

The Mirror House: Writing the Uncanny into the Australian Suburban Home

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of the uncanny as a means of situating a gothic haunted house story in a contemporary Australian suburban home. In Volume One, the exegesis, I discuss the way Freud's concept of the uncanny can work within a haunted house text, both as a means of transcending conventional clichés and as a way of ensuring contemporary relevance. I examine the uncanny with reference to 'haunted' structures, beginning with the original gothic castles. I then discuss the literary representation of the uncanny house in the Australian post-colonial context, using Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* as an example. Moving from direct colonial references into contemporary time and space, I argue that modern suburbs are uncanny places, and thus a natural site for a modern 'haunted' story. The uncanny, then, can be seen as a point of nexus between genre, history, place and individual through which my novel was created. The second volume of the thesis comprises this novel, *The Mirror House*.

Volume 1:
Writing the Uncanny
Into the Australian Suburban Home

Writing the uncanny into the Australian suburban home

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1. Introduction

...in each moment of the history of the representation of the uncanny...the buildings and spaces that have acted as the sites for uncanny experiences have been invested with recognisable characteristics. These almost typical and eventually commonplace qualities – the attributes of haunted houses in Gothic romances are the most well known – while evidently not essentially uncanny in themselves, nevertheless have been seen as emblematic of the uncanny, as the cultural signs of estrangement for particular periods (Vidler 11).

A novel is not a house, but it needs to be constructed. A story is not a ghost, but without a structure it is amorphous, and in danger of dissolving. My novel *The Mirror House* is set in a new outer-suburban Australian home, but placed within the literary tradition of the gothic haunted house. This concept for a novel raises questions of how to work within an established set of conventions and expectations, but to render them relevant for a contemporary audience; and how a tradition so closely bound with the historical can be repositioned in a setting defined by its lack of history. The challenge inherent in the juxtaposition can be simply framed: how can the ‘new’ be haunted?

This thesis will discuss the extent to which the concepts discussed in Freud’s 1919 essay ‘The Uncanny,’ and expounded in critical discourse, can provide an answer - a means of evoking unease and uncertainty beyond the strictures of conventional genre, as well as situating my work within a larger context. I will examine the way the uncanny resonates within ‘emblematic’ haunted structures and make a case for the suburban house as the locus of the uncanny in the present day. My novel then attempts to create such an unhomely home.

While creative works described as gothic - film as well as text - generally attempt to startle, evoke fear, or horrify, it is the sense of the uncanny that can enable contemporary relevance for ‘haunted’ stories. The uncanny suggests a pervading and unresolvable sense of unease, a resignation to intellectual uncertainty. Critical discussion on the topic concerns the refusal of history to be

repressed, and a rejection of simple binaries such as inside and outside, past and present, alive and dead. It permeates not only the haunted house, but modernity, suburbia, and the act of writing itself. The uncanny encompasses the double, an uneasy copy of ourselves that brings into question our own identity and mortality. These aspects of ambiguity and duplicity not only refuse an easy resolution but can provide a means of transcending clichéd conventions of genre.

Critical discussion on gothic literature, the uncanny, genre studies, and the built environment are vast areas of discourse, and this exegesis makes no claim to a comprehensive examination of these extensive fields. Rather, I examine the way they come together in the haunted structure as a means of providing a literary and historical context for my novel *The Mirror House*, and to signal how the uncanny, in particular the idea of the double, may work within the text. The development of this novel provides a focus for the convergence of genre, place and individual, or as I will expound, the gothic haunted house; Australia as a settler nation; the uncanny nature of the suburbs; and the idea of the writer. I will make a case that the outer-suburban home can be seen as the ‘emblematic’ site for the representation of the uncanny in this millennium. My novel can then take its place chronologically in the haunted house tradition, reimagining it in the ‘new’ whilst referring back to its literary history.

The modern suburban home does not seem an immediately likely site for the traditional haunted house. The classic gothic haunted house of the imagination is inextricably bound with history, age and decay, along with the declining families of ancient lineages who have inhabited them for generations; as in Edgar Allan Poe’s *House of Usher*, it is a ‘repository of centuries of memory and tradition, embodied in its walls and objects’ (Vidler 18). In Chapter Two I will examine these origins of the gothic haunted house, and the doubled representations of the castle/home/castle present in the very first ‘gothic’ novels. I will discuss how Freudian analysis of the uncanny is bound with the idea of the ‘unhomely,’ and how this reflects both backwards and forwards through the genre.

In Chapter Three I bring the discussion closer to ‘home.’ I examine Australian postcolonial gothic and the way reproducing a distant idea of the homely in an alien landscape created an uncanny nation. Postcolonial gothic has a strong emphasis on the borderless power of the landscape and the uneasy siting of European settlement within it. The nation itself in this discussion often

metaphorically takes the place of the 'home,' but I will argue for the particular role of the house itself as a representative structure within the landscape. A text which engages directly with contemporary Australia and the postcolonial gothic haunted house genre is Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* (2005) and I will examine this novel with reference to the house at its centre.

While *The White Earth* is firmly grounded in the lived history of postcolonial settlement, Chapter Four moves beyond this direct colonial link to an examination of the uncanny in a site more immediately relevant to the majority of contemporary Australians – the suburbs. I will argue for the notion of contemporary suburbs as unsettled, liminal spaces, blurred in definition, uncanny in themselves, and the possibility this raises of envisioning suburban settlement as a wider metaphor for Australian history.

In Chapter Five I discuss the way the uncanny resonates through the act of writing, its connection with the inspiration for my creative piece, *The Mirror House*, and how it provided a solution to some of the challenges of working within a genre.

My novel *The Mirror House* is presented at the end of this exegesis. This thesis is itself thus doubled, two pieces of writing in two different voices bound together: one 'academic,' supported by absent or distant or dead experts, formally stating and arguing for its own logic; a different piece, 'creative,' originating in the author's imagination and following paths not easily mapped. Though the creative writing and the exegesis informed each other over time, structure requires order, and a separating of the theoretical and contextual background from the novel. It is an uneasy separation. The uncanny acts of writing and reading unsettle artificial binaries of fact and fiction, imagination and logic, invention and the search for truth, and inevitably the two pieces reflect backwards and forwards across the divide, and haunt each other.

2. Exploring the castle: the uncanny and the gothic haunted house

The uncanny as it is depicted in literature...is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides (Freud 157).

The gothic haunted house

However contemporary an attempt at interpretation might be, to speak of a haunted house is to locate a work within a genre. Without diverting into an extensive exploration of genre theory, it is possible to say that the idea of the haunted house story suggests a tradition and set of conventions, which create expectations of a text situated within it. In this chapter I will briefly examine how the idea of 'home' is bound with both the origins of the gothic haunted house, and with Freud's uncanny; and indicate how ambiguity, intellectual uncertainty, and doubleness informs this literary tradition.

The haunted house is intricately entwined, though not necessarily synonymous, with the gothic. The word 'gothic' was itself originally an architectural term, with its own disputed history. Even before it was applied to any literary works, the word was ambiguous as to both its meaning, and to the values ascribed to it.

In *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, Spooner and McEvoy argue:

Prior to the French Revolution, nationalist pressures pushed the various meanings of 'Gothic' in opposite directions. Insofar as the word meant pre-Reformation 'medievalism,' it was negatively tarred with the Catholic brush. But insofar as it meant the cultural cradle of modern Englishness, it was positive (15).

It was a haunted house novel that shifted the use of the term across from architecture to literature, and bound together the ideas of 'gothic' and 'novel'. There is general agreement that the first gothic novel was *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, published in 1764 (Spooner and McEvoy 1; Punter and Byron 10). The way *Otranto* was conceived and written weaves together

strands of architecture, dwelling, haunting, and literature. *Otranto*'s author, Horace Walpole, was an enthusiast of gothic architecture and had his house at Strawberry Hill transformed into 'shrine of the faux-medieval,' re-created with details copied from other gothic structures (Spooner and McEvoy 13). Walpole is quoted as saying that this house inspired *Otranto*, and there are traceable parallels between Strawberry Hill and the fictional castle (Walpole, 1969xi). Walpole subtitled the second edition of his work 'A Gothic Novel' and thus a literary genre sprang from a house haunted, if not by ghosts, then very much by the historical idea of the gothic. It is interesting to reflect, however, that though the castle was almost by definition written into the early gothic novel, its origin was no medieval castle at all, but Walpole's home, a reproduction based on his obsession. At its very inception, the haunted house arose from a double, an image, a mirror of the idea, an ambiguous borrowed term, retrospectively haunting an existing structure and recreated in a text.

In moving to literature, the values ascribed to gothic split and doubled again: 'In effect, the positive, idealised meanings of Gothic were channelled into chivalry and architecture, while the glamorously negative ones were poured into the Gothic novel, so that it soon gained a reputation much like Lord Byron's, of being mad, bad, and dangerous to read (Spooner and McEvoy 17).'

The crumbling medieval castles iconic to the gothic were themselves unsettled places. Fortified military strongpoints, they also existed as private residences and centres of the estate, they were both places for social and economic interaction and metaphorical symbols of authority (Creighton 1). Castles were thus homes, and also emblematic of alienation. They were built to keep people in, and out. It is hardly surprising that early gothic texts were situated in these representations of power, a power that was morally contested and subject to dispute, and that issues of ownership and inheritance are central to early gothic stories. While these disputed inheritances undoubtedly raise questions of property, class, gender politics and the myriad other ways in which the texts have been discussed, there is also a fundamental question of dwelling. Who has the right to inhabit, as well as inherit, the castle? Who has the legitimate right to call the castle home, and by what might this be unsettled?

The High Gothic period, between 1764 and around 1820 produced a variety of admirers and imitators to a large extent set the tropes and conventions of the genre that became familiar. 'Gothic

novels could be easily identified by the incorporation of dominant tropes such as imperilled heroines, dastardly villains, ineffectual heroes, supernatural events, dilapidated buildings and atmospheric weather (Spooner and McEvoy 1).’ A list from the 1801 *Monthly* added ‘unnatural parents, persecuted lovers, murders, haunted apartments, winding sheets, winding staircases, subterraneous passages, lamps that are dim and perverse, and that always go out when they should not, monasteries, caves, monks, tall thin and withered with lank abstemious cheeks, dreams, groans and spectres (cited in Hoeveler 2).’ Two hundred years ago, the conventions of the haunted house were already being itemised, and mocked. However, from the earliest phase, the question of *how* the dwelling was haunted was contested.

Ann Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*, published in 1794, is acknowledged as another key work in the origins of gothic – Spooner and McEvoy argue for it as the most significant original gothic work, even above *Otranto* (10). It has many of the key tropes of the gothic haunted house such as the remote castle, the imperilled heroine, and apparently supernatural events. However, amongst the differences manifest in this work is the technique of the ‘explicable supernatural.’ While *Otranto*’s ‘shade’ appears to announce the castle’s true heritage before ascending to heaven to persuade the beholders of ‘divine will’ (Walpole 108), Radcliffe’s hauntings have rational explanations, sometimes arrived at through unlikely contortions of plot. This technique has been derided both by her contemporaries and afterwards (Haggerty 22) but it is an early indication of the psychological basis for haunting. What this work does, in effect, is to ‘state explicitly that we are haunted by ghosts of our own making (Heiland 77).’ Terry Castle in her study of the eighteenth century uncanny, *The Female Thermometer*, argues that to dismiss or mock the ‘explained supernatural’ in the novel is to ignore Radcliffe’s role in identifying the ‘collective absorption in the vivid if hallucinatory contents of the mind,’ that she in fact pre-empted modern psychological theories (125).

These two iconic texts not only set up many of the conventions of the haunted house, but in their split between supernatural and psychological represent the two poles between which ‘the uncanny’ falls.

The uncanny

The relationship between the terms ‘gothic’ and ‘uncanny’ to some extent mirrors the relationship between the structure of generic conventions and the essence that transcends them. But both are slippery words themselves, words which hint at something simple and at the same time indefinable. They are in common use outside academia – compared with, for example, ‘postmodernism’ or ‘deconstruction’ – but at the same time they have each spawned thousands of pages of critical academic discourse and disputed definitions. ‘Gothic’ has expanded in meaning so far that in ‘Gothic Anxieties: Struggling with a Definition,’ Rintoul argues the difficulty of engaging with the subject without becoming gothically trapped in a castle of endless redefinition (703). To a large extent the ‘uncanny’ is that which cannot be named, and exists not in the definition but in the attempt to define it.

Castle maintains that the eighteenth century ‘invented’ the uncanny, that ‘the aggressively rationalist imperatives of the epoch – also produced, like a kind of toxic side effect, a new human experience of strangeness, anxiety, bafflement and intellectual impasse (8).’ Mladen Dolar argues that there is a specific dimension of the uncanny that emerges with modernity – that the Enlightenment removed the uncanny from its exclusive place of the sacred and made it unplaceable. The gothic novel, he argues, was a response to revolution and the rise of scientific rationality. ‘Ghosts, vampires, monsters, the undead dead, etc. flourish in an era when you might expect them to be dead and buried, without a place. They are something brought about by modernity itself (Dolar 7).’ Rather than destroy the uncanny, the Enlightenment set it loose in the world. This continues into the present when ongoing understanding of psychology, and the capacity of science to dissect the world from a genetic to a universal level seems boundless. Yet there is still a sense that there is something which lies between and beyond these explanations, something which resists analysis. This ‘something’ can perhaps account for the continuing interest in ‘haunted’, gothic, or uncanny literature.

Discussing the ‘uncanny’ in relation to writing a ‘haunted’ story seems almost unnecessary, if not tautological. Uncanny is a word commonly used as a synonym for that which is strange, weird,

not the way it 'should' be. The Macquarie Dictionary definition reads: '1. such as to arouse superstitious uneasiness; unnaturally strange.' However, the dictionary goes on to unsettle itself with a second definition: '2. preternaturally good (877).' Are the two definitions contradictory, or complementary? What is unnaturally strange, as opposed to naturally strange? Is the strange good, and why would too good be considered strange? The sense of the 'unnatural' hints at that lingering, uncertain element of the uncanny – something is not right, but perhaps not in a way easy to articulate.

Pursuit of the uncanny is akin to trying to hold down a phantom. In her commentary on Sigmund Freud's seminal 1919, Helene Cixous argues: 'Nothing turns out less reassuring for the reader than this niggling, cautious, yet wily and interminable pursuit (of 'something' – be it a domain, an emotional movement, a concept, impossible to determine yet variable in its form, intensity, quality and content) (525).' Here she indicates the difficulty of deciding even what manner of thing the uncanny *is*. After writing his comprehensive book on the topic Nicholas Royle concludes: 'To write about the uncanny...is to lose one's bearings, to find oneself immersed in the maddening logic of the supplement, to engage with a hydra (8).' However, Freud's essay provides a starting point from which to begin tackling the beast.

Freud attempts to 'distinguish as "uncanny" certain things within the boundaries of what is 'fearful' (Freud 122). His thesis, simply stated, is: 'the "uncanny" is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar (Freud 123-4).' He begins with an etymological discussion, tracing the word, or similar words, through other languages, back to their meaning and origin. The German word in the original text, usually translated as 'uncanny' is 'unheimlich' (124). Studying its roots and definitions, he concludes that the word doubles back on itself, to mean that which is concealed and kept out of sight (129). '*Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich* (131).' He quotes Schelling that 'everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, yet comes to light (cited Freud 130).' Unheimlich translates more precisely into English as 'unhomely'. The homely, then, is not only is a site which can be disrupted, but of necessity contains the unhomely within it. The uncanny, Freud argues 'in in reality nothing

new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression (148).’

The uncanny is the disruption of the familiar by the unfamiliar – but an unfamiliar that is in reality not unfamiliar at all. It is this complex set of repression and re-emergence, the undermining of meanings and emphasis on return that creates a feeling of unease, even in the discourse on the uncanny itself. It is this ambiguity, this incapacity for ‘settledness’ which, I will argue, allows the haunted house to cross time and space, to allow the unhomey home to be highly relevant to notions of Australian identity and to contemporary literature.

The idea of the ‘double’ is inherent in the uncanny, indeed Bennett and Royle in *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* argue that to move the uncanny beyond the mysterious, bizarre or frightening *requires* ‘duplicity, doubling and deception (38-39).’ Freud cites material by Otto Rank that the double as conceived in an infantile state is an insurance against death. But when the primary narcissism of the child has past, the double becomes a ‘ghastly harbinger of death (141).’ The double might be a comfort to a child not yet sharply differentiated to the world, Freud says, but to recall this creation in a later stage is to create a vision of terror (143).

The double creates an ‘extraordinarily strong feeling of something uncanny (142).’ It is, however, not just a literal doppelganger that this applies to. Freud includes in his idea of the double not only someone identical in looks but also telepathy, the ‘doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self’; and the ‘constant recurrence of similar situations’ (141). The recurrence of events can ‘awaken an uncanny feeling, which recalls that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams (143).’ This ‘involuntary repetition...forces upon us the idea of something fateful and unescapable (144).’

Doubling ripples through the text itself. Freud states that: ‘Some languages in use today can only render the German expression ‘an unheimlich house’ by ‘a haunted house’ (149). This implies that Freud’s ‘unheimlich’ house is not the same as a ‘haunted’ house. The essay questions the notion that a haunted/uncanny/unheimlich house is a single, definable entity at all, and raises the uneasy

feeling that the essay in its original German is discussing a subtly different subject than we are reading in English.

Intellectual uncertainty and ambiguity are the essence of the uncanny. Maria Tatar's analysis of the Freud essay, 'The Houses of Fiction: Toward a Definition of the Uncanny,' explicates Tzvetan Todorov's argument that the uncanny is situated in the space beyond that which is simply a product of the imagination, and therefore merely strange or extraordinary, and that which defies natural laws and can be classed as 'marvellous.' If something is the product of an individual's psychology, this is strange but within explicable boundaries. If something is clearly supernatural it exists entirely outside these boundaries. However, the 'third kind of ghost' (168) can neither be explained away as entirely imaginary nor entirely supernatural; it is this space of intellectual uncertainty that cannot be resolved one way or another, that is essential to the uncanny. Tatar argues:

Uncanny events have the power to provoke a sense of dread precisely because they are at once strange and familiar. Their strangeness endows them with a supernatural quality; their familiarity, once recognized and understood, divests them of this supernatural aura... Their ambiguous character almost invariably generates the hesitation that defines the fantastic (169).

The castles in the two previously mentioned gothic texts *Otranto* and *Udolpho*, house the two extremes, supernatural and the psychological, between which Maria Tatar's 'third ghost' exists. *Otranto's* spirits, while they evoke guilt and fear, are clearly supernatural, while *Udolpho's* have logical explanations. While still studied and respected as classics of the genre, I think it can be argued that the place of these two texts on these extremes leaves them as interesting but archaic or quaint cultural artefacts rather than highly relevant works for contemporary audiences.

In comparison, for example, Henry James *Turn of the Screw*, published in 1898, straddles the ghostly/psychological basis for haunting in such a way that it is unresolvable. The story involves a governess employed by a gentleman to take charge of his distant country property, along with his niece and nephew. Isolated, the governess begins to experience haunting by her predecessor and her predecessor's lover, who she comes to believe are trying to 'possess' the children. In its earliest critical reception it was read as a straightforward ghost story, but in the 1930s, theories of the

governess's mental unreliability were postulated, reading the governess as hysterical (Haggerty 151). The 'overwhelming amount of critical exegesis (Haggerty 150)' that has arisen from this famous tale is largely focused around the irreconcilability of these readings, whether two children are 'really' haunted by ghosts, or whether the ghosts' existence is entirely the delusion of the troubled governess. *Turn of the Screw* is, in a sense, a doubled narrative, two different stories co-existing in one text, a picture that changes according to how it is held to the light. Does the horror lie in the power of the supernatural to overwhelm innocent children, or the madness of the governess who inflicts her delusions on her charges? The essence of the success and enduring interest in *Turn of the Screw* is that the ambiguity is unable to be resolved: 'We are therefore confronted with our own inability to explain, or explain away, the Gothic experience. The degree to which we push for a resolution to this confusion, the very degree to which we desire that resolution still, is the degree to which we are part of the horror of the tale (Haggerty 157).'

Beyond its interest in words and their unsettled definitions, Freud's *Uncanny* has a larger general relevance for writing and writers. As Freud says in his opening sentence, it is rare for 'a psycho-analyst' to feel 'impelled' to venture into aesthetics (122). The 'psycho-analyst' is of course Freud, one of the many times in which Freud himself is 'doubled' in the text. He makes use of literature, in particular an E.T.A. Hoffmann story, 'The Sandman' to explicate his theory (133-140). He notes the haunted house is 'perhaps the most striking of all' in terms of examples of the uncanny (149). Interestingly, he adds 'we refrained from doing so because the uncanny in it is too much mingled with and in part covered by what is purely gruesome (149).'

Freud's resistance to discussing the haunted house as an example suggests the dialectic between haunted house *conventions* and uncanny *effect*. They are of course to a large extent not separable, they are indeed 'mingled.'

The haunted house has remained a strong subset of the gothic, and the ruined castle of its originating novels continues to be emblematic of the genre and a favoured site for endless reinterpretation. The castle, though, has detached itself from its original complex relationship with the notion of 'home' to become a standard trope of the genre, a sort of visual shorthand. In becoming essentially 'other' to contemporary readers, it provides a containable experience of haunting, and as

such more escapable, and less uncanny. A crumbling castle signals its haunted status, and entering, or not, is a choice. It is when the walls disappear and the spectres are set loose that they become truly frightening. 'Escaping from the tomb and the castle, the monastery and the mansion, the gothic arguably becomes more potentially terrifying because of its ability to manifest itself and variations of itself anywhere (Wolfreys, 9).'

For European settlers in Australia, there were no ruined ancestral castles. Turcotte in his essay 'Australian Gothic' (1998) quotes Frederick Sinnett, writing in 1856, on the lack of appropriately dilapidated buildings to situate gothic stories within. Sinnett in 'The Fiction Fields of Australia' says that: 'It must be admitted that Mrs. Radcliffe's genius would be quite thrown away here; and we must reconcile ourselves to the conviction that the foundations of a second "Castle of Otranto" can hardly be laid in Australia during our time' (Sinnett, cited in Turcotte 3).

Instead, the absence of solid walls set loose the spectres into the landscape and in recreating the structures of the home in attempt to keep the alien out, an uncanny nation was created.

3. Raising/razing the homestead: postcolonial gothic and Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth*

Postcolonial gothic is interested in the representation of the unheimlich nature of home as both dwelling and nation....part of the postcolonial gothic's agenda is unveiling that behind the construction of hominess abroad lies something fundamentally unhomely (Azzam iv).

Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* won the Miles Franklin Prize and the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Southeast Asia and South Pacific Region in 2005. McGahan is an established Australian writer who, in this novel, chooses a distinctly gothic setting and tone, and tension between ideas of meaningful literature and assumptions about gothic novels were reflected in its critical reception. One reviewer remarks that the lack of depth of certain characters is 'an unavoidable by-product of the sort of gothic models McGahan draws upon (Bradley 41).' The novel is described as a 'gothic thriller and family saga' which in terms of style is 'chronological, plot-driven' and 'clearly targets a popular audience' but which is political, arguably didactic and also 'critically acclaimed (Horakova 120-121).' There is more than a suggestion that the gothic haunted house novel is an uneasy place for genuine exploration of contemporary Australian issues through a serious literary work. It is '(a)t one level...a suspenseful gothic thriller. At another it's a national allegory, with its portent that past wrongs will come back to haunt future generations – that those who dispossess will in turn be dispossessed (Tuffield 2).' There is a need to excuse, to divide, and to some extent differentiate the gothic elements from the meaning and impact of the text.

Even given this uneasy reception, the novel's success, both on its own terms and in terms of critical reaction, indicates that the traditional gothic haunted house narrative can be a site for meaningful and relevant contemporary literature. In this case, I will argue that the structure of Kuran House in the novel provides an apt literary metaphor for postcolonial concerns with Australian national identity.

Colonial anxieties

Australian gothic, past and present, often situates danger in the landscape, particularly in the extremes of nature – the excess of the tropics, with its uncontrollable vegetal growth, its blurring of boundaries between inside and outside and unpredictable wild weather; or at the other extreme, the terrifyingly empty, featureless, borderless outback depicted in films such as *Wolf Creek*. This tradition refers back to a colonial past in which the landscape was the source of fear.

The emergence of gothic literature in Australia was more than a product of Europeans bringing their literary traditions with settlement. Colonial settlers were removed not just from their homes, but from all that was familiar. If home is that which provides comfort and protection, and keeps danger out, it is not surprising that the landscape, the enormous ancient continent itself, was the source of uneasiness and terror when the comfort of such a notion had been exploded. Fear of being lost in the bush was at least in part the knowledge that there were no boundaries, no walls, no way of containing this strange new place. Turcotte argues that '[f]or many the very landscape of Australia was Gothic (2).' Gelder and Weaver, in their collection of Colonial Australian Gothic stories, take this suggestion further, that: 'For the colonial Australian Gothic, the bush is invariably a place of settler disorientation and death, as if the promise of settlement can never be fully realised (5).'

The response to this alienation was to create an illusion of order by imposing ideas of 'home' or replications of the Britain left behind on the other side of the world. However, this process of reconstruction necessitated the belief that this hostile country was a blank space onto which British society could be imposed. Knowledge of the removal, disruption and extermination of the country's Indigenous peoples needed to be repressed. What was created was at best an uncanny double, an artificial representation or replica of a distant idea, always in danger of being disrupted by the repressed past.

If England was 'home' then an attempt at settling elsewhere was inherently unhomely and it is hardly surprising this unhomeliness was reflected in early literature. As Turcotte states:

[T]he generic qualities of the Gothic mode lend themselves to articulating the colonial experience inasmuch as each emerges out of a condition of deracination and uncertainty, of the familiar transposed into unfamiliar space. It is this very quality which Freud identified as the condition of the uncanny, where the home is unhomely – where the Heimlich becomes Unheimlich – and yet remains sufficiently familiar to disorient and disempower (Turcotte 1).

The very construction of the ‘familiar’ could arguably only ever serve as a reminder of how ‘unfamiliar’ the new colony was.

Postcolonial hauntings

While colonial gothic represents the lived experience of settler colonists, postcolonial theory operates at a remove which allows it to reflect critically on this experience and its implications for contemporary Australia. ‘Home’ in this debate is often conflated with the nation itself. In *Uncanny Australia*, Gelder and Jacobs examine contemporary Australia in the light of the Mabo decision 1992 which awarded limited land rights to Indigenous peoples. This decision, they argue, made the entire country uncanny. ‘In this moment of decolonisation, what is “ours” is also potentially, or even always already, “theirs”’: the one is becoming the other, the familiar is becoming strange (Gelder and Jacobs 23).’

If the landscape is the site of haunting, and the whole nation is the unsettled ‘home’, where does that leave the house itself? It would be artificial to separate the built environment from the landscape or isolate the house from the nation. But I would argue that the constructed/reconstructed architectural forms, embodying an inherently flawed attempt at reproducing a lost idea of ‘home’ are doubly uncanny in colonial and postcolonial Australia. Like the castle, the homestead is home to some – at the exclusion of others – and at the same time a symbol of power and control.

David Crouch in ‘National Hauntings: The Architecture of Australian Ghost Stories’ argues: The house has long been used as a metaphor for the western psyche and thus the spaces of a haunted house provide the ideal site for the uncanny return of the repressed...And in Australia it

seems possible to extend the spatial metaphor to imagine the house as analogous with the nation; here the haunted house becomes a metonym for Australia, its ghosts are the collective anxieties of white settlement (95).

The representation of the house in *The White Earth* reflects these anxieties.

The White Earth

Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* (2004) uses conventions of the gothic haunted house genre as a basis for engaging with Australia's colonial history and contemporary identity. It combines classic gothic tropes with events such as the passing of the Land Rights bill of 1993 and its implications for freehold, leasehold and Crown land; the rise of rural-based racist political parties; and the technicalities of Aboriginal claims to ownership. Chronologically as well as thematically, its doubled structure of historical and contemporary narratives bridges postcolonial gothic and contemporary Australia.

The White Earth encapsulates an overview of history of white settlement in Queensland, from Aboriginal habitation through to white explorers, pastoralisation, the breaking up of the giant pastoral leases, post war settlement, and the passing of Native Title. The story follows dual strands of narrative, closely intertwined. The 'present-day' narrative is set in 1993 and is written from the point of view William, great-nephew of John McIvor, current owner of Kuran Station. The station is set in the Darling Downs in Queensland, and William and his mother are brought to live there after being left destitute by the death of William's father. John McIvor has ideas of making William his heir, and sets increasingly difficult tests for William to prove his worthiness. William is torn between the competing demands and contradictory stories of his mother Veronica, his great-uncle, and, later, John McIvor's daughter Ruth. The second strand of narrative goes back in time to 1914, to follow John McIvor's history. His father, Daniel McIvor, was the manager of Kuran Station and felt a sense of entitlement to the station he worked on but did not own, and passed this obsession to his son.

The text is firmly grounded in the tropes of traditional gothic tales. The main characters of the novel reprise gothic stock figures. William is the innocent, powerless ingénue taken into a decaying mansion, which harbours secrets and ghosts of which he is ignorant. His great uncle John is a classic gothic villain – brooding, mysterious, distant, powerful, and with his own secrets and his own agenda. The housekeeper Mrs Griffith is an embittered, interfering woman with a sense of entitlement. William’s mother Veronica suffers from mental health problems – Mrs. Griffith describes her as ‘touched’ (McGahan 115) – thus figuring as the hysterical, insane or unreliable female. At the heart of the narrative are questions of ancestry, entitlement, and legitimacy of inheritance, classic gothic themes of the ‘subversion of primogeniture expressed in the theme of usurpation’ (Ellis 57) that have echoed through the genre since the original gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*.

