to jump out of bed, I'm unable to move, and my eyes are locked on the bird whose insides are spilling from its belly, glistening strings and nuggetty little organs. There is a rotten smell about the bird. I think I release a scream.

I wake to find my covers thrown back and my heart clattering loudly somewhere in my head. The bedside clock reads 11.35 in square yellow letters. I have barely been asleep. Walking to the bathroom down our dark hallway, I can't seem to shake off the residue of the dream, a feeling of dirtiness, but more strongly, a sense of something like dread. The apartment is a washed-out grey with the gold glow of streetlights filtered through the curtains. The air is empty and regretful. Washing my hands at the sink I look down into the small wonky garden next door to see a bat flying into the branches of the fig tree, its silhouette graceful and sinister with pointed tips.

I have a strong urge to see Sam, to apologise for before, but his phone rings out, metallic and cold. I imagine him still sitting on the park bench where I left him, crunching dead leaves in his palm, or lying on his bed wide-eyed, smoking perhaps and ignoring the telephone.

Riding down the hill and past the café strip it occurs to me suddenly that Sam may have gone to see Lauren after leaving the park. I scan the outdoor tables for him but see only strangers. Most of the places are closed for the night. I realise I have no helmet on, the wind whips my hair around behind me and I feel my bird dream falling away as I ride.

From the street I see the kitchen light of Sam's flat is on, a small bright rectangle revealing pale blue cupboards and the curved edge of a light fitting. I lean my bike against the railing, climb the concrete staircase and walk along the balcony to Sam's door. I have no idea

what to say to him, aside from offering an apology, but then I guess I am also expecting one in return. I knock and wait. From the neighbouring flat I hear the sounds of David Letterman's Late Show, a burst of brassy theme music followed by a studio audience laughing and clapping, but there are no sounds from Sam's place. Again I begin to think he may be with Lauren, perhaps the two of them are in the bedroom, ignoring the door, though it seems oddly quiet inside. I knock again, louder. A surge of engine noise and techno music escalates then dies as a car speeds by on the street below, leaving the sweet smell of burnt rubber. I try Sam's door and find it, as usual, open. The empty living room is revealed, unlit but for a slant of light falling from the hallway. On the coffee table is the usual sprawl of items, an ashtray full of butts, a pile of newspapers, a coffee mug, a couple of pens. Sam's red sneakers lie open-mouthed on the carpet.

'Sam?' I call quietly, as though trying to rouse someone very gently from a deep sleep. 'Sam?' Are you around?

In the hallway entrance, Sam's head appears. He looks completely shocked to see me.

'You are here. I had this bad feeling and I wanted to make sure...', my words peter out as Sam's stunned face scrunches itself into a grimace.

'Evie,' he says, stepping forward.

'Are you okay?' I whisper. Then I see the blood. A shiny glove covering his left hand. He holds it out to me as though I am to inspect his fingernails for dirt. Droplets fall heavily onto the carpet, perfectly spherical like balls of mercury, they fall slowly, flatten and expand when they hit the floor. The palm of Sam's right hand is also coated in red, like a child's hand pressed in finger paint. His black t-shirt is darker in patches and his jeans are also stained. There is a single red smear down one side of his face. My voice sounds out of place, too loud and abrupt.

'What happened? Sam!' I blurt. 'What happened?' I repeat this question but only because I have no other words; I'm not expecting an answer. I have seen the source of the bleeding, the long cut on his left wrist, running alongside the two tendons which harden when the hand muscles are clenched.

'It's just a cut,' he whispers. I rush past him into the bathroom to find a trail of frilled red droplets running across the floor tiles and the basin filled with pink water. In the round indent where the soap should be is a razor blade, one of the old-fashioned ones used to sharpen pencils or sticks of charcoal. I have a box of these on my drawing desk at home. I take a green towel from the metal rail and turn to see Sam leaning against the doorframe, pale-faced and vacant looking, but when he speaks he sounds almost apologetic.

'I never wanted...' he says.

'Don't worry Sam. It's going to be okay, but let's just...', I wrap the green towel around his bloody wrist and hand, tucking the edges into the bulk of it. 'Keep pressure on it,' I say. 'Press it

hard right there.’ It looks like a boxing glove. Not until now has it occurred to me to call an ambulance.

The operator speaks in short questioning sentences.

‘Can I have your address? Is that a ground floor apartment? How does he look now? And the bleeding?’

Sam sits on the couch with his head lolled back on the cushions and his long legs stretched out in front of him. The bandaged hand rests in his lap, a messy bundle with blood fringing the edges like bright red lace. While I listen to the operator, Sam starts talking, addressing me I think, though his eyes are focussed on the ceiling. I hear my name, repeated as though he is analysing the sound of it, and some other phrases and words.

‘I didn’t intend to...Evie...involving you at all...Evie...part of your life...Eve.’

Hanging up the phone, I feel empowered, practical, sensible, all those things I strived to be praised for at school, the qualities teachers valued above all else. I open the curtain on the window looking down to the street, then flick on the light so we can be easily seen when the ambulance arrives. Sitting beside Sam I tighten the bandage and help with applying pressure near the cut. The blood flow has slowed a little, though it continues to seep out and soak into the towel. The operator had told me to keep Sam talking.

‘Sam,’ I say. ‘The ambulance is on its way.’ Sam’s head rolls on the cushions to face me and I see a flicker of clarity in his confused eyes.

‘You don’t need to wait Evie...I can be...okay...now. It’s just a cut, and I actually feel...’

‘It’s a bad cut,’ I say, reaching to touch his hair, the curls now long enough to fall over his forehead like they used to. He turns toward my hand and closes his eyes.

‘I never wanted to hurt you. Evie...I didn’t want you to see it. It should have been...just ...one part of your life removed,’ he says, slurring. ‘And...you could be happy...happier.’

I stare at Sam’s face, unable to respond. A distant siren grows louder, a familiar noise in the city night. The dark windowpane begins to flash frantically red and blue. I walk to the open door and raise a hand.

The news of my father’s death came to me through my mother. I don’t know how it came to her. Perhaps Carol from the National Park office found out first and called or perhaps it was the police. I was working on a drawing of two seahorses with their tails intertwined. She knocked at the open door of my room. She never knocked. She sat on the edge of my bed and I saw that her face looked odd, as though she had just drunk something toxic and was waiting for the effects to take hold.

‘Evie,’ she said in a strange voice, the words sounding swallowed or turned inside out. ‘I need to talk to you.’ She presented me with the facts in bullet points. My father had drowned in the sea. He had gone for a swim before work, but the weather changed suddenly. The sea was too rough. There would be a funeral. Everything would be okay.

I felt confusion. I felt the world turn to chaos. I felt my skull glow white hot, my eyes wash through with stinging salt water.

I looked out the window incredulous.

‘Dad,’ I whispered.

My mother’s yellow Toyota pulls into the driveway of Sam’s parent’s house at 6.05am. She leaves the headlights on and walks up the path to the front door a little faster than usual. Her hair is tied in a low ponytail hanging limp down her back, she wears slip on massaging sandals of the sort older ladies buy at chemists. I relish these facts; my mother left in a hurry to come to me, no time to pin her hair in its usual bun or find proper shoes; my mother also started the car which has sat by the side of the house collecting leaves for months. I watch her on the step from behind a wide bay window with its collection of pot plants and pottery ornaments. As she talks to Sam’s mother Jeannie at the front door, her face is soft as though the muscles have slackened, the eyes not glassy but moist, she looks weary with sadness. She looks kind. I have the distinct feeling I’m seeing someone I knew a long time ago but had forgotten about. I would like her to talk with Jeannie at the front door for hours, so I can continue to watch from behind the glass. I feel like a child. I give in to the feeling and wait to be looked after.

By the time we drive into the sleeping street where my mother’s home sits, with the birds starting their morning calls and the streetlights still faintly glowing against the sky, I feel startlingly awake despite my lack of sleep. I keep looking at that something new in my mother’s face.

We sit opposite each other at the kitchen table and I am drinking tea again, herbal this time, ginger mixed with another subtler flavour. There is a ribbon of sun sectioning the tabletop in half, my half and hers. She makes noises as though to say something, but only inhales and exhales with a whistling sound, and I notice she is holding back tears. I’m shocked into speech.

‘What are you crying for Mum? He’s okay. I’m okay.’

She stares past me into the hallway, stirring sugar into her tea, her eyes at first shiny then frantically blinking. I struggle for words and find myself repeating the same thing, ‘I’m okay. It’s

okay.’ As I hold my mother, for the first time in what is probably a decade, I feel her thinness, the narrow ribcage and bony shoulders, the coarseness of the ponytail sitting between her shoulder blades. All these details I had forgotten. The manner in which she cries surprises me, just as a grown man sobbing is often jolting to see and hear. Her tears follow deep inhalations that reach a certain point then gush back out in a whimpering sort of sigh. Through the window the sky continues to brighten and expand into daylight, a bird alights on a bird feeder to peck a few times and fly away.