The use of a dual narrative does more than simply juxtapose the old and the new to deepen our understanding of events and motivation. David Crouch argues that ‘a haunting implies a presence caught out of time. Confusing the binary between absence and presence, ghosts suggest a temporality in which past, present and future can be inter-implicated (95).’ In *The White Earth*, the juxtaposition of narratives of ‘past,’ ‘present’ and ‘future’ create uneasy connections and implications between the fates of the protagonists. The narrative is ‘haunted’ by the eruption of events already past, or which prove portents to the future. In the sense of repetition, of brooding fate and uncertainty over what is ‘real’ that is created, it provides much of the sense of ‘haunting’.

Haunted landscape, haunted people

In the tradition of colonial and postcolonial gothic, the landscape in *The White Earth* plays a distinct role as alien, dangerous, unknowable. The boundaries of the station have altered in its history, its edges growing and shrinking and under constant real or perceived threat. Outdoors, space is unsettled – William finds himself disoriented on the first time he sets out to explore the station, and his last journey through it is almost fatal. When William ventures into the bush, he becomes literally, psychologically and emotionally lost amongst spectres of European and Indigenous origin (chapters

37-39). The European ghosts present a spectral history of settlement – the dead explorer, the cannibalistic shepherds. However it is the Aboriginal ghosts, the bunyip, the spectres of the landscape that are most ‘true.’ When the ghosts of European explorers appear, even though he is frightened by them, William does not wholly believe in them: ‘You’re not here,’ William insisted, convinced that he was standing alone under the noon sun, and talking to empty air. ‘You’re not real’ (310).

The bunyip, in contrast, is presented as far more powerful, and scorns the other ghosts. It is presented as older, wiser, more real:

William stared, unable to move. Was he really awake? He felt that he was, but it was impossible, this had to be another dream, another ghost, like the man with the axe or the lost explorer. But the shape knew his thoughts, and exuded scorn.

White men dreamt those spirits. The black men dreamt me, long ago.

It was true, William thought, through his fear (316).

Fire, earth, and water play crucial roles and all three are presented as uncontrollable and hostile to the human characters. Fire in particular doubles and replicates through the text and becoming a character or ghost, and the repetition of the figure of the ‘burning man’ flickers across time, space and the history of the two protagonists. It is ultimately inexplicable, uncontainable, and at the same time, evokes a memory of the known.

‘But the flame was unearthly too. It wasn’t focused around a single point, but it seemed to change in shape, to swell and shrink and remould itself endlessly, and to hint at something familiar.’ (214)

The ghosts exist in the realm of the ‘supernatural’, and haunt the landscape, while the characters in the text are themselves ‘haunted’ by obsession and loss. Throughout the narrative there is a recurring theme of sacrificing all that is meaningful and human in the pursuit of ownership or possession. John McIvor’s very existence was due to his father’s ambition to have a son to marry the Elizabeth White, and thus gain access to Kuran House. John McIvor, in turn, sees his wife only as a means to an end, and sacrifices his own daughter Ruth in his ambition – ruthless? – to acquire the house. William’s mother Veronica is blinded to her own son’s needs to the point of almost fatal

neglect, in her attempt to ingratiate him with his great-uncle so they can inherit the house in turn. Veronica dies in her attempt to rescue the will, and thus prove their entitlement. Even Ruth, presented as level-headed and sensible, finds herself questioning the extent to which her actions are driven by a form of ultimate revenge on her father. All of the characters, to differing degrees, are 'possessed' themselves by their quest for possession of the property.

If the ghosts that arise from the landscape are supernatural, and the obsessions that haunt the protagonists psychological, it remains for Kuran House to embody the 'third kind of ghost', a true sense of postcolonial displacement.

The House

In *The White Earth*, Kuran House is the uncanny, unsettled space which contains both present and past simultaneously, in which the one is in constant uneasy relation with the other, one in constant threat of disrupting the other and being disrupted in turn.

The House (always written with the capital letter) plays a specific role, even though in the text it is often conflated with the larger Kuran Station and thus the inhabited landscape. The House as a structure is potent itself, as symbol of colonialism, as an animistic character and uncanny space. The past seeps through the walls and exists behind locked doors, is buried under the floorboards, it is reproduced but cannot be recreated. Rooms in the House co-exist with their uncanny doubles in space and in time.

Though ownership is usually discussed in the novel in terms of the land and the broader station, Kuran House is important as a symbol of possession. It is a European idea of habitation or dwelling that is contrasted in the text with the powerful Aboriginal sense of belonging. European settlers can never truly understand the place they live in, but are reduced to recreating replicas from somewhere else, and inhabiting them uneasily, always aware that this recreation is itself an embodiment of loss.

The House is uncannily animistic, very much presented as a living character in the novel. When William first arrives, the House 'frowns' at him (17). It is a brooding, menacing presence, with the

hovering threat that it will do him harm, but also the tempting possibilities of what it may offer.

William feels it communicating with him. 'It was the House, calling to him. And the House didn't lie (117).'

Once grand, the 'shining light of the Downs (24),' the House was a symbol of authority – from above it forms the shape of an 'H,' stamped onto the landscape (33). It literally stands on successive layers of occupation – the massacre of Aboriginal inhabitants, a dead explorer, a failed squatter, until finally the aptly named White family, aristocratic refugees from England, claim it for their own and recreate a vision of a European ancestral home. In its heyday, 'the people of the villages and towns all looked to the House for authority, for judgement, for leadership (29).'

It is now 'ruinous' with smashed windows, piled rubbish, dry fountains, and rutted overgrown gardens (16). The doubled structure of the narrative unsettles a single view of the house – in its prime we have already seen its failure; its neglected state recalls its past.

Kuran House presents a vision of colonial settlement, immediately transmuted into postcolonial melancholy. The first time he sees it, William gets a sense of it as 'of palaces and manors in somewhere like England, the stately homes of princes and dukes (15).'

Even a young child such as William, who has never left Australia, recognises that the house is a recreation of a distant past, of something that belongs somewhere else, and, significantly, *to* someone else. This image is immediately overlaid by his observation the house is in ruins, distorted by detritus of a resolutely contemporary kind – broken bicycles and rolls of wire, plywood in the windows, a rusty air-conditioner.

William discovers that inside is a 'labyrinth' (33) with once gracious rooms on the lower floor – the 'present', where William, his mother and the housekeeper dwell – now divided up into a maze of fibro partitions filled with shabby furniture and threadbare carpets, though vestiges of the once grand interior can be seen. The first time he enters it, it is described as the housekeeper leading him 'off into the darkness (21),' and this confusion of rooms foreshadows William's bewildered journey through conflicting versions of truth and history. The House is an embodiment of history, and the

colonial past is now segmented, closed off, its edges uncertain, an uneasy mix of old authority and contemporary needs.

The past erupts into this present. William discovers indications of its former glory – beautiful floorboards under peeling lino, giant stone fireplaces bricked in, ornate ceilings under cobwebs (33). But also, amongst the decay, there are particular rooms which lovingly reprise the heyday of the mansion. Each of the rooms which has been ‘recreated’ is significant. The office has been reclaimed, restored to how it looked when John McIvor was a boy, and William feels ‘(a) thrill of recognition ran through him, because this was right, this was what the House was supposed to look like (41).’ The office was the seat of power and control, the place where decisions were made. It was also the place where Daniel McIvor, John’s father, asserted his authority, and from which he was dismissed. In reproducing it, John McIvor is attempting to reclaim the lost authority of his father. Even here, though, William discovers images of the past, mottled and hidden. Images of English castles and fox hunts, juxtaposed with ‘a collection of shapes recognisable as people only because of their white eyes and teeth. Black men, looking on from the shadows (46).’

The upper floor of the house is the realm of secrets, forbidden to William because it is dangerous. When William trespasses into the upstairs he finds it full of doubles. There are replicated staircases, double doors, double rooms:

[F]our huge chambers, two on either side of the central gallery. The rooms were identical, with large windows, great stone fireplaces and double doors...Here were another four rooms, two on each side...The western half of the House was a mirror image of the east wing (151).

The upper floor houses two powerfully symbolic rooms. One is a red room – a reference back to a similar room in *Jane Eyre*, even as to the angry housekeeper’s threat to lock William inside it (158). This room, with its blood red walls, its darkness which is ‘weirdly crimson’ is the heart of the House in more ways than one (153). This room contains physical remnants of the violent history of the station. Guns, and artefacts from the explorer who ‘discovered’ the area but either died or was killed. Most significantly, the room houses the uniform, cap and badge that Daniel McIvor wore, that

gave him the spurious authority, we later discover, to massacre Aboriginal people. William takes these things up and feels their power:

And with the hat on his head, and the gun in his hand, he felt a power working in him. He was still somewhere where he didn't belong, the red walls still frowned down about him, but he had donned a uniform now, and held a weapon in his hand. He stood up. He felt taller. Older. He turned to the cabinet, and saw himself reflected in the glass. The badge gleamed on his brow, and the gun hung potently from his hand. He was only a boy, but he could see the shadow of a man. He lifted the gun slowly, took aim along the barrel (155-6).

The past and present ripple through this image. William 'becomes' Daniel McIvor with the acquiring of his uniform and badge. He can at this stage have no knowledge of the history of the House. But he feels the settler's sense of not-belonging, and the power of authority, backed by violence, as a response to it.

The ghosts William encounters in the bush may be products of his diseased brain or they may be supernatural. Though the text does not come down on one side or the other, these options exist. The obsession with the House evident in various generations of people is a kind of psychological haunting. The spectres that haunt the House, however, are of a different kind and more in keeping with contemporary analyses of postcolonial theorists such as Gelder and Jacobs, who argue the value of the uncanny lies in its refusal to be reduced to a binary, an either/or.

In postcolonial Australia... it may well be that both of these positions are inhabited at the same time: one is innocent ('out of place') and guilty ('in place') simultaneously. And this is entirely consistent with postcoloniality as a contemporary moment, where one remains within the structures of colonialism even as one is somehow located beyond them or 'after' them (Gelder and Jacobs 24).

When William puts on the cap he is neither innocent nor guilty, he is knowing and unknowing, present and past, himself and other. He 'dresses himself' in a history whose meaning he does not understand.

The House also contains a powerful sense of desire for belonging, a nostalgia that is the other side of the postcolonial debate, the sense of yearning for place that is the counterpoint to postcolonial guilt. The 'red room' can be seen as an inverse of the 'white room', a recreation of Elizabeth White's bedroom as seen and remembered by the young John McIvor. The older John McIvor now sleeps in this room and has recreated it exactly as he remembers it. Even William, knowing nothing of its past, feels it is 'strangely like a woman lived here, not a man (153).' The ghost of the young Elizabeth White lingers in the structure, though she is not dead. This room is all light and softness and comfort, and represents a gentle, feminine past, a powerful evocation of lost innocence and beauty. William understands that this room was his Uncle John's 'true secret' (152). Though poignant, there is also something grotesque about this embittered, lonely old man sleeping in a reproduction of a bedroom designed for a young girl. The room is an evocation of the longing and loss associated with being 'out of place,' of the bafflement of 'ownership' that can never be completely inhabited because the meaning has fled. The artificial reproduction will always be unsettled by knowledge of what was before, and is now lost.

Beyond the station boundaries

At the conclusion of *The White Earth*, ownership of the station is contested, indeed the idea of 'ownership' is itself disputed. The House is destroyed, and to a certain extent this erasing of the symbol of the colonial past is a satisfying end to the story. However, it also raises the question of what is to be built over these burnt-out remains, and what might haunt the 'new' homes that come after?

In 'Circling with Ghosts: The Search for Redemption', Margaret Merrilees argues that:

Historical fiction, particularly in the form of allegory, provides a distance, a relative safety, from which to explore the perennial question of national identity, to examine a past that is otherwise too painful to admit, and to frame a quest for resolution, if not redemption (75).

While apt, this idea also raises the question of whether, and how, it is possible to move beyond this 'safe' distance. *The White Earth* intertwines contemporary and colonial narratives but is still very

much grounded in the settler past. Is there a place for an uncanny narrative that is entirely set in the present?

While hardly claiming to resolve questions of postcolonial guilt and issues of belonging in Australian identity, I would argue that in terms of literature there is value in moving beyond the symbolic recreation and direct engagement with a colonial past, to broaden the idea of haunting and the places that might be haunted. I suggest that to interrogate the idea of the 'new' dwelling may be a further means of contextualising and making relevant Australia's uneasy relationship with its history. The natural site for this is the place the majority of Australians call home.

4. Rendering the brick veneer: uncanny suburbia

suburb n. 1. a district, usually residential and to some degree remote from the business or administrative centre of a city or large town and enjoying its own facilities as schools, shopping centres, railway stations. 2. An outlying part.

suburban adj. 1. relating to, inhabiting or being in a suburb or the suburbs of a city or town. 2. characteristic of a suburb or suburbs. 3. narrow-minded; conventional in outlook.

suburbia n. 1. the suburbs collectively especially as they embody the middle range of community standards and values. 2. suburban inhabitants collectively. 3. the characteristic life of people in suburbs (Macquarie Dictionary 803).

An uncanny time

The modern world is uncanny. Derrida says:

‘Contrary to what we might believe, the experience of ghosts is not tied to a bygone historical period, like the landscape of Scottish manors, etc., but on the contrary is accentuated, accelerated by modern technologies like film, television, the telephone. These technologies inhabit, as it were, a phantom structure (cited in Wolfreys 1).

Since these words were written over twenty years ago, technologies have become even more ‘spectral’, with information stored in disconnected ‘clouds’; ‘books’ which nowhere exist as paper books but are transmitted as electronic signals; virtual worlds habited by avatars of flesh and blood humans; and the multitude examples of reality made virtual. We create computer generated ‘doubles’ that are, and are not, ourselves. As social media users are discovering, things we thought past, once familiar but forgotten, can now more than ever resurface to disrupt our comfortable present.

Technology enables a person to be ‘in the world’ and ‘at home’ simultaneously, and as the virtual world intrudes into our private spaces, the idea of what is ‘inside’ and private compared to what is ‘outside’ and public, blurs. Technology is increasingly being built into the very walls of our homes.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this, the concept of 'home' is still highly important. Whatever level of connection to a virtual world, in contemporary Australia, 'brick and mortar' is the definition of the real, the solid.

The vast majority of Australians do not live in crumbling mansions, and while there are examples of gothic architecture, stone churches and ruins of penal settlements, and homesteads roped off for display, for Australians in general they are already 'unfamiliar.' They are historical, they replicate a European past, they call to mind the conventions of the gothic but they are comfortably separate from the idea of dwelling. We can visit these places, and walk away, closing the door behind us, and travel 'home' to the suburbs. Rather than these more obvious structures, I would argue the home is the more unsettling place for haunting, in fact the home is the only place that can meaningfully be haunted.

The act of haunting is effective because it displaces us in those places where we feel most secure, most notably in our homes, in the domestic scene. Indeed, haunting is nothing other than the destabilization of the domestic scene, as that place where we apparently confirm our identity, our sense of being, where we feel most at home with ourselves (Wolfreys 5).

For most Australians, home is a house in the suburbs.

Capital cities house almost two-thirds of the population, and the growth of cities accounted for almost three-quarters of Australia's population increase at the turn of this millennium (Gleeson, *Toxic Cities*, 31). These 'cities', beyond their Central Business Districts, are constructed from suburbs. Moreover, these suburbs are expanding ever outwards, with almost sixty per cent of Melbourne's population growth taking place on the outer fringes (Sherborne 11). In general we are born in the suburbs, or establish ourselves in them when we arrive from other countries; we grow up in them or grow old in them; we move from one to another over the course of our lives; mostly we die in them.

If the uncanny is found in the making the familiar unfamiliar, in ambiguous borders and intellectual uncertainty, in the repression of history so thoroughly that the act of repression is itself forgotten, the modern suburban house, particularly in the outer or fringe suburbs, can be seen as the physical representation of the uncanny in the present moment.

The word 'suburb' in Australia carries its substantial burden of definitions and associated values. Suburbia, the suburbs, inner and outer suburbs, and the suburban home, all have interconnected but differing shades of meaning, and all can be seen as uncanny places. What do we mean when we talk of a suburb, or 'the suburbs'; what is meant by that slightly sneering adjective 'suburban' and where is that strange place 'suburbia'?

A mythical place: suburbia

Suburbia is a country in which everyone and no-one lives. It encompasses both more, and less, than the actual suburbs and their residents. It is not a term used in a positive or neutral way, more often it simultaneously indicates both conformity and 'otherness,' a place that holds values, but values inherently different from the person using the word. To say 'suburbia' is to set yourself outside its boundaries, even while you most likely live there. 'Suburbia', then, is an idea of place, of 'home' created for purpose of undermining or contradicting it, the idea of the 'unhomely' intrinsic the concept of the homely. It is quintessentially familiar, but also intrinsically disrupted by its own meaning.

Suburbia, whatever else it may be, is also a euphemism for normality. As such it has become central to representations of transgression, deviance or perversion that are either implicitly or explicitly anti-suburban in their refusal of a life-style that is immediately recognisable, yet notoriously difficult to specify (McCann 56).

If suburbia is the noun, suburban is the adjective. While there is more capacity for 'suburban' to be used in a neutral fashion, it too generally carries its load of negative judgement. In Gary Kinnane's critique of the anti-suburban tradition, he articulates the way in which 'anti-suburbanism arose from various post-war bohemian and intellectual cliques, who asserted in one way or another...a lofty scorn for suburban living and what they took to be its implications – a living death of conformity and safety (42).'

Suburbia, then, was created to house the fear of excess ‘homeliness,’ a place that contains everything unhomey about the ‘safety’ of the home. But its creation is based on an attempt to set ourselves outside of this indefinable, amorphous place. Fear of suburbia is perhaps a reprise of the postcolonial fear of the lack of boundaries and borders. Because ‘the suburbs’ are a place which resist definition and containment.

A hybrid space

Kinnane argues that this scorning of suburbia encouraged Australian culture to elevate the city and the bush as the definitive Australian experience (42). This is partly because the city and the country seem to exist more clearly in their own right, while the suburbs occupy an uneasy space which is neither, and both. Suburbs are an/other place, perhaps easiest described by what they are not. Not the city, and not the country, but something else, though the ‘what else’ resists definition.

Suburbs construct the city, but are not the city. ‘Sub/urban’ suggests less than, beneath, or other than, urban. Not the centre, but defined in relation to it. The suburb unsettles the idea of what the city is, and blurs where it ends. What exactly is ‘Melbourne’? Outside of the CBD, the suburbs provide the city’s borders, but the borders are always shifting, and the city sets itself in opposition to its own surrounds.

Suburbs may be in the country, but not of the country. A brand new set of dwellings and shops established in bush or farmland an hour’s drive from the city is still described as a ‘suburb.’ Why not a ‘country town?’ One difference surely lies with history, and its relation to identity – a country town is something that was created for its own purpose, which has grown and evolved over time. A new outer suburb created on farmland is set in the countryside, but an outpost of the city.

Advertising often suggests a variation of ‘have the best of both worlds.’ Stewart and Dickinson in their examination of space and place through the Flatiron Crossing mall in Colorado, argue that suburbs were born a hybrid. ‘Neither simply rural nor purely urban, the suburbs proffered and promised the hopes and aspirations of both spaces (Stewart and Dickinson 284).’ Perhaps there is

some inherent artificiality in the construction of the suburbs – where a city or town may grow organically, suburbs are a conscientious attempt to set up a space that contains elements of both, but that never quite sits easily between them.

Even within their own boundaries, suburbs are less fixed than might be supposed. Not in the sense of changing their location – though sometimes a suburb will swallow up a neighbouring area, and sometimes a small, identifiable section will make a bid to escape the boundaries of its larger, overarching designation. However, without moving, a suburb may change its place in the shifting suburban hierarchy. A recent study notes: ‘The designation of “inner,” “middle,” “outer” and now “fringe” is a moveable feast, shifting as the city expands and as senses of space, time, amenity and desirability alter (Holliday 6).’ There is no firm boundary between that which is inner and that which is outer, these definitions bend with demographic pressures. The ‘inner city’ which would once, in Melbourne, have been a small ring of suburbs adjoining the CBD, may now extend ten kilometres or more into suburbs three or four or five deep. The values attached to these definitions are also fluid. A ‘new’ suburb is formed, and becomes established, it is swallowed in the encroachment of others, and after time it becomes ‘established’ and the ‘fringe’ or ‘outer’ moves somewhere else.

A shifting edge

The growth of the outer suburbs means the city no longer contained, therefore no longer ‘knowable.’ Wolfreys quotes Derrida that the city takes place on the condition of an ‘axiom of incompleteness’ that it must remain ‘indefinitely and structurally non-saturable (Wolfreys 172).’ There is a kind of horror or fear attached to the idea of unchecked, unstoppable growth. While there are quite genuine environmental and socio-economic concerns about urban sprawl, which there is not space to examine here, the language used to describe the growth of the outer fringe often has a gothic tone reflecting this horror. A US study was titled *Sprawl Kills* (Hirschorn). A submission by Brendan Gleeson to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry – Children, Young People and the Built Environment’ was titled ‘Australia’s Toxic Cities: Modernity’s Paradox?’ Another of his studies titled ‘Waking from the

Dream: Towards Urban Resilience in the Face of Sudden Threat,' itself conjuring a fearful image of a sleeper woken by a horror, discussed the representation of unchecked growth: 'Its failings haunt the grounds of contemporary suburban debate with misleading spectres, whose lamentations warn of obesity, poverty, loneliness and almost every other human malady, including an early death (3).'

The general suggestion of the outer edges as creeping, sprawling, monsters, gobbling resources, making people ill, even killing children, sits in stark opposition to the advertised lifestyles, and the aspirations of the people who move into them. The uncontained desire for the portrayed ideals of the 'home' creates a monster, which in turn consumes the families who seek it. The monster is never satisfied, but demands endless new developments to feed it.

A new development

This factor of 'newness' is an attractive selling point for the suburbs. Lyn Richards in 'Suburbia: Domestic Dreaming' cites the Berwick Report by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 1993. The study found that it was not simply affordability which attracted people to outer suburbs rather than ones closer to the city which might be better serviced by amenities and transport: 'The difference...was the image of a new area, with new, clean houses, and a 'country atmosphere' in which to bring up children. To gain these, people were prepared to pay prices of distance and lack of facilities...cleanliness and newness mattered a lot (117).'

The words 'new suburb' are themselves uncanny. In combination, they imply a creation of dwelling where nothing has been before. 'New' suburbs are almost invariably built on what was previously farmland, or industrial land, each with its own history of occupation and production; and before that, any piece of Australian land has a longer history of habitation by Indigenous peoples. To cast any suburb as 'new' is to repress this sense of history, to call the landscape 'empty' or unused. It could be argued, of course, that it is only the suburbs themselves to which the term 'new' applies. A 'new suburb' merely means a suburb now exists, where there was not one before. However, to dwell on this idea is to sever the settlement from the landscape. The idea of a 'new' suburb on an old

landscape creates a curious impression of a set of houses and streets and shops hovering just slightly above the land, but unconnected to it.

The development of a 'new' suburb thus may, in fact, serve as a type of metaphor for Australians' experience of colonialism. It plays out a contemporary version of Terra Nullius, visioning the land as a blank canvas waiting for the arrival of a developer who 'discovers' and 'takes up' the 'empty' land, and creates an infrastructure into which people move, and from which they benefit, though they have no direct link with its acquisition or history. The significant difference is that Indigenous inhabitants have in general been driven out long ago, but it is also this very historical distance which makes it easier to see the land as 'empty'.

One of the questions at the heart of our uneasy inhabitation of a colonial nation is what is the connection, obligation or implication of the crimes of the past for those not directly involved. Few Australians have direct family connection to settler conflict, we are a mostly a land of migrants, in waves of British, European, Asian, African, Middle Eastern. In arguing against the Australian government's apology to Indigenous peoples, former Prime Minister John Howard stated: 'I do not believe as a matter of principle that one generation can accept responsibility for the acts of earlier generations' (Davies). The argument is that the arrival of European settlers and their impact on Indigenous Australians happened long ago, that any atrocities, if acknowledged, were inflicted by other people; that contemporary Australians have no direct involvement, therefore no obligation to consider the reality and consequences of these events.

This argument is a way of not just repressing but denying history, a way of refuting the relevance of that which has gone before, and refusing to acknowledge the implications of what comes after. It is an argument that dismissing history is a means of dealing with it, and it carries an expectation that history will remain buried. The anger of some people at the idea of apology may be connected precisely to the fear of acknowledging the history of the land on which our own suburban homes are built, a denial that Australia's past is in any way connected to how they now live. The notion that, as Gelder and Jacobs argue, what is 'ours' could also be 'theirs' (Gelder and Jacobs 23) creates an uncanny anxiety around the homeliness of our own homes.

This very disconnection creates its own sense of lack, and results in a contradictory reaching for the legitimacy of acceptable aspects of Australian history. There is a kind of yearning for history, but a history stripped of challenge and reduced to sterile recreation.

The return of history

'New' suburbs have a complex relationship with history, a refusing/embracing that on some level understands its value and reaches for historical legitimacy.

David Guterson in 'No Place Like Home' notes that in the (then) brand new walled community of Green Valley set in the desert near Los Angeles, the names of developments either hark back to a European past with names such as Renaissance and Steeplechase, or else deny their desert setting with names like Crystal Creek and Bay Breeze (61). The names of outer suburbs in Melbourne often suggest comfort and safety, such as Hidden Valley, Eden Park and Sanctuary Lakes, or else have a colonial ring to them such as Caroline Springs or Roxburgh Park. Interestingly, one new suburb is named Truganina, referencing the Aboriginal elder Truganini. As I write, it is possible to purchase a brand new Georgian style home on Federation Drive in Truganina, an uneasy mix of historical referencing. There seems to be an attempt to connect 'new' places to the past through the declarative process of naming itself.

Within these suburbs, houses are often built in reproductions of other styles – Federation, Georgian, Tudor – embracing the comforting aesthetic of the historical in recreating them stylistically. Vidler comments on the way so called 'empty' spaces are created for development, and then re-filled with an attempt at recreation of an unreachable past.

The task of filling these voids...is given over to architecture, which is forced, in the absence of a lived past, to search for posthistorical grounds on which to base an 'authentic' home for society. Thus, on an even more literal level, architecture finds itself 'repeating' history, whether in traditional or avant-garde guise, in a way that itself gives rise to an uncanny sense of *deja vu*

that parallels Freud's own description of the uncanny as linked to the 'compulsion to repeat' (13).

Again, it is the structures built in the space left by the erasure of history that house the uncanny.

Uncanny houses

Guterson notes the unease created by repeated design, and the lack of centre: 'Within the high walls lining Green Valley's expansive parkways lie homes so similar they appear as uncanny mirror reflections of one another – and, as it turns out, they are... Neighbourhoods are labyrinthine, confusing in their sameness; each block looks eerily like the next (55).' This repetition and duplication can be both an assurance of belonging, of being correct, of being 'in place,' at the same time as indicating a loss of individuality that brings the owner's existence into question. It is the very 'newness' and instant creation of these suburbs that severs them from the meaning attached to historical place. Or as Stewart and Dickinson put it: 'Since each new suburb consists of the same types of instant architecture and cultural resources (chain restaurants and coffee shops, for example) the loss of vernacular spaces can become deeply felt... These new spaces make it difficult to recognize where one is, and even more troubling, who one is in the first instance (286).'

I prefer not to use the term McMansion, as it is a word which, unexamined, creates the us/them categories to which discussion of the suburbs so easily falls prey. Naomi Stead's discussion 'Reincarnated McMansion' usefully points out that while the 'Mc' part may imply mass production, the 'mansion' part of the term is the more relevant. These houses are abundant with the use of ornament such as columns, finials, and gables.

They show fascinating vestiges of actual mansion architecture – the ornate double doors are wide enough to be thrown open to carriages full of visiting nobles, a double line of servants standing to attention, the ballroom bedecked with flowers. The rooms are scaled for a crowd, especially the public spaces – the foyers, formal dining rooms, staircases, multiple lounge spaces. (10)

She goes on to suggest the poignancy of contrasting this with the image of ‘a middle class couple or small nuclear family eating on the couch in front of the television (10).’ Here we have arrived at image of the modern uncanny, an echoing mansion, a not-quite-right recreation of history, which is elusive and refuses to be housed within the structure designed to contain it.

As Richards argues, the houses in the outer suburbs are not cheap, nor are they small. It is perhaps not coincidental that the growth of the suburbs has seen the growth of the size of house. There are arguments that one reason for this is fear of danger from the outside (Gleeson, *Toxic Cities*, 25). While people buying a house in the outer suburbs argue for it in terms of it being an ideal place to raise children (Richards 116), the growth of Home Theatres, Teenage Retreats, Parents Retreats, suggest the strong desire to remain in the home. Gleeson argues: ‘The contemporary suburban mega house internalizes activity, allocating large amounts of space to passive recreation: home theatres, lounges, rumpus and computer rooms, courtyards, and monster garages for the storage of adults’ toys (*Toxic Cities*, 21).’

This arguably brings us full circle then, to what at least one critic sees as the crucial element of the gothic haunted castle: ‘The strand of popular culture we call the Gothic novel can be distinguished by the presence of house in which people are locked in and locked out (Ellis 3).’ The contemporary home, particularly the large ornate outer-suburban home, has returned to its roots, carrying as it does echoes of both colonial incursion and gothic castle. A newly constructed mansion on the outer edge of the suburbs, rather than sitting uneasily in the haunted house tradition, can in fact be seen as the ‘emblematic’ of the uncanny in the current millenium.