As abruptly as she began, my mother ceases her crying. She pulls a folded handkerchief from her pocket to blow her nose, tucks her hair behind her ear like a young girl and takes a careful measured sip of her tea.

‘Your friend Sam’, she begins. ‘Must have been very depressed to do what he did. And he’s very lucky to have a friend like you.’

‘It was only by chance that I showed up.’

‘When your father, when he died...’

All the years I’ve wanted to have this conversation with my mother! But now I’m suddenly scared to hear her mention him. The words ‘your father’ remain hovering above the tabletop between us.

‘I could have been there to help but I wasn’t.’

‘Mum! He drowned, miles away. What could you possibly have done?’

‘I could have stopped him going. I should have known you see. He just made it so hard!’

‘But how could you have known?’ I ask in hope of some clarification, but in an instant I know already. My face burns as though someone’s hot hand is pressed over it. I want to stop my mother’s words but they come anyway.

‘He wanted to go Eve. He let it take him. The sea.’

Again those peculiar tears and accompanying noises begin and she leans over to me once more. I hold her, wishing to join her sobs but I can’t. I stare at the new day outside the window and am suddenly very tired, my head is pounding with it. I hear my voice say something about needing sleep and my mother quickly pulls away, wiping her eyes.

‘Of course you do,’ she says. ‘Here let’s get you organised.’

I dream of a house. It is fibro like the old beach house but the shape has altered to a series of corners and corridors. I search for some object of comfort; a worn rug with woven patterns, our old velour couch, a lamp giving out a gold light, but the floors and walls are bare. I move forwards as though gently pulled by an invisible string. In my hand is a bunch of keys, my

father's keys with their weight and silver angles. As I walk, they chime too loudly and at the sides of my vision, the walls begin to bloom with new detail. Suddenly I am in a hallway where the wallpaper writhes with deep blue foliage, leaves of the same shape and size as those on my funeral dress. It sends a chill through me colder than the stone walls which were there before. The walls move like a garden, silent but all the time growing.

I continue to walk, unable to turn back towards the door. For all I know it may have disappeared, swallowed by the wall as a wound is by new skin. The keys begin to dig into my palm but my hand has cramped into a claw-like gesture and I can't loosen the grip. I feel the raw inside of my flesh fuse onto the metal of the keys and my arm weakens to a dead weight as though my hand has turned to lead. Behind me, a trail of blood travels along the floorboards and for a split second I wonder if I'll need it to find my way out again. I pass by door after door I cannot open because the keys are embedded in my hand. The corridor has no end. From somewhere behind the moving wallpaper an orchestra starts quietly and rises up to rush through the corridor like a surge of water or air. The strings are sharp as blades. The flutes and piccolos dance crazily at a piercing pitch. I raise my hands to cover my aching ears but they move as though magnetised and cover my mouth instead. My bloody palm with its startling taste of metal. I try to breathe but only suck in the thick blood and the jagged edges of the keys scrape at my gums. My legs continue their pace but at the same time I feel paralysed.

I wake expecting to find blooms of blood on the sheets. Shapes like countries, a map of my nightmare. But despite being soaked through with sweat, the sheets remain pale yellow with no sign of blood. My arm is folded underneath me, an aching deadweight. I cry quietly, rotating the events of last night in my head. I hear Sam speaking in the succinct and articulate way of someone who has rehearsed his lines.

'I never wanted to hurt you Evie. Only me. Just that one part of your life removed. I didn't want you to cry.'

Removed. I can't get past the use of that word. As though a person can be quietly removed from life, from the lives of other people, like a splinter or a prickle or a leaf caught in a person's hair. I repeat the word softly, move my lips in the shape. Removed. It belongs on the bone-coloured page of a textbook, yet Sam had used it without thought, had applied it to himself, to the many dimensions of his life, to his warm red blood and to his place with me and his place in this world. Removed. I whisper the word again.

My mother's words don't repeat themselves with the same clarity. They're rushed and fumbled, as though hiding something. I struggle to remember the precise order in which they were arranged.

'He let it take him, Eve. The sea. It was his intention to go.'