5. Constructing *The Mirror House*: reflections and refractions

Genre, of course, is comforting. It establishes order even in the midst of disorder. Genre speaks of a legacy, of a heritage, of certainty (Turcotte, 11).

Contemporary context

Australian literature has a long tradition of novels and writers ascribed the loose label 'gothic', from Marcus Clarke to Patrick White, from Christina Stead to Janette Turner Hospital. This is partly because of the generality of definition of the term itself. In reviewing Australian writer Julia Leigh's *Disquiet*, reviewer Meg Mundell describes it as gothic – a 'shady' word, which 'doesn't so much prescribe a genre as suggest a mood – gloomy, uneasy, brooding (1).' There is also a re-emergence of the suburbs as worthy of writing in, and about. Stephen Carroll's recent novels such as *The Spirit of Progress* (2011) are examples of the embracing of the suburbs as a legitimate subject matter. However the juxtaposition of contemporary suburban house, particularly outer-suburban house, and haunting does not seem to have been widely explored in contemporary Australian literature.

Peggy Frew's *House of Sticks* (2011) is described by Kate Veitch as 'suburban gothic.' However, though the house in this text is a contested site, the elements of unease and intellectual uncertainty revolve around the possibly sinister intrusion of a friend rather than the house itself, the 'house of sticks' perhaps referring more to the potential destruction by the wolf. *Disquiet*, (2008) mentioned above, features a protagonist who is Australian, but in fleeing violence escapes to her mother's home in France. This Australian text returns the gothic to its roots, as the woman returns to a European ancestral home. Other contemporary examples of haunted narratives tend to the historical. Chris Womersley's *Bereft* (2010) features an ambiguous girl who may or may not be a ghost, but it is located in the post-war past, and in the uneasy borders of landscape and habitation, the haunting of a metaphorical rather than physical home. Kate Grenville's *Secret River* (2005) concludes with a house

haunted not by the presence of those killed, but by their absence. It, too, is historical and engages with a direct postcolonial examination of violence and settler history. Virginia Duigan's *The Precipice* (2011) is a brooding narrative with a strong focus on a large house, but again it is the landscape which provides the menace.

Though no search can be conclusive, and I have not thoroughly examined more popular fiction, it seems safe to say, at least, that a recent literary attempt at an Australian suburban example of the haunted house has not been widely explored. *The Mirror House* is such an exploration.

The ghostly text

A text is a structure haunted by the ghost of its writer. Julian Wolfreys in *Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* discusses how we reanimate texts – a text 'says' something or makes something occur. He explores the way a text exists, often, as a conduit for a dead person. I write 'Freud says...' as if I can hear him, as if he is in the room. Wolfreys argues: 'Texts are neither dead nor alive, yet they hover at the very limits between living and dying. The text thus partakes in its own haunting, it is traced by its own phantoms, and it is this condition which reading must confront (Wolfreys xii).'

As I sit here writing these words, you, the reader, do not exist for me except in shadowy, indistinct, perhaps slightly menacing form, ultimately unknowable. As you read them, I, the writer do not exist for you in any real sense. We haunt each other through the structure of the text on the page.

Wolfreys' discussion is based around the *reading* of texts. How much more uncanny is the act of writing? Writing fiction is, surely, an attempt to create a world 'real' enough to be familiar, to resonate with readers, but at the same time to make it unfamiliar, to allow the reader to see things differently.

There is, too, an aspect of writing that feels elusive, something both part of and distinct from, the writer, a 'writing self' that is in some way someone else. Contemporary writers such as Margaret Atwood have attempted to grapple with this idea of this double. Her gothically named collection

Negotiating with the Dead (2003) contains an essay titled ‘Duplicity: The Jekyll hand, the Hyde hand and the slippery double: why there are always two.’ Again there is that sense not only of doubleness, but uncertainty, the inability to reconcile the two, the failure to be able to settle on one, or the other. She cites a famous Jorge Luis Borges essay titled ‘Borges and I’ which also tries to separate the writer from the person but concludes ‘I do not know which of us has written this page’ (cited in Atwood 39). In attempting to define this relationship, Atwood ultimately uses the analogy of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. If one side of the mirror is ‘life’-Alice and the other is ‘art’-Alice, the act of writing, Atwood says, takes place at the moment she passes from one side to the other, the moment the mirror dissolves (49-50). This recalls the ‘third kind of ghost,’ that which is neither one thing nor the other, in one space or another, that which hovers at the borders of definition and naming.

To return to Freud’s essay, which has ghosted this work, many later critics point out that Freud himself is doubled in it. Lyndenberg in ‘Freud’s Uncanny Narratives’ writes that ‘[i]n The Uncanny’ Freud defensively doubles himself in his personal anecdotes, splitting into controlling narrator and helpless protagonist (1079).’ Helene Cixous argues that ‘if we experience uneasiness in reading Freud’s essay, it is because the author is his double in a game that cannot be dissociated from his own text (547).’ Trying to capture the elusive uncanny, Freud falls prey to it instead. Trying to define the double who is the ‘writer’ perhaps creates us as haunted houses ourselves, inhabited by elusive ghosts. Not just the clichéd, though relevant, ‘ghosts of our past,’ but our uncanny writing self, and the ghosts of the texts that have helped to form us.

Two brown houses

It is surely almost impossible to pin down – or separate out – the nexus of personal, literary, and cultural history that come together to create the germ of a new piece of fiction. But reflecting on the creation of *The Mirror House* I can draw out two images, two incidences of texts, which connected through me, or my writerly self, to form the idea for the novel.

I

A girl is lying on a purple bedspread in a chocolate brick veneer house on the very outer edge of Melbourne's eastern suburbs. She is deeply engrossed in a Readers Digest Condensed Edition of *Jane Eyre*. I am not sure exactly how old she is. Old enough to read it, young enough to be frightened by Bertha, lonely enough to identify with little Jane. She herself is in two places, there in her suburban bed, but she is also locked in Charlotte Bronte's rendering of the infamous red room, ready to be terrified by ghosts which threaten, but never appear.

This image is of my younger self, who is me, and is not-me. This book with its terrors is more comforting to me than this strange place I find myself in. We have moved from the then working class inner Melbourne suburb of Port Melbourne, to Mooroolbark, on the furthest reaches of the outer eastern suburbs. My parents and two brothers and I have left behind our old 'bank house', a small double storey whose boundaries were blurred by the occupation of grandmother and uncle and aunts, by the ebb and flow of close neighbours, by a tiny park across the road and the ocean not so far away. Now we have arrived in a quiet, limitless, empty-feeling place. There are dry paddocks on two sides of our house and an empty block across the road. The single set of neighbours are somewhat menacing, brooding, and keep their distance. The suburb strikes me as a vast, alien and uneasy and I take comfort, as always, in books. I sit under my window, but not looking through it to the mirroring window of the house next door. I stare down instead to where I hold Jane in my hands, comforted while being frightened. In a house with not many books, with few of the 'greats' of literature, even this butchered version of *Jane Eyre* is catching at me. Gothic stories, hovering as they do in the spaces between 'popular' and 'classic' give me my first inkling of what a book should be.

This image is of course retrospective, dubious, informed by my adult self, and possibly not a true representation of events at all.

II

An adult ‘me,’ a mother, nudging middle age, is reading a newspaper at the kitchen table in the house I have finally purchased. I have crept, over the years, closer and closer to the city – or further and further from the outer fringe – and settled where I can see the Eureka Towers from my front porch. *The Age* is open in front of me on October 9, 2005, the date and article factual, proveable, certifiable. The headline that catches my eye is: ‘Buyers not deterred by a ghost or two.’ In it, is an article about the sale of the house of Joe and Maria Korp, the infamous ‘body in the boot’ case where Joe was alleged to have coerced his mistress to kill his wife. Maria was not killed instantly but left to linger in the boot of a car parked outside the Shrine of Remembrance, and ultimately died in hospital. Joe Korp hanged himself, though there is a question as to whether he intended to do so. I, like many Melburnians, had followed the story with some horror. The tabloid aspects of the tragedy were already widely exploited, to the point where the coverage itself created a kind of disgust. But the sale of the house this day caught my attention. Who would want that house, and what it would be like to live there?

It was only later that I realised on any conscious level that house of Joe and Maria Korp in the picture was reminiscent of my childhood home. The Korp house was a double storey, different in size and shape to my small three bedroom brick veneer, so not immediately comparable. It was the colours that were identical, the same chocolate brick and pointed red tile roof. The picture in *The Age* was photographed so that the house seems to stand alone, surround by its front lawn and a vast, cloudy sky with only two electrical transmission towers in the distance, recalling that sense of isolation and solitude. An uncanny experience. My uneasy past rising up to disrupt my comfortable breakfast in the place I felt at home at last.

Somewhere in the conjunction between these two moments of fiction and fact, past and present, genre and individual, the novel *The Mirror House* exists in thin, spectral form. Whose story was I reading, and whose story would I come to write?

6. Conclusion

All stories are, more or less, ghost stories...all forms of narrative are, in one way or another, haunted
(Wolfreys 3).

Genre as a haunted structure

No work of fiction exists in a vacuum. For adults, a legacy of reading generally precedes an attempt at writing, and the books we love become embedded in our past, our own literary history. They frame our idea of what a book should be. It is hardly surprising, then, that when we come to write, we might attempt to work within a tradition that has been meaningful to us.

However, working within a genre sets up an expectation of how that genre will proceed, and provides certain constrictions which hover over the narrative. When writing *The Mirror House*, the conventions of the gothic haunted house seemed in some ways to direct the story in ways I was reluctant to go. Yet it was not possible to abandon them altogether – the words ‘house’ and ‘haunted’ conjure an expectation which, if not fulfilled, left the narrative confused and the reader frustrated. Also, there was pleasure in reinventing some of the tropes – the large brooding house, the mysterious benefactor, the imperilled heroine, questions of mental stability – in a contemporary context. To reinvent, not reproduce, was the aim.

Research into the uncanny, and in particular the idea of the double allowed me to take the narrative in more interesting directions. The conceit of a ‘doubled’ house provided some distance from gothic clichés. It provided capacity to explore the ambiguity of what was really happening, and the borders of identity. Almost incidentally, it helped to metaphorically address issues of past violence in a way that resonates more closely with contemporary Australian experiences of history. The uncertainty as to how much past violence matters, how far it can be repressed, and what are the responsibilities of those who come after, seemed to open possibilities rather than close them down. I found myself with a protagonist who held up a mirror that reflected someone like her, but not her;

who inhabited spaces created the same, but not the same space; who had both an unbearably intimate and at the same time disconnected and distant relationship with past violence; whose disruption by the fallout of past violence refused to allow her to settle comfortably in her new space. In retrospect these seemed useful metaphors and ways of representing issues of contemporary Australian identity.

The uncanny ripples through all the points of connection that brought *The Mirror House* into being. The gothic tradition provided the genre; postcolonial Australia provided the political and local historical context; the suburbs provided the setting; and resonances of my own past, in terms of place and the reading of texts, brought them together. In the writing, the notions of doubleness and duplicity, ambiguity and intellectual uncertainty, came to form the core of the novel.

There is a sense in which my initial challenge, to write a haunted story in a house that was entirely new, failed. Though the house was new, events had to have occurred in the past, the protagonist had to have previous experiences which resonated. If the question underlying setting a ghost story in a suburban house is: 'how can the new be haunted', the uncanny, more than providing an answer, negates the question. The notion of the uncanny is an argument that the 'new' is always haunted. The 'new' contains within it its own opposite – it is only possible to consider something 'new' by repressing the 'old', by denying its history. At the same time 'newness' is a transitory term, one which as soon as it exists denies itself, beginning its inexorable slide into 'oldness' and necessitating its own replacement. 'Newness' is haunted by its own extinction. The endless quest for the 'new' helps create monsters of overconsumption and excess materialism, which leave behind them trails of environmental degradation, social injustice, and disposable, interchangeable relationships. These themes also haunt *The Mirror House*.

The past, whether our own or the past of the spaces we inhabit, cannot be excised. There are no blank slates, on a personal, national, or literary level. The more we attempt to repress the past and deny our connection to it while we build our homes on its 'empty' spaces, the more we are laying down ghosts that will rise to unsettle us wherever – and whenever – we think we are most at home.

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Volume 2:
The Mirror House

The Mirror House

Portico

Lora traced the plan of the house with her finger. Breakfast. Study. Dining. Bath. Bed. Tiny quadrants showed how doors might open, or close. ‘What’s this?’ she said.

Neil raised a grey-brown eyebrow, and Lora ducked her head, flustered. Of course she had seen a real estate brochure before. She was just startled when Neil produced this one from nowhere, like a conjurer, and slapped it flat on the linen tablecloth without comment. The two of them were sitting next to the window of a restaurant inserted into the dizzying top corner of a city tower. The lights and stars were spectacular, but the paper on the table drew their focus downwards. Lora’s fingers walked across the smooth glossy surface from one square to another. Left to right, and then down, and right to left. Later it would occur to her that she should have been quicker to turn it over, to where, on the other side, the photo of the house loomed large and dark. But she became entranced by the way the rooms were divided and contained, and labelled in black and white, as if every day could be a simple process of moving smoothly from one clean geometric shape to the next. Her life at the moment was more a scatty series of scribbled ellipses around the needs of her daughter Cloudy, and wild lurches, halts and reversals as she traipsed the city trying to find them a home they could afford.

Neil scooped salmon roe with a silver spoon. A tiny red egg escaped and rested on his bottom lip, and he flicked at it with the point of his tongue, then lifted a napkin corner to wipe his mouth. ‘A new development. Falconara Lakes. Not here, interstate. They’re shifting me nearer to Head Office.’

The name of the place meant nothing to Lora. She scabbled to pick up the brochure from the table, the corner of it pricking her finger. She wished Neil would help her out, give her some context. They had not been together a year yet, he had his own impeccable mezzanine apartment, and he had made no overtures before about them all living together. If that was the implication.

At last she turned the paper, but the movement of her arm caused the candlelight to bob and bow, so that the pictures and words fractured, and she could not make them out in the dim expensive lighting. Then the flame stilled.

Brand New Spacious Family Giant.

An Envious Lifestyle.

Effortless Living.

Above the words 'For Sale' in heavy gothic script was a photo shot at night. A house, new, enormous, with heavy brown brick walls pushing solidly into the earth, the jagged angles of its roof reducing the night sky to a sliver of purple-black. It had double-storey hexagonal wings jutting from either side, a semi-circular white columned portico between them. A matching balcony sat on top of this, with its own small pointed roof like a crimson hat. Every light was blazing, showing empty rooms with doors through to emptiness and further open doors.

Neil's smile indicated he was going to make an announcement. Lora held the house in her hands, light and flimsy and insubstantial so long as it existed only on paper. She sensed that she was to be provided with two alternatives. Only two. Turning her eyes back to the picture, she was distracted by a flutter of recognition of this particular shape of brick and tile.

'Well? What do you think?' said Neil, tossing down the napkin and leaning back in his chair.

Lora could not think where she might have seen the house before, and the suggestion of memory had receded immediately, leaving only the detritus of faint dismay. But, stalling for time, disputing the house's claims to newness, she finally said: 'It looks familiar.'

Foundation

He sits on the rail of the bridge that curves over the lake where it thins at one end. He has fine whiskers at the edges of his mouth, and the height of a man, though not the bulk, and the bones and hunger and awkwardness of an adolescent. He thinks of himself as a boy, if he thinks about himself at all.

The boy, then, sits, balancing his scrawny buttocks on the white-painted wood. His hair is not quite dreadlocks, more like wool from the back of a brown sheep that has lived too long in a dusty paddock, and it knocks against his shoulders as he leans forward. The sparsity of flesh beneath his skin highlights the sharp bones of his cheeks and eye sockets.

The light hurts his eyes. He narrows them against the glare and raises a finger to the corner of his eyelid. The bone-dry fingerskin soaks up a trickle of moisture, his hand is parched. A lifted splinter pierces his palm when he returns it to the rail.

All this air makes him uneasy. He is accustomed to denser, darker places. The sky around him is blue and curved, an upside down wading pool dotted with clouds like drowned white bunnies. Houses line the streets in uneven rows, surrounded by empty blocks and paddocks awaiting more houses. In the distance someone has set down the city in a series of tiny rectangular shapes, but he turns his back on the city and studies the two large brown houses that face each other across the lake. They are identical, as if the reflection of one has peeled away from the surface of the water, shaking off drops like a dog, and set itself upright on the other side.

He turns his head, slowly, from one to the other, and back, again and again, so that it seems he is denying an accusation, or refusing something he wants but should not have.

He has returned because he belongs in one of those houses.

But he is yet to understand which one.

Family room

Lora woke early, the first morning in Falconara Lakes. It was still dark, but the curtain shielding the window had begun to lighten at its edges. Neil dozed on, his snore a faint click at the end of every intake of breath, like a very slow clock marking out his allocation of sleep. The click-pause-click emphasised the larger silence. The homes Lora had lived in before were inevitably set hard against main roads or train lines, or else shared walls with noisy neighbours. Here, there was a quiet that held distance within it, distance from other people and from the infrastructure required to move numbers of them from place to place, to entertain them and keep them fed. Here, the houses contained everything that was needed, and remained silent until their owners woke.

She eased a foot out of bed to the carpeted floor and lifted the quilt with gentle movements. She did not want to wake anyone, she needed a few moments to walk the rooms alone. Neil would soon spring up brisk and energetic and full of plans. Cloudy would creep out, uncertain, sleepy-eyed, wanting cuddles, breakfast, her mother's focus. All of which would be fine, later. But this quiet time was a small gift after the chaos and busyness of the past week, and she needed to absorb the size and shape of what she had taken on, in accepting Neil's offer.

The rooms of their own accord had warmed to an even blood-heat. Lora stretched, cracking her back, which was stiff from the travel – the taxi, the plane trip, the drive. She rotated shoulders sore from the rush to set up the basics of the house so they could eat and wash and sleep. Neil sighed and shifted, but settled again. His greying hair was trimmed too short for sleep to muss it, and he shaved at night as well as in the morning so his skin was always smooth. He looked as if should his new work colleagues file in, ready for a meeting, he could simply shrug on a jacket and begin the day's proceedings. She admired his composure, as she always envied people who were effortless in the front they presented to the world. Lora ran a hand over her own thick mud-brown hair with its odd grey strands, picked a crust of sleep from her eye, and headed for the bathroom.

The bright banks of lights in the ensuite were not kind. Lora had the sort of face that was at its best animated and engaged, but in sadness or thought the lines and incipient folds had nowhere to

hide. Rubbing cream into her wrinkles, she wondered how much turning forty had influenced her decision to come here. She seemed to have arrived at middle age with very little, partly at least because she never stuck at anything long enough – job, relationship, house – for it to acquire substance or reward.

Enough of the dawn eked through the naked windows that she could click off the too-honest artificial light. The ensuite was as big as the lounge room in her old flat. It was designed so that two people could move through it preparing for the day, without having to step back and say, no, you go first. Its size dispensed with the need for such ordinary morning courtesies. There were twin sinks, the toilet was partnered with a bidet, the shower, too, was doubled. Only the enormous spa stood singular, but there was room for at least six people in it. Lora had never been in a house with a spa before. She peered into the intimidating black-tiled depths, set with silver taps and plugs and knobs. A soft whisper of water came from inside it, a faint trickle and suspicion of dripping, though there was no water to be seen. But perhaps it was meant to sound like that.

Lora slipped back through the bedroom and went to check on Cloudy. Her child slept with her thumb in her mouth, and dreamed around it. A kicked-off bedsock lay on the floor, and her bunny had fallen next to it, limbs splayed and ear hanging by a thread. Cloudy, like Neil, had already made a claim on her space, had surrendered herself immediately and trustingly to the new house. Lora crept away and eased the door closed.

After arriving yesterday, they had made the beds, opened a few kitchen boxes, set out some toiletries in the bathrooms. But the house still had the waiting air that came with unfilled spaces – a hungry, anticipatory feel. Lora stood in the enormous open area upstairs, reluctant to push open doors that were lined up and closed tight against empty rooms behind. At one end of the void there was a floor-to-ceiling arched window looking over the lake at the back of the house. Lora glanced through, but it was too dark to see much. No one else was stirring in Falconara Lakes, no other lights shone from windows. Only streetlights glowed redundantly on empty roads and footpaths, tracing the pattern of repeating curves and circles that formed the suburb, marking the edges of the irregular dark shape of the water.

Lora turned and walked the expanse of cream carpet towards the front of the house, where the balcony curved out from the facade. It was accessed by sliding glass doors and Lora fumbled a little as she worked out what to lift, what to pull, to release her from the house. Outside the air was colder, but fresh and moist after the dryness of the central heating. Smells of damp earth and eucalypt made her realise how accustomed she had become to the chemical scents of the city.

She rested her hands on the curve of the white railing and admitted to a moment of ironic, self-conscious romance. Here she was, standing alone in the dawn in her long white dressing gown, on the balcony of her grand house, as if some fairytale vision of life had been projected from her childhood into this future. An incongruous princess. Though the grand house was no medieval castle, and the grounds around it were not set with formal gardens or forests, but were flat basalt plains covered in old farmland.

Falconara Lakes had been designed and set down far from the distant city. Its houses were arranged along concentric circles of streets around the lake, and the whole was linked to the freeway by a single road, like an umbilical cord still attached to the infant suburb, which they had travelled along yesterday. In the first exuberance of development, at the height of the boom, the land had been snapped up, gobbled up. Prices were rising, people had to get in early, speculators bought parcels with the smug knowledge they would double in value, no-one cared what they paid because next year the land would certainly be worth more. But then the boom went bust. Prices fell. Those who had bought in glassy-eyed confidence at the top of the rocketing market were now stuck with land they could not sell, and could not afford to build on. The development had stalled to a mixture of grand new mansions, uncertain half-built frames, and blocks that sat empty, testaments to failure or miscalculation or greed.

Across the road from Neil's house was one such empty block. In the gathering light Lora could see how mounds of earth had been piled in humps and left, the way weeds grew between the rubble. Furtive piles of rubbish had accumulated in the corners. Beyond the empty block were paddocks, vast and flat and covered in stubble, dotted with a few lonely eucalypts, and fences of drooping wire and old posts sagging at random angles. The city was a few insignificant lights on the horizon.

Lora shivered a little, with cold or a minor sense of panic. Duty, fear, a blind leap of faith had driven her to this suburb on this very outer rim of this strange city. It was only weeks ago, really, a few months, since she and Cloudy had been living frugally but comfortably in their little flat. Neil had his own place, and their relationships twined and grew slowly and without pressure. The flat was small, but Cloudy had her own tiny bedroom, and there were some good neighbours. In the odd, almost triangular room off the kitchen that got the morning sun Lora would read the paper with her breakfast, while Cloudy played in the small shared garden. They had cared for the flat and called it home. But, evicted when the place was sold, Lora saw how lucky she had been for all those years, as doors and doors and doors were shut in her face. Wooden doors of houses, painted doors of flats, the heavy glass and steel doors of real estate offices. 'It's a hot rental market, love,' said the agent, looking over Cloudy's head to the long queue of more desirable tenants beyond. 'But bung in an application, you never know your luck.'

When Neil had made his offer, she and Cloudy were living in a lean-to on the back of the rented house of a friend of a friend, a desperate stop-gap. In the tacked-on room, the window was sealed with a scarf jammed in a gap, the door groaned shut at an angle of twenty degrees, Cloudy had her bath in water pooled in the bottom of a stained shower in a shared bathroom. Always there was a glimmer of a threat, not so far removed, that Lora might be found inadequate, not a fit person to be raising this child.

She was precisely aware of how the world saw her. A single mother, father unknown, unable to provide a roof over her child's head. The tabloid phrases had so little to do with the real Lora and Cloudy, the limited but precious day-to-day round of their lives. But Lora knew that she had brought Cloudy into the world out of her own need, her own loneliness, and she felt the heavy gaze of the world judging her failure to give her child the picture-book life she deserved.

Instead, at the back of the sharehouse, Lora had found a syringe in the garden where Cloudy played. A spindle from the wicked godmother, one pinprick from it and Lora might have lost Cloudy altogether, one way or another. She had dealt with the thing, then washed and washed her hands, and sat at the grubby kitchen table. After a time she had taken out Neil's brochure yet again. It had

become dog-eared and was beginning to rip at the edges and tear across the middle, from her taking it out and examining it, and folding it over and shoving it away again. Effortless Living. There were worse fates, she decided in that moment. She had drawn two figures, one large, one small with two ponytails, into the white spaces.

A new home in a new neighbourhood. A good man, she was sure of it. A relationship. A family. Lora had always thought she and Cloudy were family enough, but the world insisted on its labels. A real home that no one could judge as unsuitable for a child.

On the balcony, Lora felt the bulk of the house behind her, between her shoulder blades. She turned around towards it and leaned against the railing, but from this angle she could see very little. Only the void behind her thin reflection in the sliding doors, the white roof of the balcony low over her head. Her feet were bare, and freezing. It was colder down here, though it was only just autumn, they would need heavier clothes. She shivered, and slid the door open, and stepped back through the glass into the life she had chosen.

Crawl space

The light becomes brighter as the sun rises, and the people are drawn out of their dim houses towards it, like moths. The boy hooks his hands around the curved railing, and flips his body over the side, and under the bridge. He wears a satchel across his shoulder, and inside that is a box of thin cardboard. From the box comes a little musical clinking and chattering. He lands on the mud platform which holds one edge of the bridge, and settles himself into the curve underneath it, legs bent, arms around them, chin resting in the cleft between.

It is better here, a little moister, a little dimmer. He prefers the undersides of things, the deep places which are strong enough to support heavy structures, but offer him shelter without complaint. He finds pleasure, as well as safety, amongst the concrete posts holding up buildings, or the large stormwater pipes that run underground, or deep dark car parks with their little nooks and corners and stairwells. Sounds have depth to them in these places, and the light, if any, is weary and thin at having to find its way down so far. On the surface, in the air, noises are dry and shrill, and the light can be savage.

This space under the bridge is too small, neither one thing nor the other. Light sneaks in sideways, bouncing up from the water, and the wooden slats over his head do not close against each other tightly. They creak a warning as someone walks over them. The boy freezes, eyesockets pressed to bony knees. From the red behind his eyes a story forms. A story about a troll. In the story the troll wants to eat the goats trip-trapping over the bridge, but the goats outsmart him. He is supposed be on the side of the goats. But the goats have grinning white faces and hard little hooves, and the biggest one has heavy curving horns as well and an angry scowl. The goats have each other, they stick together. The troll has no one on his side. The boy opens his eyes and the story disappears.

He puts a hand into the lake, precisely up to the thin scar across his wrist. His hand is a measuring cup, and the lake fills it to the line. When he draws it back up the water drips from his wrists, drop by drop, back to where it belongs.

He opens his little box. Some of the pieces of chalk are long like fingers, others are ground down to fingernails, and together they make their pleasant music as he rummages in them. At the very bottom is something cold and small and hard, but his fingers recoil from this. They curl instead around a stick of red. He dips this into the lake, just the tip. It sips the lake water and the darkness rises slowly up the chalk, turning it from dust-red to deeper crimson. When it reaches the top he takes the chalk from the water.

The boy bends over the lake thinking to see his face, but there is nothing there. He sits back on his haunches, and returns the chalk to its box. Its noise is duller now. The dry chalks clink clink clink as usual, but the filled one is quiet, weakened. Poisoned.

Sorry, he murmurs. I'm sorry.

There are more thumps and groans from on top of the bridge and the boy shrinks further back under the curved wood. Trip trap. Where you live determines what you are. He lives nowhere. If he does not want to become a troll he must find a place. Not the houses. He is not allowed to go into the houses.

The sun is too high to go looking, the sounds are thin and the air is dry. For now he curls up in a ball, trusting in the capacity of people not to concern themselves with what is under their own feet.

Al fresco

Lora stood staring at the stove top, a smooth sheet of black glasslike material with no obvious knobs or buttons. Determined to do this the right way, to begin as she meant to go on, she had decided to make pancakes for breakfast. She had unearthed the box of groceries and found enough kitchenware, but the unfamiliar kitchen kept reducing her to slow clumsiness. The oven was an industrial-sized metal and black cube that glowered mockingly against the wall in the cooking recess. The morning sun bouncing off the steel splashbacks made her squint. Handleless cupboards defied entry. Her old homes might have been basic, but she felt a brief nostalgia for their clunky Bakelite knobs and crusty gas-jets, lit by holding a long match at arm's length and leaning back. The whoosh of flame might have been perilous, but it was definitive. Here, her finger hovered uncertainly over a touch-pad, and finally a circle of red began to glow in the blackness. She set a pan on it and hoped for the best.

As she splashed a ladle of batter, she felt a self-consciousness that was unlike her usual vague self. Lora was by nature someone whose focus was pulled inwards, who conducted a large part of her life safely and privately in the confines of her own head, except when her attention was snapped outwards by the needs of her daughter. Neil often called her dreamy, with a balance of affection and irritation that shifted depending on the importance of what she had forgotten or overlooked or left unfinished.

She liked cooking, for herself, for others, but in this kitchen there was just the faintest sense of playing a role, or making some ironic joke. Or being in a TV ad, perhaps that was it. A gleaming kitchen in a commercial, no mess, yet, no stains on the table or drawings stuck to the fridge by masking tape, hanging by one corner, no crusts on the stove from meals burned or bubbled over. Everything perfect and shining. They would soon fix that, she thought, with Cloudy's childish mess, and her own erratic approach to housework. Though she would need to adjust to Neil's higher standards.

A faint smell of burnt flour and butter rose from the pan. Lora, distracted, had forgotten to turn the pancake. She flipped it into an improvised compost bucket, melted another gob of butter, and started again.