There's one particular wall in my bedroom, between the door and the entrance to the wardrobe, that I look at now. Hanging from a nail is a small rag doll dressed in yellowed lace and with an almost featureless face, two dots for eyes and a stitched pink bud for a mouth. It's the sort of thing sold at weekend craft markets in country towns. I suppose my mother must have bought it at some point, though I've never seen it before. It is not the doll but the nail I look at. One Saturday when I was very little, my father hammered in that very nail and placed one of his framed beach photos on the wall. It became one of my most prized possessions. I would lie in bed in the mornings and study it. It was the sort of picture that went on and on beyond the confines of its frame, suggesting more than it showed, an entire landscape I longed to explore. Though the picture is no longer there, the details remain clear. The gull standing serenely on one leg, the stretching clouds torn at the edges, the water meeting the sand in shallow, white-rimmed arcs. Now I insert my dad into the scene, just a speck, far away, swimming out towards the horizon line. He shrinks gradually, eventually disappearing and the photo returns to stillness in my mind as though he never entered the picture at all.

My mother had hoped to remove the grief from our lives, but in doing so, she just removed him, my father, completely. Erased. I say it aloud. Another word, my own. I try to summon up a fresh surge of anger for my mother and her lies. But I have felt anger towards her for most of my life, and now pity is all I find. That, and sadness. Like a shadow cast by some towering figure facing the other way.

Outside the window it is late afternoon, the sky a bluish white with a strengthening grey wash. The bedroom door hangs ajar and yellow light from the kitchen falls across the carpet in an elongated triangle. I hear my mother chopping vegetables and the twilight birds warbling in the garden. The bedroom window is open slightly, and outside is the jasmine vine heaped over the side fence with sprays of pink buds already. It is not yet Spring. I roll over into the pillow and pull the covers over my eyes. I need to find sleep. A dark dreamless river of it to dive into.

But still I dream.

I dream I am in charge of a small group of children. They cling at my clothes with bright red palms, staining the fabric. I ask them kindly if they have been finger-painting, but they are not yet able to comprehend what I am saying. They stare blankly at me. Some giggle. I wade through them as if through water. They cling on.

I dream I am cycling alongside the railway track. A train hurtles past towards the ocean. There are people with their noses against the windowpanes waving at me. They are damaged somehow.

I dream I am in my mother's kitchen. I live here now. My mother is cooking dinner, swishing vegetables around in a saucepan, adding salt and herbs, food smells wafting warmly through the air. My stomach groans with hunger, but when she sits down, she has only cups of tea. We drink in silence.

I dream of living things curled inside shells. A wind whips up the sea and the sand. I tuck the shells safely under rocks, but then I feel despair.

I dream Sam gives me a box of matches shaped like a small coffin. It fits snugly in my palm. I thank him with a kiss.

I hear Sam's voice in the kitchen before I've even opened my eyes. It is morning again, windy with a brightly lit sky. I have slept for a day and a night. My bladder hurts. I pad down the hall to the bathroom with its speckled blue tiles, frosted windows and soapy smell. In the mirror over the basin I am pale with small eyes and lank hair, wearing a t-shirt of my mother's over a pair of tracksuit pants. I remember taking them from her, putting them on and falling into bed. But surely that was years ago. I'm so much older now.

Sam and I sit out in the middle of the sunny windy day, both half-blind with the glare like animals after hibernating. We squint at each other. There is a terracotta bowl on the outdoor table with a thin greenish film of water in the bottom and a few small leaves in there half submerged. Sam uses his good hand to tilt the bowl to catch the sun and we both watch the water darken the sides of the bowl in droplets. There are some tinny wind chimes in the neighbour's yard, frantically clanging in the gusty air. My mother brings us wholemeal bread rolls with frills of lettuce poking out. We eat. For a while it seems neither of us have the words.

When it does start, our conversation, it is in the most mundane way. Sam looks up from the table at me.

'So how are you feeling?'

'How am *I* feeling?'

'Yeah.'

'I can't really tell.'

I stare through a gap in the table palings to the shaded paving underneath, just as I have done many times at the pier looking down into clear water. Sam thinks I'm angry with him. I know this because of the care he's taking with me, the gentle strain in his voice, but the truth is I'm racked with guilt. A simple apology seems inadequate, feeble. Everything I imagine saying sounds like a cliché. I focus on the paving through the gap where a chain of ants follows the lines of grouting, as neatly as a car follows a road.

'I want to say I'm sorry,' I blurt out, before the words have a chance to dissolve.

'What do you have to be sorry for?'

'For not realising. For not caring enough about you.'

'I *know* you care about me Eve.' Sam leans forward to rest his head against mine, and for a moment we let our foreheads pulse. The wind flares and dies. All around us the foliage pauses momentarily.