‘You know, I thought we would be able to walk around the lake,’ she said, watching the creamy bubbles begin to form and pop. ‘But the side fences go all the way down at the back. You can’t get through’

Neil had refused the rich breakfast, he was measuring his high protein muesli into his bowl and spooning on linseed. ‘We have lake frontage. You wouldn’t want people wandering through our back yard.’ He snapped the lid back on his container and took the maple syrup away from Cloudy. ‘That’s too much,’ he said. ‘You won’t eat all that. Don’t waste it.’ Though Lora had been about to say something similar, her shoulder tightened with the irritation that she always felt when someone else criticised Cloudy, however mildly. She smothered the instinct to leap to Cloudy’s defence, and wondered how many of these exchanges would need to take place before the mild rebellions and corresponding rebukes of a family felt natural. Cloudy had always belonged to Lora alone. But she knew she needed to let go of this dynamic. She needed to make room for Neil, to let him in, to give him a role. Lora would not be here with Neil if he was not kind, if he had not proved himself with Cloudy. She was not that desperate.

‘Can we swim in the lake?’ Cloudy said, unfazed by disputes over syrup.

‘No, it’s not for swimming,’ Neil said.

Cloudy made a disappointed mouth. ‘But why? Why is there a lake if you can’t swim in it?’

Neil glanced at her, and Lora held herself very still. But he smiled. ‘There’s a pool not far away. With a water slide. We’ll go there in summer. And there’s a huge Adventure Playground in the park. I’ll take you on the weekend,’ he said, like a father might.

Lora believed in love, and attraction, and chemistry. But she was also old enough to know there exists an economics of relationships, along with a history. A balancing of attributes, of needs fulfilled and qualities offered. She knew she and Cloudy filled vacant spaces in Neil’s life. Lora was, if nothing else, malleable. Or as he put it, her calm was a relief after the hysterics and violent temper of

his ex. His last relationship had disintegrated into the chaos he hated so much, and his daughter was grown and estranged and distant. Neil was not given to overt emotion, he closed the door on his past and did not like to discuss it. But sometimes Lora saw him watching Cloudy doing the ordinary things of a child's life, and his indulgent smile would suddenly fade, and his eyes would cloud and he would turn away. Replication can never be exact, and produces its own grief. Sometimes, perhaps, that is the point.

Lora eased a successful pancake onto Cloudy's plate. She thought of dating sites she had sometimes tried. No Kids. No Single Mothers. Married man seeks daytime fun times. No Strings. She was hardly going to complain about his conscientious parenting of a child not his own.

Neil looked up and smiled at her. 'Better get going. Sorry to leave you with all this. You'll be alright?' he said. Neil worked in finance, he had just been transferred, that was why they were all here. An opportunity, he said. A challenge. They needed someone to sort it out. He had explained his job to her once. So far as she could tell it involved speculating on products that had not yet been created, or guessing the rise and fall of currencies in the future. This seemed to rely a lot on portents, whispers, handfuls of money tossed to the sky to see the way the wind was blowing. But despite this, working in finance was seen as hard-headed and practical, and rewarded with large amounts of money.

Lora, on the other hand, had studied history. First generation university, with no-one to guide her, she had chosen it because she had an idea the past was fixed, and therefore containable. Solid substantial facts in a life that she always felt was drifting on currents not of her making. And she had enjoyed the study, she had become absorbed in the ebbs and flows of great events, and the minutiae of the lives of people long dead. She still did some freelance work. Though she had quickly learned that neither grand sweep of events nor domestic detail paid much rent.

They had met while she was researching the history of the building Neil was working in. They had coffee in the little café at the bottom of the building, and when Lora mentioned Cloudy, instead of the blank, cautious face Lora had come to expect, he smiled and offered reminiscences of his own daughter, now adult, and living overseas. Lora thought in a strange way they made a good match, Neil

with his focus on the future, hers on the past, and Cloudy as the fulcrum with her child's constant engagement with the present.

'We'll have fun,' Lora said now. 'Do a bit more unpacking. Explore the neighbourhood.'

Neil leaned in, smelling of coffee and spicy aftershave and clean clothes, and kissed her on the cheek. He ruffled Cloudy's hair. 'See you later kiddo,' he said, and disappeared through a door in the hallway. There was the muted sound of an engine, a hum. In this house, even the car had its own bedroom.

Later Lora and Cloudy stood on the footpath contemplating the neighbours. Across the road was the empty block, more demoralized, less mysterious, in the daylight. To the left of Neil's house was a Georgian house with a For Sale sign in the front, clearly empty. On the right hand was a Federation style replica, painted in the appropriate colours of cream and green and maroon, two storey, with elaborate wooden verandahs running the whole length of the top and the bottom, dormer windows and gables and a sharp spike of green painted wood on the very top. The letterbox was an elaborate affair of curlicued maroon metal.

From their own stark square mailbox the local paper drooped, and Lora retrieved it. The front page was about the Historical Society's battle to hold onto an old cottage, threatened with demolition for yet another car park for the Megaplex shopping centre in the next suburb. She skimmed the story until she was startled by the bang of a door.

A woman had emerged from the Federation style house. 'Hello.' She was a little older perhaps than Lora, neatly dressed and made up, brown bobbed hair shining. 'I'm Ann-maree,' she said, coming closer so that she and Lora stood on either side of the fence. 'I saw you arriving.'

Lora smiled back. 'I'm Lora. And that's Cloudy. Yes. Moving. It's a killer.'

'How are you finding the house? It's very grand, isn't it?' The left corner of the thick lips twitched upwards. 'Very...new. We were one of the first in this estate, you know, there was nothing much here when we built. One of the pioneers!'

Lora studied the house behind her. 'Your house is the right style then.'

‘What? Oh yes,’ Ann-maree said. ‘We like the classic look.’ The woman glanced at Lora’s house and pursed her lips, then turned back with a bright smile. ‘You’ll have to come and have a visit, I’ll show you inside. When you’re settled, you know. You and your husband and little girl.’ A strand of hair lifted against the woman’s cheek and she tucked it back carefully.

Lora nodded, not bothering to correct her. It wouldn’t hurt, she thought, for people to think Neil was Cloudy’s father. Cloudy, moving through the various homes with people coming and going, and with a few erratic days at an inner city child care, had not asked many questions about this yet. Lora was not quite ready to slot Neil into this role, but the more people assumed, the fewer questions that anyone would ask, Cloudy included. Easier perhaps all around.

‘And do you have...a family?’ Lora asked in turn.

Ann-maree gave a short laugh, the meaning of which was not clear. ‘Oh yes. My husband Keith. And we have a daughter too. Older than yours. A teenager. Going through a phase. A very long phase. Ha. No doubt you’ll see her around.’ Her lips bunched and skewed to the left. She let go of the fence and dusted her hands, becoming brisk. ‘Anyway, I’ll let you get on.’ The lips twitched both sides and the woman turned and disappeared into the shadows of her own verandah.

‘Come on!’ Cloudy was bored with running up and down the steps, and grabbed at Lora’s hand. She skipped as they went down the path, jerking her mother’s arm down with each jump, but Lora did not complain. She was overwhelmed sometimes by the trust her daughter had in her, when Lora had no such faith in herself. But it was part of the job of parenthood, Lora knew, to don the façade of confidence. I know what I’m doing, the world is a safe and wonderful place, everything is alright. Smiling and striding confidently while inside thinking, I’m a crap parent, I’m going to stuff this up, the world is dangerous and full of things that will hurt you and there is so little I can do. Perhaps the advantage of being a child as the small circle of time they existed in, the immediacy of their lives. Cloudy was warm, comfortable, full of pancakes, her mother was close by. She was content.

The composition of the curved street was uneven. The houses interspersing the unfinished blocks were all different styles, pseudo-Georgian, mock-Tudor, modern-design. Some had For Sale signs. A particularly dark one with rows of long thin windows made Lora think of a prison. A chalet-

style had a steeply pitched roof to keep off non-existent snow, and edelweiss carved into its wooden trim. The styles of gardens were English cottage, Japanese, native, sometimes matching the house, sometimes not. It was as if the world and its flora had been sliced up and shuffled, and left to fall at random, with large gaps between. They walked along the clean white footpath to where a small bridge crossed the lake to the streets and houses on the other side. Cloudy stopped halfway to hang over the railing and watch the birds. Lora, noting the ducks on the lake through the glass window in the morning, had thought to bring breadcrusts. Cloudy broke it into smaller and smaller pieces as a moving patchwork quilt of seagulls and ducks and moorhens stitched itself together beneath them. The child was intent on each bird getting its fair share, an extra piece if it had a bent foot or other disability. 'Not you, greedy-guts,' she said, dispensing crumbs. 'Here, you can have this bit.'

Lora drew a deep breath. Cloudy would be happy here. She would have a proper house and everything she needed, and places to play. There was a new Kindergarten for her. Next year there would be school. Routine, familiarity, proceeding through life's official stages in an orderly fashion. As for Lora, she had made this decision and would make it work.

'Cloudy,' she said. The child didn't respond, her gaze fixed on the birds, but Lora did not want anything really, just the delight of saying her daughter's name. She never tired of it. The birth certificate said Claudia, which happened to be her great grandmother's name. But this was a rationalisation, Lora's nod to the formality of words typed on documents, or to appease rude enquiring strangers. In truth her daughter was Cloudy since she shot from her mother's body, surprising the midwife, slithering out onto the mat where Lora squatted. It was Lora who raised her up, sinking her fingers into the soft, dawn-red, white-streaked flesh. Her perfection was not about hard symmetry, but everything vaporous and malleable, and Lora had named her accordingly.

After the bread was finished the birds lost interest and sailed away. Cloudy ran across the bridge and Lora, as always, watched, followed. On the other side, another street curved away next to the lake, mirroring their own. There were fewer vacant blocks on this side, more finished houses, some quite established, with grown trees and worn driveways, and the houses stretched from here all the way to the suburb's shops and town centre.

Suddenly Cloudy looked up and said ‘Oh! We’re home.’

And for a second it seemed as if this was true. As if they had crossed the bridge, crossed the lake, and somehow ended up back where they had started. Lora’s spatial coordination was not very solid at the best of times, but she thought that even she could not be so disoriented. She was spun away from the sense of where she was located in the world, and actually stumbled back a step, two, to stop from falling. But she righted herself quickly. Because of course it was not their house, just identical in design: the same dark brown brick and red roof, the portico and balcony, the same curved turrets jutting out on either side, with their own roofs like pointed hats, the steps, the grand double front doors, the multiple arched windows.

Lora caught at Cloudy’s arm and pulled her back, a little harder than she intended. ‘No! No, that’s not our house.’

Cloudy was puzzled. ‘It looks like ours.’

‘Not exactly,’ Lora said, and it was true. The house on second glance was older, if not by much. Neil’s house was so new it hardly felt settled on its foundations. This house had a sort of patina, an aura of lives lived in it. But not lived now. The quiet around it suggested abandonment, not temporary absence. The lawn was mown short, but too short, with dead patches in it, down to dirt in some places, and there were weeds and headless stalks in the concrete-edged flower beds. Once someone had tended it, but now it gave the impression an uninterested person was given a few dollars to come once in a while and do a rough maintenance on the garden. The folds in the curtains hanging in the windows suggested that they would be edged in dust, dust that would drift about in the light from the windows if they were pulled open. There was a scribble of red on the side of the garage, graffiti of some sort.

A door slammed and a woman emerged from the house next door. Lora turned and automatically smiled a little. But her smile faded at the sight of the woman’s face. It was beautiful to the point of uncanniness, unnatural in its perfection. As if the idea of beauty had been deconstructed into pieces, set in plastic, and reassembled, and somehow the result didn’t quite match. The features were out of proportion – eyes large and eyelashes dark and visible even from this distance, lips oddly

bulbous and painted thick red, nose almost too small, a tiny stub. Her hair was at least six individual shades of gold, in streaks, and remained rigidly unmoving despite the breeze. The woman could have been twenty-five or fifty. The lips parted and from this expressionless face emerged a cold voice. 'They've gone. It's all over. There's nothing here now. Don't you have anything better to do?'

Lora drew back, and clutched Cloudy to her. 'We're new. I was just...' Lora faltered again. She had no real reason to be standing there in a strange street, staring at a strange house, she could not for a minute recall exactly how she had ended up here at all. The woman was a reproach to her in so many ways. Lora was immediately aware of her own mismatched clothes dragged from plastic bags this morning, the grey threads in her hair four weeks overdue for a cut, the morning light on the wrinkles around her eyes. 'Sorry,' she said, apologising for her presence, her appearance, her existence. She smiled against the woman's blank face. A monkey grin, bared teeth stretching her face to show she was not a threat. Don't hurt me. But there was nothing of the natural about this woman, who now folded her arms, and simply stared. Her fingernails were tipped in scarlet.

Lora nodded and turned and tugged Cloudy back along the street.

'Was that lady angry?' said Cloudy, staring back over her shoulder. 'We weren't doing anything.'

'Yes. No. I don't know,' Lora said, not looking back. 'Come on, let's go home.' She paused for a moment, in the middle of the bridge, while the multiple definitions of 'home' wavered around her.

Lora had spent her growing years bouncing between the flats where her father lived with his girlfriends, and the houses where her mother lived with her stepfather. The stepfather houses went up a size every two years, like Lora's shoes. One was so big that Lora became convinced the previous people were still there, moving quietly about in the empty rooms behind them. Why else would there be two kitchens, and more bathrooms than there were people? While her father's flats grew ever smaller, so that she tripped on the girlfriends' handbags and sent lipsticks clattering onto the hard wooden floors. She became an expert at packing. She learned to fold things so smoothly that they took up no room, to discard anything that wouldn't manage the journey, to fill corners, to push things down

hard, and lean her weight on the lid until it caught with a click. Each time she would pack away some version of herself. Her father liked her always smiling and cheerful, her stepfather wanted to know what she was staring at, her mother guided her with quiet nods and shakes of the head and desperate smiles behind the stepfather's back to show whether or not she was doing the right thing. Lora learned early that life was about adapting to other people's expectations, about donning the appropriate façade and adjusting it according to someone else's response.

The birds were gone, and Cloudy ran off down the bridge, not looking back. Shrugging off her mother's mistakes and failures, running home, confident of the word, confident, somehow, of the way.

Interstice

The boy walks along the streets. He is real enough, to himself, though the people won't see him. He can feel pain, and weariness. He can feel hunger. Loneliness. He longs for contact, the touch of a hand on his hand would do.

He tries to understand the people here. A man strides along towards him, dressed in a business suit and a shiny tie striped in blue, carrying a briefcase trimmed with silver. He is shouting and waving his free arm, his eyes are unfocused. The man yells words the boy does not understand. Restructure. Collateral. Logistics. Synergy. A thin wire connects the man's mouth to his ear. The boy flinches as the man barrels towards him down the path. He does not know what this man wants with him, what language he is speaking, what the urgency is about. But the man walks right through him, still talking, still waving.

A girl on the other side of the road drifts along, in a long black dress, with a thin dark veil over her face. She keeps her head down, and there is a movement under the veil, near her neck, a shift, a bulge.

In front of a large square house a very old woman with a scarf around her head hits a tree with a broom. It is a thin small tree, half grown, and it quivers as she flogs it. The leaves fall. The woman turns the broom around and sweeps the leaves into a pile, then goes back to hitting. A single golden leaf remains holding onto its black branch, no matter how hard she hits. The woman puts down the broom. She reaches up awkwardly to grab the leaf in twisted fingers and pull it towards her. The stubborn leaf holds on and the whole tree bends towards the woman. Then it lets go at last and she hurls it towards the pile, though it only floats slowly and drifts to one side. She turns and shuffles the leaves into a black plastic bag, and ties a knot in the top, hard, before tossing it next to a garbage bin.

There is no way for the boy to touch these people. He walks on. He smooths the stripped tree gently, as he passes. The branch does not give under the pressure of his finger, but he feels a little less lonely.

Concealed robe

Neil's house was insatiable in its capacity to swallow shiny new things. The boxes marked 'Kitchen' alone were endless. The square white dinner setting was for twelve people. The glassware, Lora placed as high as she could, out of Cloudy's reach. She was scarcely brave enough to close her own fingers around the wire-thin stems. Over the next few days the drawers and cupboards began to fill with pieces of equipment that she had never used before, a coffee bean grinder, to be kept separate from the spice grinder, devices to slice eggs precisely, a tall jug that plugged in to make milkshakes, another to squeeze juices, individual electric pans for crepes, waffles, toasted sandwiches, homemade pies, all lined up on one long shelf.

Lora unwrapped the tissue paper from a clear glass square bowl. The light caught in its corners and the bowl warmed in her hands. She was discovering that there was much sensuous pleasure to be had in setting up house. Unwrapping crates full of perfect objects, kneeling and fossicking amongst tissue paper, she became distracted, transported back to a childish ideal of Christmas. Except that none of it was really hers. Not the house, with Neil's name on the paperwork; not the small white car he had got for her 'to run around in' but which was registered, reasonably enough, in his name; not the new furnishings he had gathered with care over the years, or ordered specially, and had delivered here.

Lora's few possessions had been set out on the nature strip of the old house for anyone who wanted them. 'Not worth the cost of transporting,' as Neil had said. She regarded the clear bowl in her hands. Neil had a penchant for everything colourless and square-edged, starkly simple. Lora could not decide if he was either totally comfortable about his own style, or else so rigid in it he would not risk the slightest splash of colour or whimsy. She set down the bowl, which she had already smutched. The trouble with colourless and plain was that it was so unforgiving to mess. She rubbed at the marks with her sleeve, then gave up and went to see what Neil was doing.

Even after days here, Lora had still not been able to grasp the house as a whole. Despite the ruled lines on the brochure, it appeared so far to have no limits. With its multitude of rooms, its two

storeys plus substantial basement, it multiplied in all directions, in surprising ways, inwards as well as outwards. In the master bedroom, for instance, behind the shortened wall against which their bed stood, there was concealed a walk-in wardrobe, with hidden cupboards containing invisible drawers, in which Lora had nestled the box that held her most precious things, each in its own container. So that from one perspective the whole house was an elaborate series of chambers, encased inside each other, diminishing in size down to the tiny enamelled box that contained Cloudy's first lock of hair.

At the front were the two hexagonal rooms that gave the house its distinctive shape. The kitchen-dining-living area finished in a vast glass wall with sliding doors that opened to the terraced garden leading down to the lake. Between these, there were two other equally large rooms, but square, along with the downstairs 'guest' bathroom on one side, and another smaller but still good-sized room on the other. Double doors opened from room to room so the ground floor could be made into a series of wide open shapes. The staircase rose from the cavernous black and white marble-tiled entrance hall to a landing from which it branched out – four steps led up to the left, and four steps to the right, to the upstairs rooms.

Lora followed the sound of voices to the middle downstairs room, on the right, which Neil had designated the Sitting Room. Its actual purpose, when Lora had asked, was indeterminate. She instinctively pulled herself up on the threshold. The interior of the house was finished in a lot of black and white, but in this room the lack of colour was taken to an extreme. Everything was pristine. The room was carpeted in fine soft wool so white she could hardly let her foot come down on the floor. The walls were the colour of fresh snow, white with almost a hint of blue. A large rectangle of unframed mirror hung on a wall reflecting back the light filtering through a pure white blind muffling the window.

'What do you think?' Neil said. He was directing the movers to set down a long thin snowy leather couch and an almost invisible glass coffee table resting on the thinnest of silver metal legs.

'Not very child-friendly,' Lora said.

'Well, it's not a family room. Cloudy won't need to come in here.' Neil regarded the arrangement with satisfaction. Lora did not like the idea of Cloudy being banned from rooms in her

own home. But she also could not imagine either Cloudy or herself taking pleasure amongst this whiteness. A couch not designed to be sat on, in a room not meant to be used. Stripped of its meaning as a piece of furniture, the construction of dead pale wood and bleached animal skin seemed sinister. ‘Very nice,’ Lora said, but backed out, forgetting what she had come to say, and closed the door behind her.

Boxes emptied, and were collapsed and stacked one after the other in the back shed. Slowly Lora began to be able to reach for what they needed without having to stop and consider, or to fossick wearily in the wrong container.

Though new, not everything in the house was perfect. The sliding doors to the balcony often stuck. Water kept pooling in the bottom of the spa, and the sound of that whispering trickle started and stopped for no obvious reason. Neil was annoyed at each incidence of imperfection, though none of the issues were major, and he said it was all covered by the builder’s guarantee. Lora simply shrugged. To her, stubborn doors and plumbing problems were as familiar as windows and walls. If anything she welcomed them, these imperfections made the house a little less daunting.

Lora took a break from the dusty smell of cardboard and the feel of packing paper under her fingers, and walked out the back and down the terraced garden. She regarded the house across the lake, the one she now recognised as identical to Neil’s. From the back it was the same too. It bothered her a little that she hadn’t noticed it before. That all this time she had been moving back and forth past her own windows and wide-flung glass doors, and up and down the garden, she had simply had not seen this replica right in front of her. The similarity of course was not so striking from the back – many of the houses across the lake had broad glass walls to make the most of the lake views, some of them had red tiled roofs. And Lora had not really had time to register how the rear of Neil’s house might look from a distance, and they had been so busy. Still, now she knew, she could see how the roof formed exactly the same shape, how the glass wall, though muffled by colourless curtains, was the same dimensions, and the garden differed only in level of neglect.

She jumped as Neil arrived from nowhere and put his arm around her. 'Not too shabby, eh? How do you feel, now that we're in?'

On this still, bright day, both houses sent their reflections across the surface of the water, as if reaching to touch, roof to roof. A duck splashed down to land on the water, adjusted its wings and sailed through the middle of the reflections, distorting if not erasing them. Lora remembered her last house with the train rattling past the lounge room window. Or the flat, whose only window looked straight into the neighbouring apartment block so that she kept the thin curtains always closed, making sure to match them edge to edge, feeling the threat of the gaze of the strangers next door.

A jumble of responses jostled. 'Safe,' was the word that popped out, partly to her own surprise. Neil smiled and put his arm around her.

Lora contemplated the word. Safe. A heavy door swinging shut, a silver dial spinning, a hidden code.

Home theatre

The last of the rooms to be arranged was the semi-basement area that ran behind the thirteen steps, and Neil devoted the weekend to its organisation. It was to contain the brand new television, the stacks of tall speakers, the specially bought chairs, the music system. Fragile equipment arrived in giant boxes big enough to make play houses for Cloudy.

Lora took a step back from the screen that took up most of the end wall. 'I've lived in flats smaller than that,' she said. She recalled the battered old television that travelled around with her for ten years. It was still working when it had been shipped off to the local Op Shop with the rest of her leftover possessions.

'It will be just like a movie theatre,' Neil said. 'But we won't need to go out. Don't let Cloudy touch anything in this room.' He was frowning at a black wire knot, and eased it apart, entering a last frenzy of connecting cables and plugging plastic divots into waiting sockets. He positioned a speaker geometrically and placed two of the specially-ordered chairs in the centre of the room. 'We'll set these up properly once this is organised,' he said. 'Can you dim the lights?' Lora wandered over to the wall and peered at a complex system of metal buttons until he huffed and strode over and turned a dial. 'There,' he said, and the lights dulled. He pressed a button on the remote.

Lora drew back at the impact of it. A picture burst onto the screen – two people exactly life sized. They were shouting at each other, in some sort of argument. The voices boomed from the speakers and Neil pointed the remote to lower the sound. They screamed on. The faces, Lora thought, looked familiar, but she could not place them. Neil pointed and jabbed at the screen with the remote but nothing happened. He shook it and stared at it again. On the screen the woman was crying. The man raised his hand, and Lora could not turn her eyes away. Neil strode over to turn the controls on the machine itself. The sound, if anything, was louder, and the channel would not change, nor could Neil turn it off. The man lifted his hand and slapped the woman's face and Lora flinched. Finally Neil strode to the wall and wrenched the power cord out of the wall, and the image at last faded, and the voices were silenced. 'Piece of junk,' he said, tossing the remote down onto the table. 'Useless bloody

salesman.’ He reached for the phone and began speaking, a particular voice he used that was not loud or fierce but produced the effect in the listener, Lora knew, of being dripped on by large drops of icewater.

Cloudy ran in. ‘Oh, what’s that?’ she said, reaching a hand to one of the speakers.

‘Don’t touch it!’ said Lora.

Lora stared at the screen, now black and showing only the movement of their own shadowy reflections. Appliances are nothing but circuitry and plastic and glass, she thought. Televisions are conduits, not oracles.

‘Let’s make lunch,’ she said, guiding her child away from the room.

The last load finally arrived, and was disgorged, and the last van disappeared away down the curving roads. Lora stretched and cracked her back in the entrance hall. The movement caught the mirror in the marble and iron hall-stand beyond the staircase and she set her hands on her hips and examined herself. An image of a person framed against the heavy double doors, set down on the black and white tiles. Well, she thought, I guess I’m in. Drawn into the picture.

A soft tapping sound came from outside. When she opened the front doors, beyond the white columns, rain had begun to fall. The faint lights of the city blurred together in the distance beyond the dark paddocks. Overlooked at the top of the steps, a last box was patterned with tiny drops.

Lora had a moment’s reluctance to go back inside, a sudden feeling that despite all the hanging of clothes and placing of furniture, the house was only a repository for their possessions. They had made no human impact on it at all. But a thin wind accompanied the rain, and there was nothing out there for her. She set the box inside, pushed closed the heavy doors, and the lock clicked home.

Span

The dark has walls but none of them join, there is nothing to hold him in. Only the cold concrete under his back stops him from falling further and something wet and sticky laps at his outstretched right hand. The noise goes thump thump thump but it is no longer his heart, not any more, not any more, not any more. Too late for all that.

The boy wakes.

A bird makes a sad cry, a single note, over and over. He wonders if birds have nightmares. He thinks they would. Dreams of broken wings, dreams of teeth.

The night is folding itself away, the day is creeping out from under it. He sits up. This shelter has the shape of a small house, but there are no walls and the wind whistles through, it has a roof but the floor is cold concrete.

He doesn't mind the wind, or the cold, he is used to those. But this is a place where people will come in the daylight, and the daylight places are not where he is meant to be.

If they see him in this house of sticks they might name him a pig or boil him in a pot as a wolf. He feels sorry for the wolf, too. Let me in. Please let me in.

There is a playground, and a swing made from a tyre held by chains. He sits on it, though there are no firm hands at his back to make it move, not for a long time. There are no children here yet, but he can hear their voices from other times, from when they have been here before or will be here later.

After a while, the swing begins to move a little, then a little more.

Higher, higher.

Stop.

Recreation room

On the weekend Lora and Neil took Cloudy to the promised park. They drove there along streets with such even curves and flat plains and identical streetscapes that Lora became mesmerised and gave up trying to remember the way. She made a mental note to buy a street directory, knowing she would be constantly lost in these labyrinths. The lake in theory should have provided her with a fixed point, but it was mostly hidden behind houses, and when she did get a glimpse of it through an empty block or at the end of a street, it was never where she expected it to be.

The park was on the other edge of the suburb, to the west, and had its own lake, more ornamental and artificial than the one behind Neil's house. This lake was smallish, perfectly circular, rimmed with a concrete track that people were walking and jogging around. The rest of the park was equally manicured, though as they walked along a path to the playground Neil clicked his tongue in disgust. 'Look at that. You come to these places to get away from that sort of thing. Someone should ring the Council.' He nodded at a collection of old rags and pieces of cardboard, tucked in the open space under one of the rotundas dotted around the formal gardens. To Lora the bundle looked like a nest, a mound made by some large bird collecting oddments and piling them together with the scrape of beak and clawed foot. It would be cold, she thought, the pitiful assortment did not seem enough to sustain a human body through the night. 'Yes. Though you'd hope someone would help the person, not just, you know, throw it all away and move them on.'

Neil shrugged. 'There's services for that sort of thing.'

They walked on and arrived at an elaborate playground of wooden towers and bridges and tunnels, in the form of a castle. Each slat of the fence around the playground had the name of a local business or family who had donated money towards it, etched in the wood. Cloudy disappeared into the playground and lost herself amongst the chains and posts and piled tyres, the smooth new plastic. Lora and Neil sat at a table next to the playground. Lora set up their picnic, keeping an eye on Cloudy, glancing up and checking for the bright yellow flash of woollen jumper which signalled her child's

place. Neil poured coffee from a thermos, the rich scent undercut by the smell of tanbark and moist soil, giving the brew a not-unpleasant, earthier edge. He handed her a cup. 'How's work?' Lora said.

Neil bent his head down and breathed on the plastic coffee mug, then touched a finger to its surface. He raised the finger and examined a small black speck on it, coffee ground or insect. Lora remained silent and finally he said, 'It's not quite what I was expecting. The people are alright. Some of the managers seem a bit, I don't know, paranoid. Defensive.'

Lora knew people thought Neil bossy. He often got people off-side. But to Lora it wasn't so much that he enjoyed pushing people around. It was more that he had supreme confidence in his own judgement and way of doing things. He was genuinely saddened and puzzled when people didn't see things the way he did.

Lora put her arm around him. 'Maybe you're a bit of threat to them. The outsider and all that. Maybe you should, you know, go a little easy at first.'

Neil turned his face in profile. 'Well, they hired me to do a job,' he said. 'So I'm going to do it.' He flicked the speck away with his thumbnail. 'Anyway, what about you, how are you finding things?'

Lora scanned the playground, saw the flash of yellow through the spaces in the wood. 'I'm still getting used to it. It happened so fast. It doesn't feel quite real.'

'But it's better than where you were, surely?' Neil tossed the remnants of his coffee onto the ground and turned to look at her.

Neil had seen the sharehouse. Lora knew he liked the idea of plucking them from squalor, setting things to rights. Neither foolish nor uneducated, Lora had studied history and feminism and analysed fairytales in literature, and knew about positions of power and dependence. But she had also been poor long enough to know first-hand how wearying it was to live surrounded by ugliness.

She stared into her own cup. 'Of course, oh yes, the house is lovely. And Cloudy is happy. It's just, it takes a little time.' She followed the flash of yellow to the top of the wooden tower. 'I'm thinking I should start getting some more work. Editing that family history was good, there could be a

line of work there. People do the research but aren't writers. I can make it into a story, organise printing, that sort of thing. Could be a business in it.'

'Ghost writing,' Neil said.

Lora smiled. 'I suppose you could call it that.' The flash of yellow emerged at the top of the tower, and Lora saw that it was a yellow shirt on a boy, older than Cloudy. She stood up abruptly. She had been watching the wrong child, all this time.

'What?' said Neil.

'Cloudy – I haven't seen her... I thought...' She turned from one piece of equipment to the other, checking each.

'Oh relax, she's in a playground somewhere, how far do you think she could have gone? Look at all these other parents, they're not even watching. You are over-vigilant, Lora, it's not good for children, they say, these days.' Neil leaned back, as if emphasising his refusal to worry.

Lora thought of the cardboard bed, the nest. An image lurched into her mind of a grizzled wino, a pervert, someone deranged. She started forward. Neil sighed and stood, and from his superior height said: 'Look.' And there was Cloudy, crouched down in the far corner of the playground, not running about but intent on something close to the ground, perhaps some bug or stone.

Lora relaxed, the adrenaline retreated from her system leaving her feeling foolish. Ashamed, too. How quickly, how conventionally, her fear instantly turned against the outcast. Homelessness implies a lack, but the lack of a base is also an ability to disappear, to not be registered and counted in the public eye. A genie set free of its bottle. Her rational mind knew that a pedophile was far more likely to be someone with a respectable outward appearance, with a home and a computer and an Internet connection and a bland disguise. But the prejudice remained, only just under the surface, against those who did not have a place in the world, who could not be tracked to an address. Even she succumbed, she who had been a step away from homelessness herself.

She busied herself setting out salad and dips and crackers, sandwiches of soft white bread, apple muffins they had made earlier. Neil caught Cloudy's eye and beckoned, his whole arm curling. She abandoned her play and ran up. 'I'm starving,' she said.

‘Wait. Don’t touch anything with those hands, Cloudy,’ Neil said. ‘They’re filthy.’ He took a paper napkin and wet it with some water. ‘Here. Give them to me. What on earth have you been doing?’

‘Drawing,’ said Cloudy, submitting to Neil’s scrubbing. ‘Come and see.’

‘After lunch.’ Neil said. ‘All clean?’

Cloudy held her hands up to him and he took one and shook it. ‘Nice to meet you.’ Cloudy giggled and Lora smiled at the two of them. An ordinary moment of affection. That’s what they needed, lots of these tiny moments to build a life. A process that could not be rushed.

Neil set the napkins aside. ‘Now. Let’s eat. This looks great.’

As they packed up Lora tossed the napkins, stained rust-red, into the bin. She paused. ‘What were you drawing with, Cloudy?’

She shrugged. ‘Some chalk. I found it on the ground. Little bits.’

Lora went over to see, and there were Cloudy’s round-bodied people, sprouting straight, electrocuted hair, lined up in red chalk. Four of them, a family, each on its own piece of wood, a mother and a father, a girl child and a boy.

Bearer

Light and movement to the west catch the boy's attention. It is the freeway, busy holding up its burden of moving cars. He walks away from the shops and houses towards it, on the side of the road. The houses diminish in size and number and finally leave empty paddocks. It is comforting that he can shed the houses in this way. If he looks in the right direction there might be no houses at all.

Under the place where the freeway leaves the earth to fly over the road, a long concrete slope connects the two, the freeway above, the road below. The slope is set with rough stones, and the boy can scramble up easily enough on all fours. At the top is a space, a long box, five sides made from concrete, one long side open to the air. The top holds the freeway, the sides are cradled into the earth bank, the bottom marks the beginning of the slope he has climbed. He creeps in and lies down. It is the precise size of the boy, as if it has been created for him. He unfolds his cardboard and sets it on the concrete. The cardboard gives the illusion of something he can sink into, just a little, and his jacket over him gives the illusion of warmth. It is enough. Too much comfort makes him afraid. He lies down flat, in his box in the earth.

He presses his thumb into his palm and the pain turns the red flesh white. He remembers a picture of sisters named red and white, but can't recall their story. He lifts his thumb away from his throbbing mottled paw and slumbers in his cave.

Playroom

Monday, Cloudy was going to her new Kindergarten. In their impermanent life she hadn't had the chance before, and she danced around in such excitement that Lora felt another round of guilt. But Falconara Lakes was equipped with a new state-of-the-art Preschool Centre, and the lack was about to be rectified.

Lora tidied her makeup away. Putting on her face, was the expression, and she tried every day to do this. But she had never quite got the hang of it. She aimed for a bland, neutral look, but somewhere there was always a whisper in the back of her mind – you're not fooling anyone. Who do you think you are? A reasonable question, not one to which she ever had an easy answer. She pressed her lips together, and tried a small smile in the mirror. A respectable suburban mother. She would pass. 'Come on,' she called to Cloudy. 'We need to get you to Kindy.' Cloudy ran in, excited, grubby from play, a smear of dirt on her face, the sleeve of her cardigan dripping wet.

Lora shook her head. 'Well, we can't take you like that.' She took off the damp garment. In the small bathroom on the ground floor Lora scrubbed Cloudy's face with the handtowel and ran both their hands under the tap. Four hands, doubled to eight by the mirror, flicked over the basin, and water drops flew from them to land randomly on glass and metal and tile.

The house took some time to leave. Lora's other homes had hardly been worth locking, or else someone had always been there, or in the case of the flat had locked with a single hard scraping pull of the front door. In this house there were side doors and sliding doors and window locks and she went around pulling and jiggling until she was sure the house was as secure as she could make it.

Lora felt a moment of claustrophobia in the garage. It was a tight airless box, and she had no reason yet to be confident the rollerdoor would lift, or that if she changed her mind, her key would open the door to house behind her. But Cloudy was unperturbed, taking the keys from Lora's hand. 'Which button, Mummy? I'll do it.'

Lora showed her how to press the key to unlock the car door, then the small black square device that opened the garage. And indeed everything beeped and hummed and purred as it was meant to,

and they were released into the open. In her rear vision mirror the bare paddocks were visible beyond the empty block across the road, a framed glimpse into the past, a picture of the way the land would have been before the suburb was built. She backed out, conscious of the shiny new paintwork of the car and the narrow margins of the garage door.

By studying the map and concentrating on the names of the streets, ignoring any instinct of which way should be right, she found her way to the municipal centre where the Kindergarten was housed. It was part of a safe, bland building which provided integrated services for the children of the Lakes – maternal and child health, child care, pre-school. The rooms were neutral and clean, the playground equipment was shiny primary coloured plastic, rooted securely in fresh tan-bark, unfaded, still dark brown-red. The garden beds were set with small, non-prickly plants at regular intervals allowing room to grow. All edges were rounded, no water was more than regulation thumb-deep.

Lora pulled up in the carpark and trailed behind Cloudy, making a fuss about locking the doors and walking with slow steps to the high child-proof gate. Procrastinating. She was formally handing Cloudy over to something larger and more impersonal than herself, sending her out into the official world. She couldn't shake the idea that once she passed Cloudy through the door, she would get back a different child.

Other mothers – no fathers – came and went. They all had that blow-waved look Lora was beginning to recognise and they all looked younger than Lora. Despite the morning's efforts, she felt them glancing at her, assessing her as frumpy.

Cloudy was rattling the gate. 'Come on, Mummy,' she said. 'We'll be late.'

'Let me open it,' Lora said, flicking the lock at the top so that Cloudy could pass through

She was expecting the Kinder teacher to be as new and shiny as the equipment, someone fresh out of teacher training, perhaps blushing a little as she talked to the parents. But in fact this woman was older, with grey hair standing out in a frizz around her head, her face lined and free of makeup, small black eyes. She was dressed in black, but with a shawl of rainbow colours around her shoulders and semi-precious rings on each finger. She set a hand on Cloudy's head. 'Cloudy. A soft name. Lovely,' she said. 'You can draw a cloud on your pictures to show they are yours. Until we learn how

to write our names.’ She drew the child away, and smiled and gestured at Lora. It was like a benediction, a dismissal, and almost before she knew it Lora was outside the security door. She was a bit taken aback, she had thought there might be more to it, an orientation, a window she could watch through. Perhaps this woman was used to more traditional models, or perhaps just wiser at separating overprotective mothers. Cloudy, in any case, had eyes only for her new teacher. She did not glance back.

As Lora clanged the gate behind her she felt an echoing pang. Cloudy was the one small being who needed Lora only to be herself. Who did not care how she looked or what she said. Whose simple selfish needs were easily met. The only person Lora could love without qualification and subclause. She had always been overly protective of her child, she knew it. Not rational. Not healthy.

Before Cloudy there had been one other pregnancy, a miscarriage when Lora was younger. Scarcely formed in its few weeks inside her, everyone told her it was never even a child at all, not really. A tiny gathering of formed cells, a pinpoint heart contracting by electrical reflex. Gone almost as soon as she knew it was there. But occasionally she dreamed of it, a form with no features, of shifting age, sad and accusing. It had left a gap that lingered years later until, her body starting to age and slow, Lora decided to fill it while she still could.

Cloudy had been conceived when Lora was on holiday. On a whim, she had decided to try hang-gliding. She was strapped tight to an instructor with a chubby baby-face who was touchingly grateful when Lora came back to his house and his bed. Lora lay on her stomach with her face buried in a soft white pillow, and he entered her from behind, and she imagined that they were still up there, suspended in the air, joined like birds, and thus Cloudy was brought to being. Lora never felt any need to contact the man again, had banished even his name by force of will. She liked to think Cloudy was produced at that moment her feet left the edge of the cliff, that she sprang into her womb a product of her freedom from the earth.

There was the slam of a car door. Another mother had pulled up in the Kinder carpark and was eyeing Lora with an uncertain half-smile. Lora realised she was standing stock still with her keys in

her hand. She should do something useful to fill in the time. She checked her watch and with an exaggerated show of efficiency bustled into her car.

Vanity

The one place that was always easy to find was Falconara Plaza. All roads ultimately led to this medium-sized centre, a single storey collection of shops clustered around a supermarket, with a lace-edge of carparks all around. Inside, the roof was hung with giant scarlet plastic leaves, some indication of autumn, even though the trees in this area were mostly new and thin, or else natives which did not shed, which would certainly never grow these oversized maple shapes. Everything was primary coloured and lit with that particular white hazy glow of massed fluorescence.

Lora joined the midday crowd of people, mostly mothers with prams, and felt the new identity that she would need to create begin to wrap itself around her, and the familiar, slightly suffocating feeling slowed the movement of her feet. She had an belief, not reducible to words, that sometime, when she was settled, when conditions were right, the tiny kernel of her real self, the Lora so long muffled under other people's ideas of how she should be, would flourish at last. Though as the layers accumulated, this ideal self became blurrier, more insubstantial, more distant.

The shops were lined up in rows: a supermarket, a bread shop, a prominent Tattsлото outlet, a Delish Us Donut shop, a gift shop stuffed with ribboned teddy bears and epigrams in cursive script framed in pastel colours. Cheap 'n Cheerful Children's clothes, a discount chemist. A Dollar Less Shop was hung with luridly coloured floral leis and filled with small plastic or plaster images of real and imaginary objects – flowers, dragons, fairies, buckets, wishing wells. Tucked in a corner was a Chinese café, with a bain mairie out the front full of glazed shiny food, and soothingly dim lighting in its crimson interior. There was a while-you-wait hairdresser, The Hair Apparent. Lora twitched an end of hair up and examined it, checked her watch again and ducked in.

A neat older woman was sweeping grey curls into a pile on the floor. She smiled brightly at Lora's request. 'Yes, I can fit you in, of course. Come on in love, take a seat in the chair, I'll just be a tick.' She finished sweeping, washed her hands, made an entry in a book on the counter.

Lora twirled a little in the swivelling black chair. The fluorescent lights threw harsh shadows over her face, emphasising the folds at the side of her mouth, the creases between her brows.

The hairdresser stood behind her and placed her hands gently on either side of Lora's head. 'I'm Beverley,' she said. 'What are you after today?'

'Just a trim. And I want to change the colour. Red.' Lora tried to state it with confidence.

Beverley considered the issue seriously. 'Yes, I think you could carry red. Not everyone can, you know. But if we make it more of auburn, chestnut type colour. Let me show you.' She took up a folder of tiny swatches of hair, a trophy book of fairy scalps, and opened it to a double page spread. 'How about this one? Or this?'

Tentatively, Lora pointed to one of the swatches, a colour that didn't look too drastic.

'Done.' Beverley noted the number and flung a black plastic cape around Lora's shoulders, fixing it with a clip. 'Now you have a relax while I whip up the colour.'

Lora stared at herself in the mirror. She saw the lines of her ancestors showing through under the skin, her father's mouth, her grandmother's nose. It struck her as a bizarre thing, suddenly, that these features should be handed down, that evolution had put its accumulated energy into a gene for cheekbones, a gene for eyebrows, for ear lobes. For the way the hair fell on the forehead. Redundant now, anyway, with enough money you could change them. Imagine, she thought, a man thinks he has found the perfect image for his wife, but then his children are all born with enormous noses and jug ears and cellulite. And they would have to do surgery on them. Liposuction as the new heritage.

Something cold plopped onto Lora's head and she jumped.

'Sorry love, miles away were you?' Beverly had a bowl filled with a thick dark substance and began stroking it with a brush onto Lora's head. 'So how'd you hear about me darl? One of my regulars word you up?'

'No, I'm new here. I saw your ad.' A trickle of thick deep crimson ran down the side of Lora's face. She took her hand from under the plastic and wiped at it with the towel.

Dab dab went the brush. 'Oh that's good, you pay for these things and you wonder whether they're worth it. So where've you moved to?'

'Constance Way. On the Lake.'

‘That’s nice, I had a client right there on the lake. Biggest house in the estate, it was, at the time, one of the first, had everything. Nice enough lady. Though, you know, the edgy type. Burst into tears, right in the chair, right there where you are, one day. Funny how often that happens.’ The brush applying ice cold goo to the back of Lora’s neck slowed. ‘Not that you could blame her. Unhappy. Between you and me, the husband was one of those jealous types. Couldn’t stand even the thought of another man. If she even mentioned an old boyfriend he’d go off.’ Beverley shook her head.

Lora made a mental note never to divulge anything personal. She didn’t want to become a Beverley story for the next client. But the dabbing had stopped, and the hairdresser’s face in the mirror grew still. ‘Terrible thing that happened. Terrible.’ She twirled the brush in the bowl. ‘Actually, that’s probably what made me think of it – this colour.’ The door opened and an elderly lady came in. Beverley called to her over her shoulder. ‘Hello Doris, right on time, come and sit down.’ She gave Lora a final dab. ‘There, you’re all done. We’ll just let you cook for a while, then I’ll be back.’

Lora sat looking into the mirror. Her hair was plastered to her head, and her face had nowhere to hide. And though she might have her grandmother’s nose and cheekbones, she recognised the uncertain, anxious look of her mother, and wondered at the way expressions could be passed down too.

Beverley came back later to rinse the muck off, then attacked her with the dryer, yanking and pulling at Lora’s head until her eyes teared. ‘What happened?’ Lora said, over the high whine of the dryer. ‘To the woman, the one you were talking about. The unhappy one?’

‘Oh, she...died. Sad. But there,’ Beverley said. ‘Now hasn’t that given you a lift?’

The colour had come out brighter than Lora expected, garish and unnatural. Fluffed and dried and shining chestnut, it looked unrelated to her, like a wig set on top of her anxious face. But the face in the mirror smiled politely and the mouth said ‘Lovely. Thank you’.

Lora escaped, fluffing at the hair with her hand as she headed for the main exit. Someone was standing on the other side, a shadowy shape, but the automatic doors were refusing to open. He stepped back, and forward, but they remained sealed. He hung his head and turned away, head down.

Lora felt a pang of sympathy. She knew the feeling, when even the most basic laws of physics seem to work against you, when the simplest activity becomes part of the fight to make an impact on the world. Though for her, this time, the doors hummed open when she approached them.

Cloudy was a bit disconcerted by Lora's new look.

'You're different!' Cloudy had always liked Lora to remain Lora. Even when very small, she never liked her mother playing at being someone else, or dressing up, or putting on disguises, or even funny voices. Other people could, and Cloudy herself engaged in all the usual child play-acting. But she did not like Lora to. 'No, you're just Mummy,' she would say, pulling off any mask.

Lora realised belatedly it might have been a mistake to do this on today, of all days. She put Cloudy's bag over her shoulder and picked her up. The child was getting big, and Lora felt an awareness that soon she would not be doing this anymore. There would come a time when she would no longer swing a child onto her hip, instinctively counterbalancing the weight with a tilt of her body. She kissed the side of Cloudy's head. 'You'll soon get used to it,' she said.

Neil, however, when he came home later to find them in the garden, instantly approved. 'Wow,' he said. 'You look great. Didn't recognise you.'

Lora laughed. 'Hang on a minute. That's a bit of backhanded compliment,' she said. She stood and brushed dirt from her hands.

'Sorry. I mean, from the back. When I walked in I wondered who that was in the garden. I've always loved a red-head,' he added. He stroked the red helmet.

Lora hugged him, dirty hands bent back at the wrist so she didn't muddy his suit. 'I think you should shut up before you get yourself into more trouble.' She was not comfortable with all this talk about it. 'We've started the vegie patch down here,' she said. 'Come and see.'

Lora had always managed to have a little garden, wherever she moved. Even if just herbs and lettuces in pots. There wasn't much she could plant now, but she had turned the soil and set a row of fragile pink and green beetroot plants, and little lettuces and some snow peas, and was hoping for the best.

Later, as she came up the terraces towards the back door, she understood what Neil had meant. The sun was setting behind her, filtering through the gaps in the houses across the lake, and their own ground floor was in darkness. So that, dreamy as always, thinking of other things, she meandered up to the back glass doors, and when she glanced up was momentarily startled by the red-haired woman walking towards her from inside the house.

Study

After Kinder the next day, when Cloudy was resting with a video, Lora decided she could no longer put off facing her work. She had been aware of a backlog of emails and messages piling up, like a distant electrical storm. It was time to get it sorted.

History had become a commodity she dealt in, selected acceptable facts arranged in neat square paragraphs, for cheaply bound books and reports that could be set on a shelf next to the Annual Report, and in their turn forgotten. Since Cloudy was born she had done only bits and pieces of freelance work. The history of a local school, a welfare agency who said straight up they ‘couldn’t pay much.’

Lora had chosen one of the small spare rooms upstairs, at the back, to be her study. It felt grand, and professional, to claim such a room all for herself. She was used to doing her work on whatever flat, or flat-ish surface was available, most often a space on a kitchen table cleared of mess by a sweep of her forearm. Here she could arrange a proper desk. Her computer was connected, her files in her sturdy lever-arch folders were set in a row on bookshelves the right height. As she lined up her pens in her drawer she knew she was beginning to cross the line between organising and procrastinating.

It occurred to her that when Cloudy started school next year, she could get a real job. A normal job, with annoying staff meetings and a photocopier that always broke down, and a Christmas party, and people making jokes when she arrived late and flustered in the morning. Things that she had found tiresome in the old days, but now somehow missed. A routine, a place in the world, a regular income. An identity outside of this home, a single-line response to the inevitable question of ‘what do you do?’

Definitely procrastinating now, she began searching for what sort of work might be around. It didn’t need to be much. Part time. Archiving, again perhaps, even admin to start with, in the right place, say a museum. She wondered suddenly whether she was too old to think about working her way up. If a career was another thing she had let pass by. She had spent so long waiting for things to

fall into place, to get organised, then she would begin life properly, that it was halfway over and she had still made no real purchase on it. Cloudy's existence was the sole achievement of her life, and she knew full well this was too much weight for the child to carry. Suddenly depressed, she gazed through the window, straight at the house across the lake.

She remembered that first day, and pondered the words of the strange woman. On an impulse, she turned back to the computer and searched its address, just in case, not really expecting anything.

Staring at the message that appeared on the screen Lora reflected that the world of the Internet had done away with the realm of blissful ignorance. Once, knowledge was hard-earned, considered and debated and cherished. Now, the pause between knowing and not-knowing was reduced to a flash of binary code, ones and zeros. There was no time to ask whether information would do you any good, whether or not you would prefer to turn your thoughts away. There was no seeking out, no stretch of time between a question and an answer. Everything everyone knew about anything flashed in your face in moments, with the movement of a single forefinger the merest millimetre.

Click, and Lora read the basic details.

Double deaths in Falconara Lakes. The woman, drowned in the luxuriously appointed spa in the ensuite. An inconclusive bruise on her head. The man broke his neck jumping or falling from the balcony. Suspected murder-suicide but no notes, no obvious motives, no proof. The man's family put an argument the woman had died accidentally and he had been overcome with grief and taken his own life. The woman's family argued that he was a murderer who had had an accident trying to get away with it. The coroner's finding was open.

The case had been in the news. Lora remembered a little about it, now, though of course it wasn't such big news interstate. But perhaps some detail of it was filed away in her memory. No wonder it looked familiar. They say that everything we see or experience is laid down in our brains somewhere, she thought. She turned back to the computer, but there was not much detail. The incident had happened just long enough ago that information was sketchy. The days when not every aspect of life, or death, was recorded and transmitted. There were no uploaded videos of bodies being taken away, no snaffled mortuary pictures or police reports. The woman's name was Catherine. A pleasant,

ordinary name. The man was Max. There was a blurry photo of the couple, reproduced from a time when they were happy. The man big and meaty, fair hair beginning to bald. The woman medium height, body soft and rounded, hair pulled back under a floppy hat, pale face. Loose summer clothes, arms around each other, grinning, not a care in the world.

There were bits of information in local and metropolitan newspapers, theories stated as fact from the purveyors of the ghoulish. But the story itself remained elusive. The story in the sense Lora wanted, the how, the why. There were hints of infidelities, money problems, sexual adventurousness. There were denials of all of these things. The more she read the less she could get hold of them. Abusive husband, devoted wife and mother, philandering swingers, pillar of the community, salt of the earth, happy couple, quiet family, cuckolded man, abused woman, despairing spouse. Big as it was, the house across the lake was scarcely large enough to encompass all these people who were supposed to have inhabited it for that short time.

Lora had only to turn her head to the right, to stare at it through the window. There was no way back to the truth of it now. She knew enough of history not to trust only that which was written down afterwards. And even the two people involved, had they been able to tell, would have their own conflicting version of events. What was right, what was fair, what was cruel, what was deserved. Who was provoked, who was to be pitied.

The woman and man were dead. The house was the only witness, and it was saying nothing. Lora stood up, the better to stare at it. It had been called up from someone's idea of the ideal home, a creation fantastic and extravagant. But it had become animosity made solid, a façade created from sums on a spreadsheet that were borrowed and re-borrowed and would never be repaid.

She turned back to the computer, unable to resist trying to find out more. It was the impulse that drew people to stare at a car crash, but so much easier in this age, and with no one to see and judge you for your curiosity.

Her fingers tapped and took her deeper and deeper through the cross-references. Psychological profiles of wife-killers, domestic violence statistics, the distance to fall at which a neck would break, things she did not really want to know. But the lit screen drew her head closer and the intricate web of

knowledge pulled her in, and there was always one more link that perhaps might explain it, and there was no reason to stop. A hand fell heavy on her shoulder, a physical shock shot through her body, she lurched back, the office chair spun and jarred against the desk.

‘Hey, didn’t you hear me?’ Neil took his hand from her shoulder and peered at the screen.

‘What kind of site is that? What if Cloudy saw it?’

‘Cloudy...what is she up to?’ Lora was blinking, feeling herself expand from a set of staring eyes and tapping fingertips back into her body, away from the electronic world into real time and space.

‘Don’t you know? She’s just playing in her room.’ Neil thumped the Esc key on the keyboard.

‘What’s wrong with you Lora?’

She moved away from the computer desk to the middle of the room. ‘Did you know about the house. Across the lake. The...the deaths?’ Neil sat in her vacated chair and clicked to the online newspapers, checking headlines and stock results. ‘Oh. That. I’d heard about it, I guess. Someone mentioned it at work. It was kind of notorious I think, for a while.’

‘Why didn’t you say anything? Doesn’t it bother you?’ Lora addressed the back of his shirt.

Neil was scrolling down a list of figures. ‘I can’t see how it’s relevant, to be honest. It’s nothing to do with us. A random house in the suburb. Five or six years ago wasn’t it?’ He closed down the website and turned to her, frowning as if irritated, or perplexed. ‘Really, what’s the issue?’

‘Well. It’s not quite random. It’s...’ Lora gestured to the window.

Neil just shrugged again, and shook his head. ‘Anyway,’ he said. ‘Given that you’ve been pondering murder instead of dinner, how about we go out? Or I’ll get fish ‘n chips, and to hell with low carb diets, what do you say? You like a pickled onion don’t you? I can’t stand them myself. Make me sneeze.’

Lora smiled, uncertain. Neil got up and left the room but Lora went to the window to stare at the house across the lake. It stood there, blank and unlit and empty. A random house, Neil said.

‘Cloudy,’ she heard him call. ‘How about fish ‘n chips for dinner?’

‘Yay. Can I come to the chip shop?’ A scrabble of feet on floorboards, a television silenced.

‘Of course.’ Neil jangled keys.

The thought of chips made the saliva flow in Lora’s mouth, and she imagined a pickled onion, the pungent smell, the crack of the flesh between her teeth, the flow of sour juice. A little shudder ran between her shoulder blades, only at the thought of the onion, no more than that. She pulled the curtain closed against the window and turned away. ‘Wait,’ she called down the stairs. ‘Wait. I’ll come with you.’

Post

The boy thinks he has been in here for some nights now. He doesn't count days but there is that feeling of familiarity which makes him uneasy. A place can get a hold on you as tight as a strong man and when that happens there is nothing to do but to keep moving.

He stands and urinates onto the road below in a long arc that catches the rising light. Piss hisses on bitumen, cars shriek overhead, a bird ceases its keening and flaps away.

The concrete all around the sleeping place is covered now in pictures. The boy rummages in the box. His hand is sore around the splinter, red and tender in the centre of his palm. There is one whole new piece of chalk left, like one of his fingers cut off and hardened and polished. He selects a clean piece of concrete pillar and draws a series of curving lines that resolve themselves into the shape of an ear. Not a generic ear, a very particular one, with a shining earring in the shape of a tear hanging from a small thin loop, and a few strands of fine hair, smoothed back but coming loose, some strands forward, some behind. A woman's ear. He begins, always, with the shape of this woman in his mind. But he starts each time at a different part of her, and then can't move beyond it. He adds wings, to carry it away.

The moisture dripping from above and rising from below blurs and distorts the body parts that already decorate the space. A brown-red smear trickles from a flared nostril on a concrete pillar. He drops the remains of the chalk, no longer new, into his box, and rubs his red hands. A single car passes, and he waits in the shadows then scrambles down the slope and away.

Picture window

Lora drowned a pile of dishes in the kitchen sink. Her stomach was bloated and stodgy, heavy with last night's chips. She had stuffed them into her mouth, one after the other, trying to fill herself up so there was no room left, not even for speculation, until her lips were smeared and oily and her tongue spiked with salt. Now she felt the shame of overeating, and had taken a single chaste apple for breakfast in penitence. Neil, though, had restricted himself to grilled fish, and Cloudy suffered no such remorse, so Lora's hands moved amongst the aftermath of their usual breakfast. Threads of milk escaped and broadened into tiny moving sheets, filmy and translucent. She stirred them with her finger, watching them dance in the warm water, then glanced up through the window, at the house across the lake. Her hands fell still. The woman who had lived in that house was now dead, cremated, old ashes on the wind.

Don't dwell on it, she told herself. She rolled the word over in her mind, like a worry bead. Dwell. Lora dwelled on the house, Catherine dwelled in the house. A single letter was the difference between the alive and the dead. O for Lora, I for Catherine. But I am not Catherine.

Anyway it was all years ago, as Neil said. Well before our time. Nothing to do with us.

Lora went back to scraping with her fingernail at a rice bubble stuck to the side of Cloudy's bowl with sugar. Five years. Cloudy's lifetime, but not really very long. And it was hard to dismiss a story that was framed in all her back windows, that had happened in the same shaped spaces she moved through now. If the curtains in the other house could open, she might see her double standing at the same sink. Close enough to wave. Separated only by time.

Lora gave up on the bowl and left it filled with hot water to soak. A domestic, some people called it. Another word that rolled around, showing one side, then the other. Comfortable as an adjective – domestic situation, domestic life – a bit banal, perhaps, a bit boring, but cosy. But when used in this other sense, as a noun, it took on a different sound, a hissed sibilance of violence. Labelling what happened 'a domestic' was a backhanded way of rendering it safe. Because a domestic meant it wasn't random. It wasn't some stranger picking your window lock and creeping into your

bedroom, or garrotting you behind the train station, someone out there, loose, beyond your control. A domestic was contained in the home, someone else's home, not mine, not ours. The word created walls behind which people could flick the page of the newspaper to some other story.

The mirror house, Lora called it now, but only to herself.

A sad story, an unhappy place. But someone else's, she thought, once again, pulling the plug. She rinsed the cloth, and wrung it with both hands, and slapped it hard on the side of the sink. Nothing to do with us. Nothing to do with me.