'I didn't know you needed help. I thought it was your fault Sam. I wanted you to snap out if it.' My voice sounds as though sections of the words have been chipped off. Flaky. My head is teeming with words, unattached, separate, and my challenge is to release them in an order that will not only make sense, but also touch upon some emotional truth. Sam speaks first with great effort, then more easily. I realise how hungry I am for his voice, his side of the story.

'I really wanted to go, at the time it was like I'd reached this limit, like one more day was too much. I was in this state, in slow motion, like I was gone already. Absent. I was absent from myself. I watched myself in the mirror, but that reflection wasn't me, it was just some skinny pathetic guy I didn't care about. I watched him do stuff, then he made the cut. He winced but I felt nothing. Nothing at all. But what I want to say, what I'm trying to say is that when you showed up and helped me and we waited for the ambulance, I came back. I was inside myself again, and suddenly I was scared. I mean there had been a lot of blood. But I didn't realise until then. It was as though I'd had a dream then I woke up. It was you who brought me back. So don't say sorry. Please.'

I lean into Sam for a hug and over his shoulder my mother's vivid garden starts to blur behind my tears. Blinking, I make out Dad's brick garage with the facing wall covered in a mass of waving ivy leaves, and in the centre, the cobwebbed darkness of the windowpane, showing only the garden reflected slightly askew, the whole scene pulling gently upwards towards the sky.

'We're okay Sam. I'm so glad you're okay.'

I haven't been in this bedroom for years. There is different carpet in here to the rest of the rooms, dusty pink and moth-eaten at the edges. The bed and most of the other furniture is a

dated wheat coloured pine with knots staring out of the wood. On the walls there are a few pictures; a sepia photo of my Grandma and Pa on their wedding day, their cheeks tinted pink, a pair of Monet prints, his Givony gardens a blur of pinks and greens. There are small pottery containers on each bedside table full of pot pourri and the room smells faintly of roses. The bedspread must be new, soft white cotton with a thin blue stripe. There are two pillows side by side on the bed, as though a couple sleeps here.

My mother opens the top drawer of her bureau and lifts out a wooden jewellery box, one I used to look through as a child. I remember sitting in the middle of my parents' bed and laying out the items I found. Strings of coloured beads that made a click clack sound in my palm, shiny knots of silver chains, various brooches and clip-on earrings. There were also special edition coins in there, and a two dollar note rolled like a cigarette. My mother opens the lid of the box and removes a tray lined with navy blue velvet. She is still clutching the wad of tissues in her left hand and I realise for the first time that she stopped wearing her wedding ring after Dad died. I honestly never noticed it before, or if I did, I forgot a long time ago. Maybe it didn't seem like much of a big deal when I was younger. Maybe it isn't. Outside the window there's a noisy minah making noise. I stare out at the nodding bells of a Chinese Lantern bush and through to the peeling walls of the garage up against the back fence. The sky is turning from white to a yellowy pink.

'I just didn't want you to have to...', my mother's voice trails off as she turns and places something heavy and cold in my palm. A bunch of keys on a silver ring. She picks out a brass one and lifts the bunch, the rest of the keys tinkling as they settle.

'It's this one.'

I take the key and examine it like the key itself is a lost treasure. It's the type with a circular head. 'Arnott Shoe Repairs' in neat embossed letters, and suddenly I remember the key where it hung on a hook inside the laundry door. Other details come too, a pair of mud-crust boots next to the washing machine, a plastic sports watch on the windowsill, with water leaked into the digital display. My mother replaces the velvet lined tray and begins to return the jewellery box to the drawer, then stops and slides it into place on the top of the bureau.

My mother mentions something about putting the kettle on and disappears into the hallway. Classical music begins quietly in the lounge room and I sit on her bed holding the keys. My mother always seems to be setting a scene, setting things up just so. It occurs to me that the opposite is what I lacked, days that unfolded in a natural way, as a streamer does when it's unrolled and allowed to fall. Conversations that travelled from one point to another without a chartered path, without topics to be avoided. A garden created with no thought of composition, where dandelions and other weeds had a chance to push up and see the sun for a while at least.

But today something has shifted. While I sit in one room and my mother moves in another, the old loneliness isn't hovering within the house. There's a thread stretching out between us. Still fragile enough that if someone were to walk through it, it would snap, leaving the two ends trailing. But it's there.

Opening the door of my father's garage, I flinch, expecting the frantic flutter of startled birds, a mass migration of insects over the floor and walls, a scuttling of some sort. But there is nothing. The expanding triangle of daylight from the open doorway is the only movement. I wonder what can happen in a space that hasn't been entered for over ten years. What small movements and gentle noises have occurred in here over that time? How many insects and creatures have hatched and died in here? The air inside is cold and a little moist like an underground cave.