Beam

The people turn on their lights but don't close their curtains. The boy can see them, but if they try to look out they will see only their own reflections. He walks down the path, examining each back-lit image. Children lounge in front rooms, transfixed by flickering televisions. Families circle dinner tables. A man pours a drink, a woman turns a page. There is often a dog, but so long as the boy stands still and does not get too close, the dogs doze with their noses on their paws. But the cats know. They stare straight at him with their yellow eyes and blink, or thrust up a leg to show him their arseholes. If there is a cat, he moves on.

He is drawn back to the brown brick houses. He approaches one and stands in front of it, staring up. But the light is all wrong. The house is a jagged black shape cut from the sky, a thick darkness, and it is the boy who is reflected, a luminous white shadow on a blank black wall. His hand clenches, and begins to throb so badly that he turns away and goes to the lake, and thrusts the hand in the water to cool it.

Stepping forward, and again, he discovers he can cross the water under the bridge. It is not so deep after all, and he can wade through it to the other side and up.

On the other side is the other brown house. He can see this one better and sheds no shadow on its surface. Across from it is a block of land with nothing on it but piles of dirt and dumped concrete forming corners, with weeds grown to a height that can hide someone lying down. There is a large pile of damp clay, and he digs a cavity on the side, and scoops a place that he can see through. He arranges his cardboard and cloth. He settles, and watches the house. After a time, a door opens. A woman comes out.

He knows her.

The way she drifts across the front porch, the way she rests her hands on the columns, the way her head is tilted up but her gaze is turned inward, the fall of her hair. He knows her.

Casual eating

Ann-maree set some smoked salmon on the table. She had been insisting that Lora and Cloudy came for lunch almost every day since that first morning two weeks ago and finally Lora had run out of excuses. She had been expecting sandwiches, but she sat in front of a full spread of pates and fancy crackers and heavy dark breads on an embroidered tablecloth. Cloudy inspected it dubiously.

‘And this is just for you,’ Ann-maree said to the child, presenting her with a plate of crustless cheese and Vegemite on white bread cut into triangles, and another of tiny home-made biscuits, stars connected with jam. Cloudy beamed and Lora immediately softened towards the woman. She could not help but judge people according to how they treated her child. The food was as good as it looked, and after it they took their coffee out onto the back verandah, watching Cloudy disappear into a garden full of daffodils and jonquils in neat edged flowerbeds, and rounded rose bushes, and half-grown liquidambars shimmering gold.

Lora had decided not to ask about the mirror house, but now whenever she glanced across the lake it was all she could see. She couldn’t help herself. ‘Did you know...them,’ she said, nodding at it.

Ann-maree took a sip of her coffee from her gold-rimmed cup and took her time to answer. ‘I did know them, only slightly,’ she said at last.

‘What was she like?’

‘I always found her a perfectly pleasant woman. Despite what they say. Very proud of that house. A good cook, unusual you know, things with pheasant, or lambs brains, or squid, in amazing sauces. They had everything, all sorts of antiques. Black crystal champagne flutes, I remember that, I’d never seen black crystal before. Nothing but the best, it was like eating in a five-star restaurant when you went for dinner there. Limoges china. Everything imported. And the house was spectacular. They had the bathroom off the master bed, done out in this pink marble. Cost a fortune. Well. After a while Catherine decided she didn’t like it. Didn’t like the pattern. Said it was like eyes looking at her. Ripped the whole lot out and had it redone. I hate to think what it cost. But money never was an issue. Spending it, anyway. Paying it back was another thing. They say...well, they say a lot of things.’

‘So you were friendly?’ Lora turned her cup.

‘Oh well, you know, neighbourly is more like it. There weren’t many people here then. We hadn’t arrived long before...Before. Such a tragedy.’

‘Did they seem happy?’ Lora surprised herself a little, asking this out of all the possible questions.

‘Happy.’ Ann-maree stared into her cup. ‘The house made her happy. Making it nice.’ She searched Lora’s face. ‘I know how that sounds. People think it’s shallow. But Catherine was one of those people who put effort into everything. A bit, what’s the word, compulsive? And anyway, having nice things can make you happy, can’t it? If you haven’t had them. What’s wrong with a bit of comfort. If you’re...if, you know, something else is missing. Other things you can’t have.’

A door slammed behind them. Lora turned to see an unlikely vision. It was a girl, or young woman, in full gothic regalia. She wore a black lace bodice over a black t-shirt, black skirt, her hair was dyed harsh black streaked in scarlet, standing out roughly around her head. Her eyes were thickly lined with kohl, her lipstick was black. Lora could see the smears of dark shiny purple across her eyelids. She was painfully thin, her bony legs seemed to hardly have the strength to lift the heavy-soled, laced boots. The girl’s face was covered in studs – eyebrows, nose, chin, a chain between lip and ear, all the tender places pierced and armoured. As if spelling out ‘don’t touch me’ in metal. A live black and white rat sat on her shoulder. Lora was taken aback at the incongruity of it, in Ann-maree’s faultless Federation reproduction. Though perhaps not, she thought. The girl’s outfit was another recreation after all, just a different time, different style.

Ann maree set down her cup. ‘Oh Ashlee. Put that creature away. We’re eating. For goodness sake. Really, we’ve talked about this. This is Lora, from next door, what will she think of us? Lora this is my daughter Ashlee.’

‘That’s all you care about, isn’t it?’ the girl said through her black lips. ‘What people think.’ But the way she raised her hand to the creature made Lora suspect that she had forgotten she still had it there.

Ann-maree started to protest but the girl said: 'Alright, alright, relax, I'm going.' A door slammed.

'I do apologize,' Ann-maree said. 'She likes to be outrageous. Anything to get a reaction. I've tried to tell her. It will have to go, that animal, she was on her last chance, and really this is too much.'

'It's alright,' Lora said. 'No harm done. Best not make an issue out of it.' Lora did not want to be held responsible for the girl losing her pet, she did not want that hostile black-edged gaze directed at her.

'It's already an issue. Needless to say, she doesn't ask permission, she just comes back from the shop with them. And what can I do?' Ann-maree gazed down at Cloudy in the garden. 'They turn into different people, you know, when they're teenagers. Ashlee used to be such a dear little thing. I used to love dressing her up, like a little doll she was, with her blonde ringlets. I'd tie ribbons in them. Blue, and pink. Alice bands. Dear little hats. Believe it or not. I have to hide the photos, even, of those days, or she rips them up. She says she's going to move out. I say she has it too good here, but she hates this place. She says.'

'I suppose there's not much here for teenagers, is there?' Lora said. She tried to imagine a sullen Cloudy with pimples, slumped on a couch, answering in monosyllables, but couldn't do it.

Ann-maree shook her head. 'It's not that. She was a little unsettled when we came here. Then she developed this kind of imaginary friend, like kids do, and got happier. For a while. But then,' Ann-maree gazed sightlessly across the lake, 'she changed.' Grief briefly passed across her smooth face. 'Maybe it was hormones, I don't know.'

There are all sorts of ways to lose a child, Lora thought. They chatted about schools, and Keith's business, and Ann-maree's upbringing – poor, as Lora might have guessed – until clouds closed over and the sky darkened, and Lora called Cloudy to go.

On the way out, Lora couldn't resist asking. 'What do you think really happened? In the house across the lake? What was your opinion?'

Ann-maree gave an uncomfortable little laugh. 'Oh. I never believed the stories. About her, you know, being unfaithful. She wouldn't have dared. Not the type. But I'd rather not talk about it. It's

not good for the neighbourhood, is it? Not what you want to be famous for. I was glad when the fuss died down, when the newspapers dropped off. When they found something else to write about.' She opened the door. 'That's one thing, these days, isn't it, it doesn't take long for something worse to happen, somewhere else.'

Laundry

Lora gathered in the washing before the rain started fully. The heating was on, and she set up the clothes-horse over the vent in the spare room and arranged the clothes over it. They were only a little damp, they would dry quickly. She closed the door to keep the heat in and the laundry out of sight.

The rain fell outside the glass doors but the house was warm, everything was tidied away and soft music played from the speakers in the kitchen. What was wrong with a little comfort, indeed.

As she tidied the ensuite, she was drawn to the spa. She wondered how long before Catherine was found. Lora imagined her own body, naked, bloated, waterlogged, defenceless, viewed by random strangers. Heaved out, dripping. Examined, dissected. Fluids running into channels. She pulled her clothes tightly about her, overcome with a kind of protectiveness for her physical self, as if it was a separate person. She decided the ensuite was clean enough.

Swiping a cloth over the granite bench in the kitchen, her right arm moving in a single long even stroke, her left hand cupped to catch the crumbs as they fell from the edge, Lora had a sudden clear image of the dead woman, Catherine, performing the same action. The setup of the rooms in the house was dictating how Lora moved through it, how she attended to her chores. Catherine would have wiped the same bench in the same way, in her own house, gathering the crumbs from her own food. She would have bent over a similar washing machine in the same alcove in the laundry, lifting and turning, setting the basket on the machine, holding it on her hip to open the same door. She would have made circles with her hand wiping the greasy marks from the glass doors, gripping a cloth of sharp-smelling window cleaner.

Lora tried to shake the idea off, knowing she was being childish, ridiculous. But it was too late, it had taken hold. The pixellated photo, grown to full size and animated, but thin and two dimensional still, floated just behind her, permanently grinning.

In the kitchen a tap dripped onto a blue plastic container in the sink in a two beat rhythm. Da-da. Da-da. Like a heartbeat. Da-da. Da-da. Then suddenly picked up pace, da-da da-da da-da da-da da-da, the heart racing. Lora felt an echoing tug of panic, the fear pulled from the sound.

She felt a sudden wave of anger towards the dead woman. Lora had nothing to do with her. She did not want to know what she was like or how she had hung her washing or wiped her bench, or how frightened she had been when she died, how long it had taken or what her last thoughts were. She, Lora, would never be able to make a home in this place if she spent all her time obsessing about what had happened to someone else.

Lora put away the laundry basket and went upstairs to check on the washing. But when she mounted the stairs the door to the spare room was open. Perhaps she had not shut it properly, or the heating had edged it ajar. As she came closer there was a flicker of movement behind it. A white arm beckoned. Lora crept towards the door and pushed it open a little further. The warm currents of air had caught one of Neil's shirts and it waved and swayed in a headless dance. She watched for a while. How few signals we need to ascribe life to the inanimate, she thought. An approximate form, a little movement. Cloth and air. That's all it was. She closed the door gently.

But a small kernel of dread remained. It had a location, under her lungs, that made her breath come shallow, and it had a shape and density, like a moon compressed to the size of a grapefruit. It tugged at her, this cold feeling, so that grating carrot for Cloudy's lunch, or crossing washing powder off the shopping list, or running her hands across Neil's bare chest in bed, everything she did was done against the pull of its gravity.

Waste channel

The warmth disappears with the sun, and the sun disappears early. The boy feels cold, and hunger.

The houses close up for the night. Lights flick on and the smells of food creep out to mock him.

He can't get to the food and the warmth, the walls won't allow it. He walks on to the shopping centre and waits until the building is quiet and asleep. Around the back is where the people don't go, where the rubbish is kept. The metal bin is huge and the lid of it is heavy. He opens the lid. The smell is familiar and comforting, a smell of rot and decay and damp metal.

From around the corner comes the sound of a voice, and another, the cheerful exchanges of ordinary young men, and then the slamming of a door. The boy climbs into the bin and lets the lid fall down, and briefly he disappears into the comfort of silence and darkness. A car engine starts, and the sound, loud and startling, diminishes. The boy knows he is alone now, and he rests for a while. He doesn't mind it in here. It is warmer than outside, and safe so long as he does not fall asleep and become garbage himself. He curls up for a while in the moist dark, his nose on a cabbage leaf. But the air becomes too thick, he can't breathe in the dark, he struggles upright and pushes on the lid until it creaks open. In the dim light he forages amongst the contents of the bin.

They call it rubbish because things are all jumbled together and in the wrong place. When he picks things from the pile he restores their names to them, and they are not rubbish anymore. Beans, he says, aloud, and sets the can on the edge. Cheese. The cheese is covered in a torn plastic wrap, and has a crust of hardness. There are plastic packets of meat but he when he touches them he travels back to see the sad eyes of the lamb pleading. He murmurs an apology and sets the packet aside. He will not eat the lamb.

But here is a box of cereal, split but still mostly full. He plunges his hand in it. At the taste, his past crunches in his ears, but he chooses not to hear it. He studies the picture on the box. A pink kangaroo is preparing to jump into a bowl of milk. He lifts the half-full plastic bag of cereal from the box and returns it to the pile, making it into rubbish again. He folds the cardboard kangaroo carefully and slips it inside the lining of his coat. He sorts more pieces of cardboard, then gathers together his

beans, his cheese, his bread, and some apples that are only a little bruised, a little rotten. There is a plastic bag, and he empties it of its contents and sets his goods in it. Rummaging further his fingers strike a smooth surface, like taut skin. His hands hook around a rectangle of plastic stretched firm, holding six blue-capped bottles of water together. He runs his hand over the smooth plastic. The water has been taken from its flow and trapped in little bottles, and tied together, and then put in the bin. The water inside makes a sad sound, too small, when it sloshes against the top of the bottle. He carries them along with his bag and climbs out of the bin. Outside he drinks one and the water is so pure and sweet he does not stop until the bottle is empty. He pauses, then pulls another bottle from the packet and pours it onto the ground. It forms a little pool then begins to trickle away, to run and spread and finally to soak into the earth.

Dining

In the next few weeks Lora's life firmed into its new shape. She pushed down her unease and blamed it on the move, on being in a new place. Foolishness, an old-fashioned word but one of her favourite self-accusations. Neil had immediately forgotten all about the mirror house, and she could understand how it could be viewed as really nothing at all. The thought of it was like a trick picture, and a simple shift of angle could change its import from one moment to the next.

Every morning Neil joined the queue of cars lined up at the traffic lights, waiting for the green to give permission for them to enter the freeway in groups of six. Lora never had any cause to go far. It was as if there was an invisible membrane, curving over the more-or-less round shape of the suburb, a comfortable self-contained bubble that Falconara Lakes existed in. Everything inside it was planned - the housing, the lakes, the community centre, the golf club, the ambience. People left it, of course, but always returned. Then the bubble sealed over, and the lights turned off almost in unison, a few disappearing lingeringly one by one, until only the street lights glowed.

Her freelance work was desultory. She again gave idle thought to getting a job but could never summon the energy to apply for anything. Later, she thought. Neil was busy, Cloudy was happy. One day, soon, when she was just a little more settled, Lora would be these things too.

Lora tended to the house, to Cloudy, poked around in her garden, which was failing to thrive in this cold weather. She was used to a tangle of vegetable growth climbing and curling and growing fat, shining with gloss, even from pots. Here in this thin grey light the plants were dispirited and hungry, thin shoots creeping above the soil but then shrinking into themselves in the cold wind. The mirror house stared derisively at her efforts.

Outside the house, shopping dominated. It was impossible not to drive past the Plaza, and excursions always involved returning with some new purchase. On the outskirts of the suburbs were warehouses and sales yards so huge Lora wondered just how many beds people could buy in their lifetimes, how the owners could sell enough boats here to make a living, just how much camping equipment people could possibly need. The letterbox was always full of coloured junkmail.

Lora was clearing this one morning with difficulty, as the shiny brochures were wedged in tight on top of each other. Ye Olde Cottage Furnishings. Cheap Meat. Bargain. Discount. Catalogues full of individual products, more than seemed possible – twenty pages of cameras, four pages of cutlery, sixteen of lawn mowers. As she pulled it out, an orange bag slipped to the ground. Lora unfurled it. A pinned-on note requested old clothes for charity.

She flicked through their wardrobes, though she had a big clearout before they moved. Cloudy was growing so fast, and Lora thought there were probably a few things she could get toss in. Tentative at first, she began to enjoy it. She had understood that acquiring things would be a great pleasure, but had never known the luxury of careless discarding. Throwing into the bag a warm woollen jumper, just because the colour would not go with her new hair. Jeans that were quite new and comfortable, but had never been flattering. A t-shirt she had kept for sentimental reasons. She stuffed them all in until the bag stretched, the clothes pressing mutely through the thin orange membrane.

Lora hefted it down to the letterbox, and saw up and down the street bulging pale orange shapes glowing in the evening light.

They were having a family dinner out, just for a change. Falconara wasn't overburdened with restaurants, but there was the Chinese café tucked away in a back corner of the shopping centre. Through the arched entrance was a dark, crimson cave, lit with lanterns, decorated with scrolls, smelling of salty spices, a relief from the metal and muzak and fluorescent lighting of the shopping centre. There was a little children's area with a basket of dog-eared toys, which Cloudy immediately settled herself in, pawing through the coverless books and eyeless teddies.

The waitress nodded over at them and smiled, and Lora saw them all through her eyes. A normal family. It struck Lora suddenly that she could have another child. It wasn't too late, not these days. But she and Neil had never discussed or even mentioned the idea. She wondered what he might say. His own daughter lived with her mother in London, she would be old enough to have her own child. He could be a grandfather.

‘Do you ever think,’ Lora said, glancing at Cloudy, keeping her voice low, ‘about trying again to contact your daughter? That it’s time?’

All expression left Neil’s face. ‘I’ve told you. She won’t have anything to do with me. Her mother took her away and poisoned her so thoroughly against me I have no hope. If I try to contact her, the mother calls it harassment and threatens me with the police.’

‘But should you...’

‘Should. Don’t start with the “shoulds” Lora. It’s easy to judge these things if you are lucky enough not to have been in the middle of them. You can’t imagine what it’s like to have someone threaten to accuse you of harming your own child. Do you know what that could mean, for her, for me, for any of us? Just the hint of it?’ Neil cracked open his menu as the waitress approached.

But Lora could imagine it, had in fact imagined it. The nightmare had been with her since Cloudy was born. Neil was right. Easy to judge, from the outside.

‘Hello. Haven’t seen you for a long time,’ the waitress said to Lora.

Lora, thrown by the turn the conversation had taken, shook her head. ‘Oh. No. No, we haven’t been here before.’

‘Yes,’ the woman said, nodding. ‘Oh yes, I think so. You like the fish?’ Lora had been going to order the fish, in fact. She nodded and ordered some sweet and sour chicken and rice for Cloudy. They turned to Neil.

‘I don’t think I’ll have anything.’ He closed the menu and handed it back.

The waitress, still smiling, said ‘Nothing? Some rice, some soup?’

Neil shook his head and looked away, closing the argument, and the waitress left.

‘You don’t want anything?’ Lora said.

‘No. No. I’m not hungry.’ He stared down at the table and for a moment his face loosened and showed his age. Lora was sorry she had brought it up. Though someone like Neil kept his emotions under control, it did not mean they were not there. Whether or not contemporary psychology thought it was healthy, it was his way of dealing with hurt, the way he had got through his life, and Lora told herself that this rigid reserve and need for control could be as deserving of pity as weeping hysterics.

When the food came, everything was shiny with glaze and caught the light of the candles. As if coated in plastic, Lora thought, exactly like those displays she used to see in the front windows of Asian cafes in her old city. The idea of herself, standing on busy noisy streets, eyeing those replicas and thinking about grabbing some takeaway, was detached as if belonging to another person. It was hard to believe that those places were still there, with other people standing in front of them. But the plastic food would still exist. It could not be eaten, and the plastic did not break down, so those glazed artificial prawns and squares of fake tofu would last forever, probably long after the people who had gazed at them were gone themselves, turned into food for worms.

‘Go on, have some of mine,’ she said, pushing her plate into the centre of the table. ‘Fish-shaped MSG – how bad can it be?’ Neil softened, and smiled, and scooped some into the little porcelain bowl on the table before him, and they ate together after all.

Cloudy fell asleep in the car on the way back. Lora watched Neil unbuckle the child and lift her out of the car, still sleeping, and carry her inside with deft movements that could only have come from action long ago practiced, lost now but remembered in the muscles of the body. A comfort in their repetition. She locked the car and hurried to open the door so Neil could guide her child through into the house.

The next morning Lora went out to get the paper. A magpie called, with a sound not like a bird at all. More like an alien broadcast, a creature from another planet transmitting its impressions of this new world. Lost and alone and trying to convey this strangeness in its own warbling, musical language.

Pausing to listen, the wet plastic-wrapped newspaper in her hand, Lora became aware that something was wrong with the front yard. The clothes from the charity bag were scattered all over it. At first she thought some dog or child or wild wind had got into them. But when she blinked away the morning film from her eyes, she saw they were not thrown about at random.

The clothes were arranged in a way to recreate the people who wore them. Neil’s old tracksuit was laid out, the pants straight, the top with its arms bent in the middle and resting on the pants pockets. Lora’s corduroy skirt was set on top of a pair of black leggings, and the jumper she hadn’t

liked was arranged with its arms around an old dress of Cloudy's, which snuggled into the hip of the skirt. Whoever it was had captured not just the clothes but the postures, the arrangements of limbs, so that all that was missing were the bodies. When she looked back at the tableau she saw, a little apart, a set of stranger's clothes. Black jeans, a long-sleeved black t-shirt, both grubby, well used. The sleeves were arranged in a manner that suggested outstretched arms. It was disturbingly familiar, the clothes, the posture.

Someone's idea of a joke, though she couldn't see the humour.

There was a loud rumbling noise from the end of the street. Lora glanced up to see workers throwing the filled charity bags of her neighbours into the back of the truck. She dropped the paper, and gathered the clothes together, shoved them back into the bag, and knotted it tight, and was finished in time to hand it to the volunteers as they reached her house.

Wiring

The electricity pylons stride double file across the paddocks, holding up heavy wires. The boy leans back to stare up at them. It is evening, there is a light drizzle. The wires cackle and hiss and plunge into the houses, and hide the electricity in the walls so the people can plug in all manner of toys which they think will make them happy, though the boy knows otherwise.

The pylons are made from metal Xs, one on top of another. Even a giant X has to narrow at its centre, down to a wedge for his single bare toe. But hanging below there is a sign showing a stickman getting hit by lightning. Zap, stickman is falling back to the ground. The stickman has rounded ends to his arms and legs. He has no eyes and there is space between his head and his body. A band of yellow. The boy raises a hand to his own neck and presses the pink flesh. He is not a stickman. He begins to climb, his fingers curling around the cold wet metal. Above his head, the pylon is dressed in a barbed wire skirt. He tries to twist through it, but it grabs him and holds him in its sharp little fingers, wait, wait. He pulls through, but the wire point writes sharply on his arm and keeps back a few of his bright red drops. Beyond the wire there is a ladder, and climbing is easier. He comes to a solid cross beam high above the ground and he sits on this, bending his legs around the metal.

The sky turns the silverygrey colour of the pylons, streaked with dead grass gold in the cracks where the light sneaks through. The wires cackle. The boy doesn't touch them. He doesn't want to end up with round stumps for hands and yellow ooze where his neck should be. There is a loud whump whump! and a bat flies past, startling him. Another and another comes, then great waves of them. They fly right past the boy, or beneath him.

Strange to be sitting higher than a creature that flies.

They make a high, harsh, squeaking cry. It takes a long time for them all to pass, while the sun disappears entirely, while the dark falls. They seem to go quickly in vast waves, but when he watches an individual bat he sees that it flaps its wings quite slowly, as if tired, or lazy, or simply confident the air alone will hold it up.

The lights flick on in the houses. From here, he can see the pattern. Down there, the woman is too close to see anything, and too small.

A last bat passes by, wings flapping slowly, staring ahead.

The boy will make a sign. The pylons will watch, and the wires hiss and whisper, and the message will go down the line.

Second living

As the weeks passed Lora chatted with Ann-maree, took Cloudy to Kinder, kept the house in order, trampled on feelings of ennui. She told herself there were worse things in the world than being a little bored. People lived in war zones, people were starving, people were willing to risk their lives for the chance of a dull, ordinary routine, let alone this level of comfort. She should be grateful, she told herself, so she was. She tried to adjust to the weather. It was harder to leave the house here, it required all manner of scarves and hats and heavy shoes to be put on and, in Cloudy's case, laboriously laced up or tied on under protest, and then later taken off and stowed away. The weather conspired to keep them inside, and the house was big enough, and warm. They could watch the rain fall on the lake through the glass while the heating hummed through the vents, and it wasn't necessary for Lora to raise her eyes to the mirror house, which stood across the water. Mostly unchanging, generally still.

But coming into the kitchen after dropping Cloudy one morning, Lora saw the flicker of movement in the mirror house, just a hint of a shift. She froze, startled, and stared. For a long time there was nothing, but as she was beginning to think she had imagined it, there it was again. The curtains in the downstairs sitting room shifted, a head passed, and disappeared. Lora's mouth went briefly dry.

There could be any number of reasons for someone being there, she thought. Logical, sensible ones. She had become accustomed to the mirror house being empty, that was all, she thought, even as she grabbed her keys, and hurried away through the front door, slamming it behind. She walked with quick short steps, the top of her body tilting forward in her haste to get there, along Constance Way to the little bridge and around the corner, tracing the path she had walked the first morning.

I will just have a quick look, just walk past, she thought. No harm in that.

In front of the mirror house was a grubby white van with its doors flung open. A sign in black was handpainted on in gothic lettering. After a bit of figuring, Lora made it out to be Dom's Domestix. On the ground was an assortment of weary looking cleaning implements – mops with balding grey heads, brooms with their bristles splayed out at varying angles, a grimy blue pan with a

mismatched green brush. She admitted to a faint sense of disappointment at this banal display. A cleaner, that was all. She was not sure what she had been expecting. Hoping, or fearing.

Propelled by her own momentum, she had continued towards the house, but now slowed, and stopped. A man emerged from where he had been filling a bucket at the neighbour's front tap. Quite tall, and strong across the shoulders, with a thick neck like a rugby player. A head shaved, but grown back enough to hint at a pattern of natural baldness, and matching three-day growth so that his whole head was almost covered in a kind of silver-grey fuzz. His eyes too were grey, and his eyebrows pepper-and-salt, and his skin had a greyish tinge. He stared at her closely for a second or two, then shook his head and turned back his business. 'Help you, love?' he said from inside the van, his voice slightly raspy as if his throat was also coated in short bristles.

'Oh, no, I was just...' Lora felt déjà vu. She vowed, after this, to leave this house alone.

'It's alright. Lotta people curious. Used to it. I come in once every coupla months or so, tidy up a bit. Caretaker, sort of thing. Come in and have a squiz if you like. Won't worry me. Company.' He gathered up his implements. The front doors were already flung open. Lora resisted for a moment, but knew she might not get another chance to see inside. And she was curious. Why not, she thought. I'm not a ghoul, it's only because it's the same as our house, that's all.

She followed slowly through the door. It was like walking into their own place that first day, before they had claimed it with their goods. The bright white rooms, the stairs curving upwards. Lora stood in the entrance foyer, uneasy. Now she was inside, to go poking about suddenly did make her feel like a rubbernecked tourist on a quest for other people's misery.

The man bustled back through a door and found her standing there. 'Not nervous are ya love? Come on, I'll keep you company, give you the tour.' He took her elbow with his thin fingers, clutching her flesh almost to the point of pain, but not quite.

Lora pulled away. 'Really, I should be getting home.'

The man leaned forward. His breath smelt of bacon. 'Nah nah, you've come this far you gotta see the upstairs. Where it all happened.' He stomped back up, not checking to see if she followed.

Lora trailed behind him, not knowing anymore if it was the force of his personality, or her own nasty curiosity that dragged her on. When she got to the top he was standing at the master bedroom door, breathing a little heavier. He flung open the door. 'Main bed.'

'Yes. I know,' Lora said. Up here, too, was the same. She moved away from him, to the upstairs back window, and stirred the curtain. There was Neil's house, where she had been standing only minutes ago. She half expected to see her own face staring back at her. What then? But it in its turn stood still and lifeless. No one home.

There was a handprint on the window, she could just make it out if she angled her vision the right way. Human sweat and oil that had not been cleaned away, a right hand. She raised her own hand to it. A close match. But she did not want to touch it. Instead, she put up her left hand, and pressed it deliberately on the glass next to the other. It made a perfect pair. But also transformed the image from a single hand leaning or waving, to two hands raised, in surrender or despair. She turned away.

'Once I let a couple in,' the man was saying from the doorway. 'Wanted to do it right in the tub where it happened. Turned them on, like. Wanted to pay me but I didn't take money. Not money. Get money anywhere.' He raised his eyebrows and licked his lips. Lora dragged herself forwards. Now was the time to turn and retreat down the stairs. But still she didn't.

He smiled a little, his thin lips greyish too, a dark line between them where they pressed together. 'Come on, I won't hurtcha! Just wanted to show you the scene of the crime.' He opened the door to the ensuite. There was nothing to see, really, it was the same as their own, and Lora knew that. 'That's fine, I don't need to see anymore. Thank you.' Ludicrous, her thanks, her incapacity to just turn and leave. He positioned himself close behind her and she had no choice but to go in.

'Shame the water's not on. We could jump in, waddy reckon? Hot tub party, they used to call them. Swingers, eh. I could tell you some stories. About them. I knew them before, you know. Worked for them. Some of the things I cleaned up from that room downstairs. Don't think they used it for Tupperware parties, know what I mean? Entertainment Room. Ha! Had a swing, sort of thing. But not for kids. Bolts on the walls. You look a bit like her, the woman. Gave me a bit of a turn when I

saw you standing out the front there.’ He moved in closer. ‘That’s my theory, you know. It was all some sort of sex thing that went wrong. Went a bit too far.’

Lora backed to the door, opened it, got through to the upstairs void where at least there was more room. The man followed, and gestured to the balcony. ‘And that’s where he jumped, or fell. Fell, I reckon. Bloke like that doesn’t kill himself. He was pissed, they reckon, waaaaaaaay over the limit, shoulda been dead just about anyway. Come out and I’ll show you.’ Lora held up her hands to ward him off. She was saved by the trilling sound of a mobile phone from below. ‘Blast,’ he said. ‘Know who that’ll be. Gotta get that love.’

She took a breath and waited until he was gone, then hurried down the stairs. She hoped to simply slide out the front door and away, but almost collided with him on the threshold. ‘Jeez. Whatsup? Get spooked? Wouldn’t be the first.’

‘No I just have to...’ Lora was about to say pick up her daughter, but she didn’t want to even mention her child to this man.

‘Never mind, I’ve gotta go. Urgent business.’ He waved the phone.

The man opened the door wider and let her out. As Lora went past him he grasped a lock of her hair between his fingers and she jerked to a stop as it tugged her head down. She almost screamed, but he was already sliding his hand down the hair, and releasing it.

‘Cobweb,’ he said, holding up a sticky strand. ‘Someone isn’t doin’ his job eh.’

Whoever was paying him wasn’t getting their money’s worth, Lora thought. She wondered who that was. ‘So who hires you? Who is it who pays you?’ she said, because she wanted to know, and to diminish him, now that she was safely outside.

He just smiled. ‘Now, that’d be telling.’ He began packing up his truck, but fired one more shot over his shoulder. ‘That’s where he would’ve landed. Right there where you’re standing. Splat.’

Lora turned and walked away up the street, glancing back to make sure he wasn’t following, or watching. She went past the bridge and home the long way, just in case. Serves me right, she thought, brushing and brushing at her hair with her fingers as she went.

Outdoor room

Neil thought they were settled enough to host a barbecue. To get to know the neighbours, Neil said, to bond with his work colleagues. To impress people, in other words, and Lora quailed internally. Large parties always made her uncomfortable at the best of times, large parties full of strangers even more so, and hosting an event in such circumstances was daunting.

But Neil assessed the long-range forecasts and picked a Sunday, he made a trip to the gigantic hardware store just down the freeway and came back fully loaded. He slammed the lid on the Grand Turbo Elite that took up the width of the tiled terrace. ‘Kangaroo,’ he said. ‘Marinated.’ He called this large silver construction a barbecue but it looked to Lora more like a section of a professional kitchen ripped out and set up in a corner of the yard. It had sections for woks and grilling and smoking and roasting. The whole thing could be covered by an enormous lid, like a silver coffin. Lora glanced through the substantial instruction booklet. ‘Rear ceramic infra-red’ it said. ‘Vitreous enamel/cast iron hotplate.’

‘Five burners,’ said Neil. ‘Should be enough.’ He poured crushed ice into a specially-bought silver bucket and added German beers, and sparkling white wine, and lined up his favourite reds on the sideboard. Lora roasted vegetables and mixed them with couscous, she decanted olives and chopped feta. As she pummelled Moroccan spices and mashed pumpkin for dip, she pushed down her own anxieties. She was not ready for this, it was like those dreams where you have to sit an exam you have not prepared for.

‘A drink for the hosts,’ Neil said, offering her a glass.

The host. Lora took the wine for courage, and considered the word. In biology, the parasite attached itself to a host. Living on another creature. Maybe that was the connection. Taking someone into your home. Allowing someone in. She would look it up. But she knew she was playing with words to distract herself from the task of getting ready. She set the glass back down, still full, and fumbled through her wardrobe uncertainly.

She had already changed twice, from a dress that suddenly struck her as inappropriately flowery, into jeans which then seemed too casual. She settled at last on a denim skirt and blue shirt of subdued pattern, her hair plain and brushed back. Her aim for the gathering was simply to slip around the fringes, not to do or say the wrong thing, not to make a fool of herself with these new people. Not to create some initial impression that would haunt her for all the time she lived here.

Scents of cumin and baked pumpkin drifted up as she piled the deep orange dip into a bowl coloured pale apricot, edged with gold. The colours were pretty, and she sprinkled on some rust-red paprika and set it on a matching plate holding carrot and radishes and celery. Here, at least, she had something that she could offer to guests with confidence. Something she could hold in front of herself. A delicious shield.

The guests arrived. Lora smiled and took jackets, offered drinks, tried hard to remember names. A woman called Serena brought her daughter Emilia, a lively little girl who went to the same Kinder as Cloudy. The two disappeared to investigate Cloudy's treasures. Ann-maree introduced her husband Keith, in impeccable designer weekend casual clothes and sunglasses. Lora took them through to the back and Keith immediately began to interrogate Neil on the barbecue setup. Ann-maree found a friend and chatted about recent holidays in Thailand. There were some people from Neil's work, Rob and Penny from Accounts whose names Lora thought amusingly appropriate, others whose names she immediately forgot.

The house, as the brochure had said, was Designed for Entertaining, with the back opened up to the decking it created an attractive indoor-outdoor space. The guests were mingling, drinking, eating. It was going well. Lora relaxed a little herself. She chatted to Serena, a pleasant but slightly vague woman, happily pregnant.

A single voice began to dominate the back garden. Keith had demolished the best part of the bottle of Shiraz and his voice was over-loud. He gestured at the house across the lake. 'You know the story of that one, don't you?' He pointed across to the mirror house and took another swig from his glass. 'The couple who built it. Bloke drowned his wife then popped himself.'

Lora froze, her ridiculous hostess smile adhering to her face. The work scandals ceased for a moment as people's faces took on a lascivious look at the once-removed horror.

'Oh, I remember that,' a square-shaped woman said. 'A few years back. Wow. That was there?'

'What was the story? Jealousy?' said Penny.

'Yeah, she was messing about with another bloke,' Rob said.

'No she wasn't,' someone else, a woman, said loudly. 'There was never any proof of that. It was an accident.'

'Ah, proof, schmoof, if you're messing about you don't leave proof.'

Everyone had turned to join in.

'I heard they were into kinky sex. You know, swingers.'

'Swingers! How appropriate.'

'Oh, don't be horrible.'

'Imagine how he would feel, the lover.'

'The *was* no lover.'

'Wasn't there a kiddie?'

'No, they didn't have any kids.'

'Money troubles, I heard. People take out these huge mortgages then can't pay them, soon as things go wrong.'

'Why do people always have to blame the woman? It was the man that did it. Bloody male violence.'

'Oh Christ, don't let Margaret get started...'

'Well he was the one that did it. He was a nutcase.'

The volume of noise rose. Everyone knew exactly what had happened. Everyone knew what men were like, what women were like.

Lora stood still and silent. She did not have the courage to challenge them, she was caught in a tight circle of people and unable to move away. The babble of voices ebbed and flowed around her. Opinions, salacious grins, the men's hands groping at the women as they talked of sex and death, the

women baring their teeth, their red tongues, stained mouths. Enjoying themselves. Lora felt the charred meat churn in her stomach. She stared down at her plate, meat oozing juices, red edges to the white bread. She scraped it all into the bin, and the smoke from the barbecue, where Neil had forgotten the last piece of meat, caught at the back of her throat, making her gag. 'Neil,' she said, cutting across the talk, hoping to turn the topic. 'The meat is burning.'

'No it isn't.' Neil turned a silver knob and waved his tongs, the voices returned, increased, shrill, cutting across each other rising in criss-cross currents into the air.

'Gives me the shivers,' one of the women was saying, staring at Lora. 'Doesn't it bother you? Seeing it right there every day?'

Neil, onto his fourth German beer, threw more kangaroo steaks inaccurately onto the barbecue plate. He adjusted them with the tongs, lining them up in neat rows. 'No way.' He turned and draped his arm across Lora's shoulders. 'Good for keeping her in line, eh? Wouldn't want to play up, she might get...' He put down the tongs and curled his fingers around her throat. There was gritty warm grease on his thumb. Lora pulled away and rubbed at her neck with a napkin.

The men laughed. The women groaned and said, 'Neeeeeeill!'

'More drinks?' Lora said. It was the only thing she could think of. There was a shout for another bottle of red. The kangaroo oozed and twitched on the hot metal, and the conversation turned to property prices, which, after looking like they would recover, were going down again.

The doorbell rang and Lora was glad to excuse herself to answer it. She took deep breaths all the way down the hall and flung the door open. Ashlee stood there. No rat today and a subdued outfit, for her, of a black tunic over a black skivvy, a black silk rose in her hair. She ducked her head and crossed her arms.

'Oh hello. Come in.' Lora smiled at her, feeling only pity for this thin frail child with her multitude of ineffective defences.

'Oh. Hey.' The girl raised her eyes briefly and walked into the house and straight down the hallway. She appeared very confident of the way, and walked through to where Ann-maree was drinking red wine on the deck. They had a brief, intense exchange.

‘Oh Lora, it seems Ashlee has invited herself. Do you mind?’

‘Not at all.’ Lora turned to the girl. ‘You are very welcome. Would you like something to eat?’

Lora gestured at the barbecue.

‘I don’t eat corpses. I don’t eat death,’ Ashlee said. ‘That’s some dead animal’s muscle tissue, you know.’

‘Ashlee, don’t be so rude or you can go home right now.’ Ann-maree was clearly mortified, which, Lora thought, was probably the point. Revenge. See what sort of daughter Mrs. Perfect has raised?

Lora didn’t mind the girl’s spirit. ‘Well, there’s a nice roasted vegetable salad inside, and plenty of bread and things. And juice and so on. Help yourself.’

The party wound down slowly. Neil set up the patio heater when it became cool. The people with babysitters went first, and Emilia was dragged away reluctantly by her parents. A small group of the others settled in, becoming more and more raucous. Rob was drunk and earnest. He held up his hand as if swearing an oath. ‘Remember what I said Neil. Back off while you can. He’ll do it. I know him better than you.’

‘Oh yes, I’m sure you do,’ Neil said, turning to wink at Lora.

Lora, seeing a couple to the front door, took the opportunity to put Cloudy to bed. ‘Those grownups are noisy,’ the child said as the voices drifted up from the backyard. But she chatted contentedly about her new best friend. Lora sat with her, in the peaceful dark, behind the tightly closed curtains, until Cloudy was drowsy. Let Neil tend to his noisy grownups.

When she was sleeping, Lora closed her door and wandered to her own bedroom. The guests were using the downstairs bathrooms, and she wanted to go to the toilet in peace, clean her teeth of the taste of meat, freshen her face. To get her through to the end, which, suddenly, could not come soon enough. The light was on in the ensuite. She pushed the door and almost screamed at a black figure reflected in the mirrors.

‘Ashlee! Good Lord, you frightened me. I thought you’d gone home.’ Lora’s heart thumped, solidly, and once again.

The girl shook her head. ‘Just came up for a bit of quiet.’ She was young enough to think that careful enunciation would hide her drunkenness. It would have been easy enough for her to snaffle drinks during the afternoon. Red wine, Lora guessed by the smell. Perhaps Ashlee had come up here to try to sober up. Not my responsibility, Lora thought. The girl looked almost eighteen anyway.

Suddenly she spoke. ‘I knew them, you know. I knew them.’

Lora was not sure what she was talking about. ‘Knew...?’

The girl lurched closer. ‘It’s so weird being here. Everything the same. Exactly the same.’ She gestured vaguely across the lake. ‘Even you. So weird. I still think of him sometimes. I miss him. They told me I was imagining. But I knew. I know. What is real.’ The girl pushed past, and after a moment her heavy boots thumped slowly, one by one, down the stairs.

Lora sat on the edge of the spa, pondering the girl’s words. She had nodded towards the mirror house, but then the rest made little sense. The water began tinkling behind her and Lora leaped up. Downstairs there was a crash, a curse, laughter and groans and sarcastic applause. She hurried downstairs to see what the damage was.

Next day there was a bit of residual mess from the party, but not too much. Lora had been glad of the excuse, throughout the afternoon, to slip away and gather up bottles, to quietly rinse a load of glasses and stack the salad bowls into the dishwasher. She scoured the backyard one last time for anything they had missed. A gleam from the back corner caught her eye. Someone had opened up Cloudy’s cubbyhouse and set a glass on it. It was one of the designer beers that Keith had been drinking. A puddle was stretched in a thin gold line along its length, edged in scummy bubbles, and a dark smear of beer had soaked into the wood of the surface. Cigarette butts were scattered on the ground. She wrinkled her nose in disgust and scrubbed at the wood with the tea towel in her hand. The glass was smeared with oily streaks from the kangaroo. ‘Nice and rare for me,’ he had said. ‘I like a bit of blood.’ Unable to leave it alone.

Lora glanced across the lake and felt a surge of solidarity for the woman who had lived unhappy and died early. Catherine. Now, helpless, she was carved up and served at barbecues for people's enjoyment. Lora felt she should have protested, defended her, put a stop to the discussion. But she knew she was a coward, especially in the face of confident people with their forthright opinions. She would sit silently, demolishing their arguments to herself, or spend hours later formulating exactly what she should have said. But the times she did open up and let her own beliefs out, she spent the next days – weeks, even – dissecting what she'd said, and imagining exactly how people would think her a fool. Mostly, it was easier to let it go. Nobody changed their minds about much anyway, in her experience, however sound the arguments against them. But still, she felt a slightly sick feeling, as if she had betrayed someone she really knew.

Sorry, she thought, going inside. As she went through the door she felt a surge of ease, a shift in comfort. As if the temperature of the house had warmed a degree or two, as if the air moved more freely through the rooms. As she finished tidying, Catherine's shadow still hovered, but Lora realised it did not have to be sinister. Rather, it could be companionable. Lora, so defensive all her life, so fearful of people's judgement, had preferred loneliness to the threat of mockery. So there was an appeal to the image, perhaps from another time, of two women going about their routine, getting ready for the day in easy silence, not needing words as they put their hands to the familiar tasks. A companion silent, familiar, moving through the same spaces, knowing and not judging, because she was the same.

Footing

The boy turns his back to the houses and walks away across the empty paddocks that stretch a long way all around. Dry empty patches of dirt show through the straw. He scuffs across the grass, which has been roughly but thoroughly cut almost to the roots. Now and then a hard strand pierces his foot.

He sees a single flickering of colour. He stops, and squats. A flower has escaped the blades of the cutting machine and pokes its head above the stubble. Tiny mauve petals on a stem as thin as wire, a miniscule yellow calyx. The last flower.

Down here, there is the buzz of living things busy eating and dying. He pats his hand along the cropped grass. A tiny winged creature flies from the flower and lands on the back of his hand. It sits there for so long he begins to wonder if it perhaps is part of him after all, a freckle or mole or spot that took flight and now has returned. But it spreads tiny invisible wings and disappears back into the grass. The flower nods and he reaches down, and pulls, and it breaks at the roots. He crams it into his filthy pocket, flinching at the curl of his hot hand, and straightens, and walks on.

A flimsy fence of wire and posts blocks his way. Against this thin barrier is set a huge sign, with solid legs planted deep in the ground. Across the top are the words 'Coming Soon. Pretty Meadows' as if the sign is a hole in the sky showing the future. A giant man and a giant woman and their giant children stand in front of an open doorway and gaze out across these paddocks. They are all smiling with teeth the size of the boy's head. He turns to see what makes them so happy. At first there is only the emptiness. But when he opens his eyes and lets the light burn them until tears come, he can see, shimmering above the dead grass, giant houses. Look, the giant man is saying. Look at our new house. And the giant children look. But it isn't new. And it isn't theirs. The boy would warn the children but they can't hear him. In the future, when they come, a small child will pause for a moment outside a door, and look around, listening. Come along, what are you waiting for, the parent will say, and the child will see no one there, and run inside, and it will be too late.

The future houses disappear and in the space they leave behind is a fairytale village. Coloured flags, and wooden tables and a bright curling metal gate. This time it does not disappear as he walks

towards it. His feet crunch underfoot the small invisible creatures unaware that houses are soon to be dropped on them. As he gets closer he can see through the gates stalls weighed down with bright objects for sale, and hung with bolts of cloth.

All the discarded things of the world are gathered in this place that is solid but not permanent. He goes to see if there is a place for him.

Library

‘I might give that market a try today,’ Lora said. It was an ordinary morning not long after the party and she felt a sudden urge for something different to look at. Neil grunted, shuffling papers, not listening, Cloudy came in wanting Lora to organise a playdate with her new Kinder friend.

‘Did you put my phone somewhere?’ Neil said. ‘Oh, don’t worry, got it.’

‘Oh, I need a show and tell,’ Cloudy said. ‘I just remembered. But not toys. Something else. Emmie bought a shell. Have we got any shells?’

On the other hand, Lora thought, I might just vanish off the face of the earth. I might try to drive away from Falconara and get zapped like a bug on the border. I might walk on the lake to see what happens. Her potential movements were of no interest to anyone at all and she felt both dizzily free, and completely irrelevant.

The signs to the market led away into the empty plains on the side of the Falconara furthest from the Freeway. An unmade road meandered through fields extending as far as the eye could see. One side was the familiar dull dry beige, the other was planted with a crop that was an unnatural fluorescent yellow. Lora drove far enough that she was beginning to wonder if she had gone astray, when she saw to her left a splash of colour in the plains, like a bright gossip magazine dropped on a beige carpet. As she pulled up in the carpark, though, and entered through the fanciful iron gates, the appealing brightness became a kind of garishness, the jumble of neon plastic so artificial it wearied the eye and made itself dull. Only about half the stalls were operating, giving the market a slightly desolate air. The scent of hot donuts and chips mingled with churned earth.

Lora wandered towards a stall piled with bright toys. On the trestle were lined up plastic tubes like translucent coffins holding rip-offs of Barbie that unwitting grandmothers would buy, only to be rejected by little girls who know they were not right. From a random jumble piled next to them, Lora picked up a cellophane packet. There were white and brown figures inside, perhaps toy soldiers. But as she squinted closer she saw that the brown ones were supposed to be some sort of rendition of an

African tribal figure. The white ones were hunters, with pith helmets, and guns at their shoulders. The cellophane chuckled as she clutched it in horror. Made in China. All that effort to bring these hideous things into being. To design them, to extract chemicals and melt them together, to mould them and cool them, to sort and pack and transport them in ships across the world, to deliver them to this paddock. Where certainly, surely, hopefully, no one would ever buy them. Yet they would remain in existence for hundreds or thousands of years. Lora felt in the tiny figures the shapes of everything that was wrong with the world.

She dropped the packet and met the cold eyes of a large, heavy-set man, slumped in a chair, counting a wad of cash and folding it into his pocket. 'You want that,' he said without rising, not really a question. Lora shook her head and half-smiled, pathetic, disgusted with herself. Though there was nothing to be gained by challenging this man about his goods. She turned away.

There was a stall with rows of books lined up on trestles, and bins at the front. Lora first scabbled through the children's bin, but it was mostly disappointing. Colouring books, half scribbled on. Tall hardbacks half ripped up the spine from overuse. Then amongst the novels a row of books caught her eye. *Turn of the Screw*, which she had studied at university. And *Rebecca*. *The Haunting of Hill House*, one of her favourites as a teenager. Lora paused, with her hand on *Jane Eyre*. Moving around so much, she had kept her book collection small, and moving to Falconara had culled even those quite brutally, bringing only a single shelf. And here were all the same books, lined up in a row. Almost the same – some different editions, a few different covers. She told her it was simply a collection of classic books that many people had, particularly women, there was no meaning to it at all.

At the very end there was a well-loved book of fairytales, one of those old editions where the stories was quite brutal. Horse's heads cut off, evil stepmothers forced into red hot shoes, wicked wolves boiled alive in pots. A traditional leather-look binding, illustrations slightly blurred in the printing, gold edging to the paper.

'Excuse me,' Lora said to the person behind the table. 'Where do you get your books from?'

The man shrugged. 'Different places. Garage sales, school fetes. That lot's from a deceased estate. Local woman. A while back now. You want that?'

Lora was holding the fairy tales in her hand. But the book in her hands felt almost too familiar, the urge to bring it home with her too strong and irrational. 'I...no...I'll think about it.' She dropped it on top of the other books and smiled, and hurried away past the stalls.

There was a sudden gap in the tables like a missing tooth. A flash of red tugged her gaze downwards. On the ground, on a patch of concrete, a drawing, in chalk. The picture drew Lora towards it, but then she stood back, the better to see it. It was an enormous human hand, palm up, fingers open and pointing downwards at an angle. The colours were all in shades of red, from pale pink to a deep, almost black purpley-crimson. It was so finely detailed that there were fine creases in the palms, the nails were ragged as if chewed, there was shadow of a scar across the thumb. A real hand, a slim long hand that had belonged to a real person. Most startling, it had wings, beautifully rendered wings with a single feather damaged, others ruffled by wind. The wings were joined to the flesh by anatomically plausible sinew and bone. Intricate detail in shades of red watercolour. Though when she moved forward, unable to resist touching, the colour came off on her fingers. Chalk, it appeared.

Unexpected tears came to Lora's own eyes. She looked around for the artist but no one was in sight. Three broken sticks of red chalk sat next to an empty box with a handful of silver coins in it. She reached for her purse and dropped in a gold coin.

It began to rain. A large drop fell onto the picture, across the base of a finger. Soon the whole thing would be obliterated. Another drop hit the back of Lora's neck, and she joined the crush of people heading for their cars.

Load bearing

If the boy was small enough, if he was a real child, he might evoke pity. But at his size people glance, and turn their heads. They hold their breath until he has passed, as if he is a walking graveyard. He lurches, he mumbles, he is monstrous, he walks among them. A woman passing lifts her small child into the folds of her cardigan.

The boy examines walls. He runs his hand along a wooden fence, not quite touching it, but he can sense the pattern of rough grain under the veneer of paint. The next fence is green metal, corrugated in long trapezoid bumps. Fences are wood and metal, walls are concrete or brick. Though not always. Fences can be brick and walls can be made of wood. There seems to be no meaning in this, other than that names are slippery things even on solid objects.

A large brick wall protects a house. He leans forward, hands splayed, forehead resting on the hard surface. The bricks in the walls are named cream and orange and chocolate, colours that make your mouth water but can break your teeth. The warm brick smells like biscuits. In the story the children go into the sugar house and the boy is put into the oven. Sweet smelling houses are not what they seem. He gathers his belongings and moves on.

There is a long smooth expanse at the front of shopping centre. The doors open and close and the real people go in and out, with heavy white bags trying to cut their fingers off. The wall holds back a great mass of things that would otherwise spill all over the world. He pats this wall, it is smooth and straight and doing its job. It provides a good surface. He opens his box and runs his fingers through the chalks, which are worn down to knuckles now. They are small but he can pinch them in his fingers. He draws until his fingers scrape against the brick, until he is not sure if it is the chalk leaving a mark or cells rubbed from his own skin.

Double doors

The decorations in the Plaza turned overnight from autumn leaves to giant snowflakes, here where snow would never fall. The weather in Falconara did not seem to change at all, in fact. The skies were always an indeterminate silver, and the cool wind always blew, and rain when it came was intermittent and thin – enough to chill and dampen, never enough to satisfy. Lora wondered whether spring would be marked by anything more than giant primary coloured plastic flowers, if summer would have a meaning at all other than Christmas decorations and a different tape for the muzak.

Her trolley was laden and Lora unpiled it onto one end of the moving belt. The bored girl at the other end, eyes glazed, thinking about the weekend, passed them through. She was jarred from her daze when Lora came to pay, though, and said, ‘Sorry, it hasn’t gone through. The card.’

‘What?’ Lora said. ‘That’s ridiculous, I only just used it.’ It was their shared card, hers and Neil’s. There must be funds in it, she thought. The next person in the queue, a young woman dressed in a business suit, had only a handful of items, already piled onto the counter. She huffed in impatience and shifted her feet. Lora tried again, running the card through. Again it was rejected. She fumbled in her purse. The woman behind was clearing her throat, glancing at her watch, tapping her feet, a St. Vitus dance of impatience. On her lunchbreak. Or late for a meeting. Lora felt herself blushing, red to match her new hair, she became highly aware of how she must look. But there was the feeling of shame that comes with being rejected by the world of commerce. She remembered this from her life before, when she would miscalculate by a small amount, and have to hand goods back. ‘Take this,’ she would say, anything that was not an absolute necessity, any treat for Cloudy, any mild indulgence for herself. ‘Take this off.’ Under the eyes of the people in the queue behind her, angry at her for her failure to have money. Or pitying, which was worse somehow. Either way, if you have no money, you are judged.

She fumbled in her purse again. She pulled out her personal card, which had a few hundred dollars on it. ‘Try this one.’ She smiled apologetically to the woman behind, who rolled her eyes, gathered her purchases and humphed away to another checkout. But after an interminable moment of

silent electronic communication the machine began to hum and spew a ribbon of paper. The girl chirped ‘Oh, that’s better.’

The woman who had been behind her was now waiting in the other queue, but staring steadfastly ahead, refusing to acknowledge her mistake by returning to the now empty checkout. Lora hefted up her own bags, glad to escape. She pushed her trolley load through the automatic doors. The wonky wheel that had tugged and nagged and set the machine askew the whole time caught at a crack in the concert, and cans tilted and slid out of the top bag onto the bananas and eggs. ‘Oh for fuck’s sake,’ she said, pushed beyond endurance by the banal but effortful task of shopping. She rattled the handle and heaved it roughly over the crack. Then looked around with faint embarrassment in case the wizened old lady in the headscarf waiting at the bus stop had heard her. But the woman stared resolutely ahead.

Lora battled the trolley down the ramp to the car and unloaded, slammed the hatchback and turned to come back.

A young man approached from the other direction, until they were either side of the zebra crossing between the carpark and the shops. He had a mismatched set of clothes, as if from Op Shops or donations. His hair hung in grimy dreadlocks. He had pants that might have belonged to a suit, once, but were now baggy and stained and incongruous over bare feet. His face, under a film of dirt, had high sharp cheekbones. It was hard to tell his age. He was taller than her, but very thin, with a delicate uncertain expression.

The youth began to cross but though he was in clear view on the pedestrian crossing, the approaching car did not even slow. He had to jump back, stumbling.

‘Hey! Watch it!’ Lora cried instinctively at the car. The driver lifted a finger at her and yelled through the open window ‘What’s your problem lady?’

The youth had stopped and turned, staring at her, open mouthed. Lora pushed her trolley across the road, the wheels stubbornly catching and reversing as if to take her back. She came up parallel to him and smiled. ‘What an idiot,’ she said. ‘Are you OK?’

He just looked at her, his mouth a little open. 'It's you,' he said. 'You came.' Up close, the boy stank. Rotten teeth, sweaty flesh, old food long ago caught in folds of filthy cloth. A hint of arse not properly wiped, urine dribbled on aged pants.

'I'm sorry?' Lora's hands tightened on the trolley handle.

'Where have you been?' The voice husky, as if not much used. But the words were not threatening, they flowed very gently on the foul breath, flowers on stormwater.

Lora glanced around in that instinctive gesture of seeking what help might be nearby. None was. The sound of a car cut through the silence between them. 'Sorry,' she said again. 'I think you have made a mistake. Excuse me.'

She tried to edge away but the trolley wheel stuck again. The boy leaned in across the metal cage. For a moment Lora felt real fear. But all he did was pull at the handle and free the trolley from its rut. 'No mistake. But I know why,' he said. 'I know why. It's my fault. You won't forgive me.' He shook his head and walked away.

Lora watched him disappear around the liquor shop. There was a mark on the white plastic handle of the trolley, where his hand has been. Red, like red dust. She touched it. Red chalk. She started and looked around for him again, but he had vanished.

A local boy, a bit unbalanced, probably a mental illness. Harmless. Easy to avoid, in future. But still Lora felt a wave of shame, of failure, of grief, emotions absolutely real but at the same time disconnected from any logical source.

She walked away from the empty trolley back to the car, got in and stared through the windscreen. There was a tiny crack in it, a little starburst, and she sat there considering it. Some small projectile must have connected with it without her realising. But the windscreen was laminated glass. Covered with a thin film so that when dealt a blow, it did not shatter.

Lora started the car, put it in reverse, and backed away past the shops. The bus had come and gone, but the old woman was still sitting there, staring ahead. Behind her head was one of the drawings, a finger pointed directly out of the wall. You. I know you.

Stumps

The boy comes back to the vacant lot. Nothing changes in it except for the weeds, which grow in tiny increments. The boy has his favourite places, at junctions of wood, or of earth and concrete. He watches the brown house.

The doors open and a child comes through. It is a little girl. She is laughing. The mother comes out and smiles. The mother holds a jacket in her hand and the girl laughs and shakes her head and runs down the steps, but the mother calls her back. The mother kneels in front of the child. She threads the child's arms into the coat and zips it up, then hugs her and sets her free. The child dances down the steps and away up the street and the mother hurries after.

The boy nestles back into his cold damp hole and ponders the child. She is not him. She must have come later. All the better for not being created out of messy flesh that bleeds and stinks and rots. A child of something much purer than that. No wonder she is happy. No wonder the mother kneels before her and bows her head.

In the stories the sister is smart, she tricks the witch, she saves the foolish boy who drops crumbs for birds to eat and loses his way.

Child of light, child of air.

Angel sister who does no harm.

She will see him.

Gallery

Over the following days, Lora began to see more of the red drawings around the suburb. Along with the handful of bold images on public walls, she spied hidden, secret ones in unexpected places. They were tucked away on oblique surfaces, half concealed, so she could not tell if they had been completed only moments ago or if they had been there always and she hadn't noticed them. You only see what you are looking for, after all. She would simply glance down the space, say, between the outside of the supermarket and the dumpster next to it, and there would be the flash of red. They were mostly in chalk, so the next time she looked for them they were gone, or there would be only a blurred smudge.

The pictures were always of a single part of the body, always with wings. On the back of the post box, a precisely rendered winged foot. On the underside of the little bridge, so you could only see it from certain positions on the other side of the lake, a heart in flight. No stylised valentine, though, it was a real heart, muscular, with veins and arteries dripping all the way down to the water.