The boxes are stacked on the long bench against the far wall, seven of them of varying sizes, thick greyish cardboard with faded words and markings. There are webs strung softly between them, coatings of dust, stripes of packing tape turned brittle and useless. They peel away easily, loose streamers falling onto the concrete floor. In the first box there is an orange towel packed in around the contents, one from the old beach house, worn thin and fringed with green. It is moth-eaten, the ends frayed and nibbled away. Underneath are the albums, vinyl coated with wide flat spines embossed in gold curlicues. On opening one my heart rotates, slows almost to a stop, then begins again at speed. Here is my dad waist-deep in a glittering sea, holding me, a grinning toddler, above the water. Here he is, one arm outstretched, tossing something towards the horizon. Here he is in the yard of the beach house against a colourful backdrop of towels hanging static on the clothes line. He wears clothes I had forgotten about, or ones my memory has altered slightly. His face is thinner, his eyes more deep-set. Most of the pages show photos of me on the beach in polka-dot bathers or exploring the rocky ledge in shorts and sandshoes. My hair is wavier than I remembered, coarse and wiry from the salt water and the wind. My legs are the thin tightly sprung legs of a child. My mother appears too, glancing away from the camera shyly, or with one arm outstretched in protest. I remember the way she would do this.

'Don't Rick! Take one of Eve. You know I hate it.' Then she would let out a small, irritated laugh, sometimes snatching the camera and pointing it at my dad.

'See how you like it,' she would tease. And he did like it, smiling and posing enthusiastically to spite her. It was all in fun. I remember them strolling barefoot towards the headland, lazily connected at the palm, the sky glowing an iridescent lemon, the water sliding upwards in arcs. I remember Dad washing my mother's foot in a tub of warm water after she had

been stung or bitten by something, a bull-ant, or a crab. I remember the two of them swimming playfully ahead of me in the bay, and talking over spread out newspapers and steaming cups of coffee on the outdoor table.

One of the albums contains photos taken on the rocky ledge, shots looking down into the shallow pools, close ups of shells, stones and weed glistening wet, the shiny bulbs of sea grapes I used to burst between my fingers. There is a shot of my dad's hand, the creased bowl of his palm holding a few teaspoons of clear water and a tiny red starfish half submerged. One shot shows my dad's feet partially buried in soft sand, the bony tops of them sprouting fine dark hairs.

Nestled in another of the beach house towels I find Dad's SLR camera, the press studs clipped tightly shut on the case, the leather strap creased like old skin. The camera itself is elegant, the silver buttons and levers delicate as charms for a bracelet, the lens spiralling forever into darkness under the lens cap. At the press of a switch the back swings open to reveal a film half used, half still enclosed in the canister. I close the flap and return the camera to its case, snapping closed its press-stud eyes, and wrap the camera once again in the old towel.

Sam shows me his scar, a harmless pink streak with a raised thread in the centre. It is perfectly straight and a few inches long, running up his wrist alongside the two tendons that harden when the muscles of the hand are clenched. He has taken to holding the scarred wrist with his opposite hand and absentmindedly running his thumb over the ripple of the scar. He reveals it to me with a kind of quiet pride, not in a way that is attention seeking, but with a private meaning and I understand immediately. *It is nothing*, he seems to be saying. *I survived. And now it is nothing.*

And I start thinking about scars. There are the tissue-like ones that bleach the skin pigment white, the skin so thin it shifts under the lightest touch of a finger. I have one of those on my ankle from some schoolyard incident, an insignificant moment of tears, a blip on the graph of my childhood. But I do remember I was wearing tights, scratchy woollen ones with lines running lengthways, and the fall tore a hole so that my blood coated the strands of frayed wool stitching. But what about the scars we can't see? Internal ones. I would like to see those scars under the surgeon's yellow light, perfect lines embossed on the glistening surface of the heart as it pulses.

These scars we can't proudly display. It is as though we are ashamed of them.

Elliot and Henry are looking for apartments; lofty warehouse conversions with brushed concrete floors and mezzanines. I sift through the pile of brochures on the coffee table. I feel afraid. *Don't leave me alone Ell!* There is still that child inside.

My scholarship money is due to run out at the end of the year and I have no idea what to do for work. Waitressing and bar work terrifies me. The pace of it with demands coming from both sides - the manager and the customers. Maybe I could work in a small shop or a library or get an administrative job, entering data, typing letters. I feel a panicky stab of grief at losing my slow-moving days of drawing and collecting textures. It doesn't seem possible that I might get a job that I enjoy, something art-related or interesting in another way. I feel overwhelmed, lonely. I surprise myself by calling my mother to talk. Clearing the green chair in the hallway of its pile of coats and scarves, I sit down with my legs curled beneath me. We talk about the prospect of Elliot moving out. She asks if I will stay on here by myself or get someone else to fill the room.

'I've been thinking about investment properties,' she says. 'And your living situation. Maybe we could look around.'

'That's something to think about,' I say. 'But I doubt I could cover the mortgage. To make it worthwhile for you.'

'I want to help you out,' she says.

And I believe her.

That night I sleep fall asleep surprisingly easily, rocked by some safe feeling.

At uni Candice gathers a small group of us to discuss applying for honours. Lisa has her heart set on it but I'm unsure my work is up to standard. I am struggling with my printmaking and stay behind after class to use the press. Candice comes out of her office with a mug of something hot.

'I think you should think about honours Eve. You've come a long way, especially this semester.'

'Thanks for saying so. I seem to have trouble thinking my stuff is valid.'

'Well, you have to decide that it is, or no one else will. That's the way it is with art. For what it's worth, I think your work is beautiful. No one else in the class is working in this small, detailed way. Also,' she says, before disappearing into her office again. 'You know your scholarship will extend for the extra year. To keep you going.'

I feel a rush of excited relief and spend the next hour in the studio, trying to fine-tune my printmaking technique, adjusting the amount of paint on the plate, the tightness of the press.

A group of us go out for dinner for my 25th birthday. It is a Thai place in the city where we sit on the floor cross-legged at low tables. We share spring rolls, coconut-milk curries, noodle dishes and a few bottles of wine. I'm given a voucher for art supplies from Henry and Elliot, a necklace from Sam and a tiny painting from Lisa showing a row of rooftops under bright morning sky.

'It reminds me of the view from the flat! Out the back, from the kitchen,' I say, holding it up for the others. I put on the necklace, a silver wire with an owl pendant, its eyes round holes in the metal. I kiss Sam on the cheek across the table.

'Suits you too,' he says.

Lisa has a new boyfriend called Nick who looks vaguely familiar to Sam and I. When he tells us he lectures in Creative Writing we place him from our first year at uni, before I joined the Visual Arts stream.

'We had a class with you I think. Australian Writing, maybe, or Short Fiction?'

'I did both of those. I just had to finish a few subjects before I graduated.'

'Yes I remember you. You had a beard then?'

'Oh gawd, yes.'

'What?' says Lisa, putting her arm around him. 'Like a little short beard?'

'More of a scary bushranger style beard.'

'I have to see photos!'

'My legs are killing me,' says Elliot, and the other men agree in unison.

'Me too.'

'I'm so glad you said that. I'm in agony.'

'I have heard somewhere that men can't cross their legs.' I say.

The seating arrangement is changed so that all the men can stretch out their legs under the table. It becomes a comedy, with all the moans of relief as they unfold and the arrangement of which leg will go where.

'Hey Sam there is a sessional vacancy at uni at the moment,' says Nick. 'Just a few classes a week teaching creative writing. Is that something you would be interested in?'

Sam's eyes brighten with enthusiasm and he and Nick organise to meet up the following week with the head of the school. Sometimes it just hits me with a thud. God! You almost *died*. And here you are eating and drinking and laughing with friends, opportunities opening up just like that.

Afterwards the boys walk on ahead, a pack of four, leaving Lisa and I to trail behind. She links her arm through mine.

'So are you going to stay in the flat? When the two boys find a place?'

'I don't know. I think I would feel left behind there. Probably better to start somewhere new.'

'Find a share house somewhere?'

'God no!' I say immediately and Lisa laughs at my reaction. 'No, my mum suggested she buy a flat, like an investment, and I be the tenant. I could choose it and make any changes that I could afford.'

'Wow that sounds *great*.'

'Sounds grown up doesn't it?'

'Well you are twenty-five.'

'Elliot says you have a quarter-life crisis at twenty-five,' I groan. 'But I'm pretty sure mine started early.'

'Then you are probably just about done with it.'

'Fingers crossed,' I say, watching the boys disappear into a brightly lit gelato bar up ahead.

'Ice-cream. God, I don't know if I can fit it in,' says Lisa.

'Come on, I'll roll you home afterwards,' I say, holding the plastic ribbons at the doorway aside. As far as birthdays go, I am thinking, this has been one of the best

Fifty laps! I cycle elated and exhausted from the pool. My arms ache from just holding the handlebars. I feel young and brave.

I dream I am in the kitchen of my mother's house, just a child. We all live here, the three of us. Beside me are Mum's legs covered by soft denim, and at the bottoms her old white sandshoes scuffed at the toes. She stirs mixture in a white bowl and hums along to the orchestra playing inside the lounge room stereo. There is a tapping on the windowpane above the bench and I look up to see my dad's face grinning against the pale blue backdrop of the sky. He leans in close and presses his nose to the glass so that it flattens a little, turns white. Mum and I laugh. Dad disappears again into the garden. The wooden spoon is knocked against the side of the mixing bowl three times and passed down to me. The mixture is sweet and buttery like a flavour infused with this bright afternoon.

My mother and I meet a real estate agent at a block of flats between the train line and a reserve that slopes down to the river. There is a bike path leading into the city running alongside and an expanse of parkland where people jog and walk their dogs and have picnics in summer. The flats are seventies blonde brick with balconies edged in white-painted railings. On some of these are pot plants, geraniums and nasturtiums, some succulents. A tabby cat begins to roll in the sun at the sight of us coming down the driveway. The flat for sale is up two flights of concrete steps and along a narrow walkway on which several bikes are chained up. The agent opens the door and hurries around opening the blinds to the small living area.

‘Take a look around,’ he says, disappearing down a hallway. ‘I’ll just open the place up.’

The kitchen is a simple L-shaped bench covered in small brown tiles, with cupboards below and above and a white enamel oven and stovetop in one corner. There is an empty hutch where a fridge would be.

‘Gas-cooking,’ says my mother. ‘That’s good.’

The estate agent reappears, all smiles, then walks outside to stand on the doorstep in the morning sun. I thank him silently for not bothering us. Over the kitchen sink is a window covered in a double frill of yellow fabric; kitsch gingham featuring eggs and butter and mixing bowls. Lifting the little curtain reveals the tangled foliage of some native shrubbery and behind it more messy layers of trees. I follow my mother down the hall and into the first bedroom with its mirrored wall of robes and large window looking disappointingly onto a clinker brick wall and a rusted drainpipe. The room itself is carpeted in a flecked cream pile like the living area and hallway; it is smallish and plain but the mirrors make it seem bigger. I see the two of us reflected in that surface. We look alike. I smile at my mother’s reflected face.

‘The robes are good,’ she says.

In the bathroom we find taps for a washing machine and a pink bathtub with matching pink basin. The two small windows are bubbled glass like those from the old beach house. As a child they reminded me of brains, or worms heaped together to make a pattern. I wonder what sort of rubbing the glass would make.

‘You know we can do some renovations,’ says my mother, pointing to the bath.

‘I like the pink.’

The second bedroom is at the end of the hallway and is larger than the first room. I find it filled with calm greenish light from the double doors opening onto the balcony.

The estate agent appears from the hall.

‘Most of the flats have balconies on the other side, but this one faces the parklands. There are only a few others like this.’ He crosses to flick the latch and open the doors, starts talking

about eating breakfast on the balcony and drinking wine out there on a summer's evening but the room has already taken shape in my mind as a studio. I could rip up the carpet and polish the boards, line the far wall with a long workbench.

'Evie come on out,' says my mother.

There, through the graceful limbs of gums, is the brown river and its sloping banks of shrubbery. A smell of damp leaves. A couple rides past talking on the bike path, flashing colourful through the trees.

'You wouldn't know the city was ten kilometres that way, would you?' the estate agent says. 'And actually, if you stand on a chair out here, you probably have city views.'

We laugh politely. He says something about leaving us to it and disappears again. Another bike flies by below, someone is calling a dog, *Mor-ris...Mor-ris*.

'This would be the bedroom then,' says my mother, walking back into the room. But I have already placed my easel in one corner, my folio against the wall in another, my desk where the shaft of light is falling in from the balcony.

'It is quite reasonable,' she goes on. 'With the train station so close, and as I said, we can renovate if you like.'

'I like it,' I give her a hug.

My bag starts to buzz. I rummage through to find my phone - Sam calling.

'You take that and I'll talk to the agent.' Mum disappears into the hallway.

I let the phone ring and walk back out onto the balcony. There are the busy sounds of birds chattering and a train rushing past a few streets away. Looking inside I see my studio. I imagine the hallway of the place lined with Dad's photos from the beach, my bike chained to the railing outside the front door, my friends in the lounge room talking and laughing.

Something on the breeze signals a change, like a step forwards, and then I realise it is the first day of Spring.