One cold morning Lora had made a determined effort to go for a walk, enduring the buttoning of coats and search for mittens, and she and Cloudy had meandered the curving streets, Cloudy hopping and running, Lora trying to establish a logic to the pattern of empty blocks and house frames and finished houses. But rain fell, and began to thicken, and they headed home quickly, Cloudy making a show of jumping in puddles too thin to make a splash. In front of the Georgian next door, which was still empty, its For Sale sign taking on a resigned air, she stopped. 'Oh, look at that Mummy,' she said, pointing.

The big side gates, which had always been kept closed, now stood open. Through the opening, there was paint visible on their shared fence. Lora glanced around then edged further down the driveway. On the wood a woman was painted. A woman with wings but no head, carrying a headless infant wrapped in a blanket of feathers.

Lora went forward slowly to touch it. It should have been disturbing. It *was* disturbing, the thought of it, but only after the fact of seeing it. It was done with incredible skill, and pathos. The care

in the way the headless mother cradled her infant, clutching her child in a grip both protective and defiant, was perfectly executed.

‘Why don’t they have faces?’ Cloudy said.

Lora thought how to answer this. ‘I don’t know. I suppose he wanted them to look this way. Maybe that’s how he sees people.’

‘Who?’

‘The...whoever drew this.’

Cloudy paused and considered it. ‘Maybe he isn’t any good at drawing faces.’

On the other side of the fence was their own laundry line, and Lora wondered how often she had stood there, even leaned against it, with only slim wood between herself and this picture. ‘Maybe you’re right. Faces are hard. Let’s go.’

Lora returned with her own child to her own house. When she went to get the washing later, she stood on her side of the fence. Again that feeling of grief swept her. Her hand, of its own volition, rose and set itself on the fence where his would have been not long ago. So close, she thought. But then was not sure exactly what she meant.

Frame

He keeps low, watching over them. Watching over. Watching. It is time for the garage door to open. The man will come out. The boy wraps his arms around his face and huddles back into his burrow. But he can see the pictures through the sounds. The opening. The car reversing out into the street, slow and careful, the front wheels grinding into the road as they turn. The car becoming smaller and smaller until it disappears, and the man with it.

He must hide from the man who will want nothing to do with him. The man looks different and might be different, perhaps. But he might be the same.

Men get very angry finding things in their houses that don't belong to them.

The boy looks at his hands, stained red.

Here in his cave of clay he thinks not of a story but of a girl. A different girl. Small and thin, the same size as him, their four thin frail hands holding pencils. They are at the bottom of a great hole, but they are safe down there, no one can see them. The clay walls rise up all around them and above them the sky is a circle of blue. They don't speak, but their hands move over pale paper, and as they finish each drawing the paper lifts and floats away. If they had time they could fill the hole with their drawings. But voices call them, the words are heavy and sink down from beyond the top of the hole, and the girl is gone and he is alone again, but not sad because he swims up through the pictures they have made.

The boy would like to make himself small. It might be the same, and he might find a thumb-sized girl to keep him company.

But he has always been too big.

Big enough to be mistaken for a man.

It was no one, says a woman's voice. That was no one. The last words she was ever to say turned him invisible.

Dressing

As the days passed, the boy, the idea of him, became fixed in Lora's mind. The demands of the house kept her hands engaged but her thoughts were too free. She would be thinking about something completely different – what to have for dinner, an interview with Cloudy's teacher – and his face would rise from nowhere. It was as if whenever she forgot about him, he was nudged, almost physically, back into her thoughts. 'Mum, Mum, guess what Emmie did at Kinder today,' Cloudy began and Lora had to shake her head, and get down on her knees and take Cloudy's hands in her own, to force herself to listen.

'I think you're missing the point, Lora,' Neil said drily over dinner, and began again some item from the news. She tuned in to the rise and fall of his voice to hear what she had missed and smile or frown in the right places, but could not focus.

She knew on any rational level that the boy was nothing to do with her. But this rationalisation met an emotional pull that was at least its equal. The feeling distilled itself down to one image – to lay her hand on the side of his face. She pictured the way the tips of her fingers would rest on his cheekbone, and her palm would cup his cheek and meet his jaw underneath, and her thumb would trail over his skin. And the thought of it made her want to weep, and she could not leave it alone.

Neil was going for an early morning bike ride. He had bought himself a gleaming creation of silver that he could pick up with one finger. Lora woke when he did and watched through half-closed eyes as he climbed into his lime green lycra. She yawned, falsely. 'I might take Cloudy to the market again today,' she said.

He raised his arms over his head and clasped them, and leant backwards. There was a crack, some misaligned sinew snapping into place. He came over and kissed her on the cheek. 'Happy to miss that.'

‘Shall I bring you home a six pack of donuts?’ Her voice was light, but he shook his head seriously and slapped his stomach under its tight green covering. ‘Undo all my good work. I’ll get some eggs at the cafe.’

‘Are the others going?’ Neil had gone for a few rides with his colleagues, it was the thing to do these days, she gathered. But Neil headed out the door, not answering.

Alone, Lora thought about the boy’s pictures, how beautiful, how transient. If he had a proper life and education, maybe he would be an artist. Such a waste for a boy like that to be on the street.

But that was rationalising. It wasn’t rational. It wasn’t a rescue mission or a compassionate middle class response to a charity case. It came from an entirely different place that was nothing to do with logic. An emotional directive.

Cloudy appeared in the doorway in her fairy pyjamas, bunny in hand. Lora flung her arms open and her child crept in under the warmth of the doona and snuggled into her, sleepy-quiet, radiating the warm, earthy smell of small child that recalled the beginning of the world, the moulding of the very first clay.

After breakfast Neil showered and headed to work, and Cloudy was eager for the trip to the market, running ahead to the car while Lora looked for her sunglasses. Lora consciously withheld any expectations but felt lightly more alive, her breath a little shallower, a hum inside her as if she were about to laugh.

Then she heard Cloudy’s voice from the driveway. ‘We’re going right now. You could come with us.’

It was Ann-maree, leaning over the fence. ‘Lora, Cloudy tells me you’re going to the market. I don’t suppose I could come along? It’s mostly full of trash, I know, but they have that organic beauty stall where they have that goat’s milk soap.’

Lora did not want Ann-maree’s company, not today. Any meaningful exchange would bounce off the crackling protective grid of conventionality that Ann-maree carried about with her. She would want answers, she would want to know what connection Lora had with this boy. But Lora was

cornered already. There was nothing to say but 'of course,' and nothing to do but to try to look as if she meant it.

When they got to the market the tatty merchandise was even worse than last time, as if it had spent the month getting a little bit dustier, a little less functional, a little sadder. Though there were even more people turning it over with hungry fingers.

'This way, I think,' Ann-maree said. Despite her disparagement she was drawn to the bright colours of the stalls, dubiously fingering a scarf, running her hand over a glass bowl. She picked up a heavy candelabra. 'Look at this. Fifty dollars. The trouble is, you don't know if it is a genuine antique or if you could buy it up the road for half the price.'

'Why don't you just buy it if you like it?' Lora said. 'Then it doesn't matter.'

Ann-maree shook her head and put it down.

'Can I have a donut?' Cloudy said.

'Cloudy we've only just got here,' Lora began.

'Oh, I'll take her,' Ann-maree said. 'I don't mind. The food vans are down the end there where my soap is.'

While Ann-maree had Cloudy it was a good chance to see if the boy was there. But in the space where the pictures had been last time there was a table of ceramic lizards fashioned with exaggerated genitals, with crude slogans carved into the bases.

The vendor sat slumped in his canvas chair, reading a newspaper, a half full coffee cup resting on top of a box next to him, a cigarette discharging smoke from one of his own lizard ashtrays.

'Excuse me,' Lora said. The man sighed and began to rise.

'Oh, no, don't get up.' There was no way she was buying one of his hideous creations. 'I was just wondering. Do you know the young man that was here a while back? He did pictures. Chalk drawings. On the ground.'

The man blew out a plume of smoke and said wearily. 'Not likely love. This is my patch. Been coming here for years. Same spot.' His hand-rolled smoke went out and he fumbled about under his chair for a lighter. He applied it to the tip of the grubby cigarette.

‘Oh.’ Lora looked around. She could have sworn it was the same row. In fact there was the book stall. ‘Do you know where he might be then? The artist?’

The man stuck a finger in his ear and scratched around. ‘There’s that bloke that does portraits of people, is that what you mean? You sit there and he draws you. Old bloke. Been doing it around all the markets for years and years.’

‘No. I don’t think so.’

The man shrugged again and turned back to his chair. ‘Best I can do love.’ He fluffed out his paper and began reading ostentatiously. Lora turned away. Maybe she was wrong, about everything. She went to find her daughter.

Cloudy had a sugary mouth and hyped up speedy eyes, blood fizzing with jam. ‘Look, Mummy, look at this, can I get it?’ The stall was of the most garish plastic toys. Cloudy was pointing at an ugly baby doll with sunken eyes and a single snaggle tooth protruding from its purple mouth. Lora knew Cloudy would never look at again if she bought it home. ‘It looks possessed,’ Lora muttered. ‘And you don’t even like baby dolls,’ she added to Cloudy.

‘I do! You just don’t buy them for me.’ Cloudy held the plastic thing up by one hand, and a look of uncertainty crossed her face, but she could not back down now.

Lora turned away, refusing to engage in the argument any longer. And then on the other side of the stall, through the crowds of people, she thought she saw him. Just a hint of dreadlocks, a lurching walk. But almost immediately the crowd of people surged around and hid him, if it was him at all. A woman with multiple dark plaits emerged from the crowd. Maybe that was who Lora had seen.

Cloudy pulled at her hand and they caught up to Ann-maree at the soap stall. She held up an embossed recycled paper bag with rope handles. ‘Got it. A good supply. Now, how about a cappuccino? I can even have full fat milk, I’m on that protein diet.’

‘Can I have a babycino?’ Cloudy said.

‘You’ve had too much already young lady.’ Lora turned to Ann-maree. ‘Do you mind if we just go home? I seem to be getting a bit of a headache.’

‘But you haven’t bought anything at all,’ Ann-maree said. ‘You can’t go home empty handed.’

‘It’s alright,’ Lora said. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ She felt exhausted, suddenly, overwhelmed with people, wanting only to get out of here to somewhere quiet, where nothing was being bought or sold.

But on the way out there was a second hand clothes stall. A dress caught Lora’s eye. An everyday winter dress, long sleeves, a gathered yoke, a very dark grey background with flowers and leaves and stylised peacocks in lighter shades of grey cascading to the hem. It was stretched a little around the neck from washing and there were a few dark marks amongst the grey. A favourite, easy dress to throw on, to go out somewhere in winter, a bit nicer than jeans but comfortable and easy with a pair of leggings to meet some friends or go to a meeting at school. Lora reached up and disentangled it from the rack. As she did, she got a whiff of a smell. It would have to be washed. The smell recreated the person who had worn it before. An ordinary human mix of a bit of sweat, the remnants of deodorant, a light touch of perfume, and something else. She held it to her nose. A scent that suggested a child, a smell of dirt and chocolate and eagerness, a child forgiven and taken into the lap.

Ann-maree frowned at it. ‘That looks familiar.’ She checked the label. ‘Oh, look, it’s designer. Not my style, but it would suit you.’ She lowered her voice. ‘Bargain them down. Make them an offer. You never know.’

But the tag said five dollars, and Lora handed it over without argument. At home she washed it with lavender woolwash and hung it over the clotheshorse to dry. When she put it on, it fitted perfectly.

Scupper

He knows the movements of the mother and the child and with coins in his hand, he can move around like the real people do. The bus driver looks away when he gets on, the other people stare hard out of the windows and shift and hold their packages and children tight towards them. He sits alone on a broad seat.

The bus settles into its long slow sloping movements and the boy watches the streets and houses through the window. People get on and huddle to the front. A young man screws plugs into his ears and sings softly and this is acceptable, people even smile a little. But not for him. He is surrounded by empty seats.

The bus stops for the length of time it takes a very old woman to shuffle up the steps and into her seat. The boy looks out and there is the man. The man from the house, sitting on a bench in a little park behind the bus stop. The man glances up and the boy shrinks back into his seat. The boy tastes acid in his mouth and might vomit, if his stomach was not so empty. But he swallows hard. The man turns away again and it seems, perhaps, that he has not seen the boy. He does not get up to get on the bus. He makes no sign but remains sitting on the bench, then puts his face into his hands. His body looks both heavy and loose, as if he could not get up and walk even if he wanted to. Out of its proper place, the man's body does not know how to move.

The bus sighs and lurches away and the boy is safe. He turns his head a little. The man remains sitting there, motionless. The bus travels far away from the man, and the boy looks ahead to where soon, he knows, the mother and child will be.

Third storey

Lora put down the local paper. She was sitting on the big front steps, gazing across the road, reading how that land was soon to be developed into yet another estate. It was to be a gated community. An even larger development than Falconara. The advertising never mentioned mere houses but always Executive Style Residences. Half-acre minimum blocks, with tennis courts and swimming pools. Security guards at the entrance. Its own separate golf course, country club, members only.

Lora was taken by an urge to walk on the land, while she could. Before the gates went up and she was locked out. She closed the door behind her and wandered across the road. The vacant block was finally being built on, the idea of a house was being framed in blond wood. She picked her way through. A cement mixer opened its mouth in a surprised circle, grey drool crusting its lips. There was a pile of clay with a great chunk taken out of it. The hole was smoothed and compressed inside, turning it into a frozen orange-gold wave.

She remembered these sites from when she was a child, watching a house grow where no house had been. The idea that houses could be created, that intimate places such as bedrooms could be wrested from open air by surly workers compiling everyday materials, was a kind of magic. If they saw you, the workers would yell at you, but Lora was less afraid of everything then. Perhaps that was what she had been searching for all this time, not the places but that first awareness of the act of creation, an early fearlessness in the face of it.

She squeezed through the fence at the back into the paddocks. The horizon expanded into a bland pale grey, but the walking was rough and unpleasant. The earth had been turned once, perhaps with some plan for a last crop, but then left to harden. Then the grass had grown and been slashed and died. So there was no smoothness to it, she had to pick and stumble her way across rough clods. She aimed for a tree, a squat, sad, lonely specimen, but one which at least gave her direction, some idea of purpose. But as she lurched onwards, it appeared to get no closer. No doubt some trick of perspective.

The future houses – residences – rose before her in the empty space.

As if stepping through the door of the idea, it occurred to Lora that maybe they should buy a house here. It would solve a lot of problems, she thought, vague as to what they might be. Security. More space. A pool for Cloudy, a tennis court. A teenage retreat. Cloudy would after all be a teenager in a few years. She could bring her friends over. It was better, everyone said, to have them come to your house, so you knew where they were, rather than roaming about. A house that would encompass every need they had, recreation, entertainment, resort. Big enough to hold their world. She could be swimming right here one day, doing solemn laps of these dry furrows.

Lora glanced back towards Neil's house. From here it looked not so big, really, not as big as she had originally thought. Size was all a matter of perspective. Not watching where she was going, she stumbled on a clod and the pain in her ankle snapped her out of her dreams. She laughed at herself, a little uneasily. Wondering at the person she had become who could even for a moment entertain the idea of playing tennis, tucked up behind walls in a gated community, swiping a card to get into her own house, locking the gates behind her to keep everyone else out.

The shadow that she was hardly aware of anymore tugged at her a little, trailed behind her as she walked, holding back, reluctant to leave. Oh, come along, Lora thought, as if she was dragging a reluctant Cloudy away from a display of brand new toys. Though of course she was alone.

Rumpus

Thursdays they went to what Cloudy calls the ‘big shops,’ a giant shopping centre twenty minutes drive away down the Freeway. It gave Lora a chance to buy more exotic fruits and vegetables than she could get at the Plaza. She could get a decent coffee, Cloudy liked looking at the toys and Lora would get her some little treat. A break in the week, even if it was just more shopping.

As they drove down the Constance Way, Lora saw Ashlee walking down the road. Her head was down, the wind tangled the fine black chiffon of her skirt around her legs, her heavy boots lifted and fell. Lora pulled up next to her and wound down her window. ‘Hi Ashlee. Need a lift?’

The girl turned her black eyes on Lora. She weighed it up for a long minute, but on cue the thin rain began to fall, and the comfort of the offer must have won out against being stuck in a car with a boring adult neighbour. She climbed in. ‘Ash,’ she said, tugging the black skirt out of the way of the door. ‘Call me Ash. I hate Ashlee. It sounds like a toddler on an American sitcom.’

Lora liked her turn of phrase, the way her mind worked. ‘Where are you going?’

‘You could just drop me at the bus station at the Plaza. Please.’ Lora could remember adolescence, that sense of being helplessly adrift in a world of identities, unable to find one that was fixed enough to hold onto.

‘Are you sure? We’re going to Stonefields but I don’t mind going out of our way if you’re going in that direction.’

Ash shook her head. ‘Bus stop’s fine.’

‘How’s your rat?’ Lora said.

‘What rat?’ said Cloudy, perking up from the back seat.

‘Ash has a rat for a pet. She takes it for walks on her shoulder.’

‘Can I see? Can I see?’ Cloudy was twisting against her constraints.

‘No, she doesn’t have it now. Only sometimes.’ Lora could feel Ash staring at her, wondering if she was being mocked. Lora, waiting for a car to pass at the intersection, turned to meet the challenge

in her face. 'I always wanted pet mice when I was small,' she went on. But I was never allowed to have them. Mum hated them and Dad, well, let's say that wouldn't have worked.'

'Rats are heaps better than mice,' Ash said. 'They have more personality. And they don't smell. People don't understand rats. They're afraid of them. It's race memory stuff.' She looked at Lora to see if she is following. 'You know. From the bubonic plague and stuff. So people still hate them. Which is stupid.'

'I don't hate them!' Cloudy chimed in. 'I love them.'

'What's yours called?' Lora scanned the road.

Ash paused, then gave a wicked sideways grin. 'Well. He's called Bubo.'

Lora laughed out loud. 'Now that's what I call irony.'

Ash shook her head. 'Nah. Irony's been done to death. I think it's more like...facing things down, you know? Putting it all out there. Calling it by its name.'

Lora turned on the heater. As the warmth rose it brought a mixture of smells exuding from the girl. Patchouli perhaps, a hint of cheap hair dye recently applied, with an undeniable musky hint of vermin. Lora stared with pity at the thin frail arms, the face riveted with metal as if attacked by a stud gun. What about you? she thought. Do you call your problems by their names? Highly aware of Cloudy in the back seat, Lora framed a careful question. 'Ash...When you said you missed him... you didn't mean...did you...Max, the man, the husband...from that house? The one like ours?'

Ash snorted. 'Him! He was an asshole. Not likely.'

'But you knew them?'

Ash nodded, reluctant, gazing out the window.

'Have you only got one?' Cloudy said from the back.

Ash half-turned her head. 'Rat? Yeah. I had another one. He was grey. He was called Titanic.'

Lora had to think about that one. 'Rats deserting a sinking ship? I like it.'

'Yep. But Bubo is better.' Ash picked at her black nail polish. 'Mum got rid of him. Titanic. She said he was unhygienic. I don't know what she did with him. Said he must have escaped from this cage, got away, but I think she killed him. So I didn't even react. I just went out the next day and got

Bubo. I've got my own money. She can't stop me. I told her if she does it again, I'll just get another one, a female, and breed them. She knows I'll do it.'

There didn't seem much to say to this. After a moment, Lora decided to have one more try. 'Was that what you meant? Who you miss?' Ash didn't reply. They arrived at the bus station. The shelter was bleak, a bent metal frame housing semi-pornographic advertisements for underwear, already defaced. It was such a depressing place, with such an air of underlying threat, that Lora hardly wanted to leave Ash there. But the girl was already unbuckling her seatbelt. She leaped out of the car. 'Thanks for the lift.' She held onto the door, looking away, then turned and leaned in. 'I was just a bit, you know, drunk. It was no one. Someone I made up. Imaginary. That's what Mum said anyway.'

Ash shook her head. 'But I can still miss him. Anyway, see ya.' She slammed the door.

Lora watched the girl settle herself in the dingy shelter, her movements in her black skirts both jerky and graceful. The girl had this habit, of dropping statements and then disappearing, leaving the words hanging, words both highly particular and pointed, but also elusive and resisting meaning. Lora put the car in gear and drove away.

'Why did she kill him? Why did the mum kill the rat?' Cloudy said, from the back seat.

Lora shifted a little. 'Oh, I don't think she did, darling. I think the rat just died. And Ash felt bad about it.'

'But why did it die then?'

Lora sighed, knowing the conversation would last the length of the trip, and beyond.

Stonefield shopping centre was reputed to be the largest in the southern hemisphere, and growing all the time. The carparks stretched in all directions but were somehow always full.

Lora circled the vast expanse of bitumen. On one extreme edge was a tiny old bluestone cottage, surrounded by a plot of land and an chainlink fence, complete with security signs. It had its back turned defiantly to the carpark, and faced out over the paddocks. From its front windows probably nothing much had changed. From its back windows, another world had grown. This was the house still subject to the ongoing dispute between the shopping centre owners and the local historical

society. It was clinging onto existence against the concrete tide, but the final appeal for historical significance seemed destined to fail. It was nothing special, the developers argued. Just a house people were making a fuss of because it had happened to survive so long. And it was falling down anyway. Lora felt a slight guilt, glancing at it. She could probably help the campaign. Do some research. But she didn't want to get involved, not now. It was clearly doomed, this tiny relic, it looked absurd, whatever meaning it had was surely lost. And she had too much else to think about.

Cloudy whined from the back seat. 'I thought we were *there*.'

Lora swore under her breath as a car coming the wrong way zipped into the single spare space in the whole row. They could go to the multistorey carpark that rose like a monolith overhead, but Lora was phobic about them. The darkness, the slow spiral down the narrow ramps, the weight of concrete and cars overhead. She caught sight of someone putting bags into a boot and stopped resolutely behind, sitting it out until the woman had finished fussing with the shopping, and got into the car, and adjusted the mirror, and touched up her makeup, and finally left. Lora parked and turned off the ignition. Around her people with anxious faces wheeled trolleys piled high with enormous plastic bags which they stuffed into the backs and boots of cars. A horn beeped. Another car had pulled up behind and was making frantic gestures to ask if she was leaving. She shook her head and opened the door.

Harsh voices came from the couple at the next car. The man was cramming a large multicoloured box into the back seat. 'It's a piece of crap,' he said.

'I don't care if it's crap. It's big, it looks spectacular, he'll be happy. It's done, alright,' said the woman. 'Let's face it, the main thing is he can brag to his mates about it.'

'It'll be broken by Monday,' said the man.

'I don't give a shit what happens on Monday,' said the woman.

Lora coughed as she breathed in exhaust fumes, closed her mouth and took another, cautious breath, through her nostrils. She set Cloudy on the bitumen and took her hand firmly and began to weave through the cars, teaching Cloudy to watch for the red tail lights that warned of drivers about to pull out, unaware who might be behind them.

The shopping centre was a cavernous thing, with a huge central void through which escalators rose towards the ceiling in an Escher-like zigzag formation. Lora headed for the electrical department. Neil had asked her to pick up the special blades for his fancy electric shaver. She took a firm grip on Cloudy's hand and walked through gleaming rows of white and silver objects which fanned out in all directions. A maze of metal and enamel, lined with seething layers of people's pressed flesh. She wished for a ball of silver string to unravel behind her, to find her way back, all the way back to the house. But she was jostled from behind, and headed into one of the aisles. It was toasters, and kettles.

'Oh look, Mummy,' Cloudy said, letting go of her hand. She picked up a pop-corn popper shaped like a duck. The popcorn apparently vomited out from the duck's mouth, not particularly enticing, Lora thought. Then, across the aisle, a familiar form caught Lora's eye. The helmet of blonde hair, the smooth features. It was the neighbour from the mirror house. Still expressionless, but there was a furtiveness about her movements and she clutched a big, bulging handbag. She was looking around, moving her head from side to side, and had her hand thrust deep into the bag. Lora took a couple of steps forward, wondering. Then, very quickly, the woman reached into the bag and placed a hairdryer on the shelf. It was clearly used. The cord dangled limply amongst the gleaming new models and intact boxes, and the metal was dull – even from where Lora was she could see a smear of soap on it. The woman scuttled off and Lora watched her disappear, perplexed. She of course knew of kleptomania. Perhaps this was a reverse form of it. People becoming so weighed down by the accumulation of objects that they returned them, one by one. To their natural habitat, Lora thought, smiling to herself. Maybe it was a growing trend.

She turned to reach again for Cloudy's hand.

The child was not there.

Lora turned, slowly, once, then faster, again, then stopped and stared about her to the left, to the right.

The floor fell, the walls receded, her breath was sucked into the void. She forced herself to draw a breath and took the few steps back to where the loathsome popcorn duck leered on its stand. It

was moments, minutes, seconds – how long? how long? – since she was standing right here, she could not be far away. Cloudy knew not to go with anyone. Didn't she? Lora elbowed her way to the end of the aisle through the churning mass of people. It was hopeless, the aisles led in all directions, the crowds were so thick she could see nothing past them, she could not hear anything past the awful tinny music and the voices of strangers and the clack of announcements, could not hear a small voice calling 'Mummy.'

Panicking now, Lora called out 'Cloudy! CLOUDY!,' aware but past caring that she would look mad, that this was not a word people thought was a name, only she, Lora, knew the small person, the gaping absence where a child had been. There was a momentary hush, a brief pause as people glanced at her, then shuffled away, wanting nothing to do with this, wanting only to tick off their lists, not having time for deranged women shouting random words in the middle of the electrical department.

Oh God, where is she? Lora became intensely aware of the moment, this moment, from which two entirely different futures separated off. That Cloudy was nearby, that she would turn up, in the next aisle, or some kind woman would bring her by the hand, and Lora would take her home; or that even now she was being carried away, or molested, some unspeakable man was doing some unthinkable thing to her right at this minute and she would never be the same, or would not come back at all.

This, all in a split second. She ran to a counter, pushing past queued customers.

'Hey, wait your turn lady,' a man said.

She leant across the counter to the girl. 'Please, please, my child is missing.' Her face must have been terrible, the young girl's mouth opened, she looked from Lora to the angry man. 'Oh. I'll just...' she had a blender in her hand

'No, please, can you call her, call security...' Lora wanted to take this girl, not much more than a child herself, and shake her into action.

An impeccably made up woman turned from where she had finished serving. 'I'll deal with this Amy, you attend to the customers. Now, just calm yourself and take a breath.'

‘My child. My child is missing.’

The woman picked up a phone. ‘Alright, don’t panic, this happens all the time, believe me. Now, what’s her name?’

‘Cloudy. Cloudy Hoffman. Please hurry.’

‘Cloudy? Really? OK.’

It was agony to stand still. Lora stepped away from the counter, wondering if she should go back to where they had been. She saw a knee-high display and climbed on it, setting a pile of dishes to trembling but past caring. Nothing, nothing, a sea of unloved faces. She checked her watch. How long had it been? Five minutes? Longer?

She will be here, she will be here somewhere. Lora was impelled to move, standing still was unbearable. She jumped from the display and began systematically grinding her way down the aisles. The rows and rows of things were obscene, offensive, gleaming piled boxes and boxes of more things than anyone in the whole world could use, a mire of metal and enamel and coiled electric cord, garish colours and shiny surfaces seethed, it was endless, and between them the press of people, hands reaching, packed together so that Lora pushed and squeezed through barriers of flesh, so that she had to shove, to put her shoulder between two bodies and shove, something fell, something crashed, she was sworn at, but pushed on, leaving behind a trail of curses, but still she went on, up and down the endless aisles which contained everything in the world, but not her daughter.

Lora raised her eyes and there, past the doors, in the central void, she saw her child on the escalators. Cloudy was rising up, floating, her face turned up and glowing in the light. Beside her was the dreadlocked youth from the supermarket.

Oh my fucking god. Lora ran, mindless now, shoving people out of the way, shouting though she knew they were too far away. She shouldered her way up the escalators but at the top there was nothing beyond the swarm of people like maggots, the maze of shops, the escalators going up, down. Lora span around and began to sob. She took a breath and by sheer force of will told herself that hysterics weren’t going to find Cloudy. She saw a man, a bearlike man in a uniform, in the distance,

standing in the entry to a shop, and ran to him. 'My daughter,' she gasped. 'She's...she's been taken, she...'

The man snapped to attention and pulled out a walkie-talkie.

'Please please please' Lora was saying, not sure who she was addressing, and there was a ringing so high in her ears she could hear nothing but her own mental screaming.

'Right, now start from the beginning,' he said in slow, pompous tones. It was all Lora could do not to hit him, not a slap but a punch, hard, in the face, hard as she could.

'We...were in the electrical department – I turned away – she was gone – but I saw her – on the escalators – coming up here – there was a boy, a young man...' Lora knew none of this was doing any good. She heard an announcement over the speakers. Lost child. Brown hair. Anyone seeing.

She was gone, it was too late. I'll kill myself, Lora thought. Without Cloudy I'll kill myself. It was no comfort, simply a fact inserting itself into the situation.

The guard's radio crackled and burred.

He grunted and grinned and started speaking but Lora could not hear it at first.

'What?' Lora said. 'What?'

'There's a little girl with Security. About five? Curly brown hair?'

Lora's entire body went so limp it was all she could do to remain upright. 'Are you sure? Is it her? But I saw...'

The walkie talkie hissed and crackled and the man spoke into it.

'She says her name...is it Cloudy? Is that right?'

'Yes,' Lora said. 'Yes.'

'Well, I don't think we get many called that.'

He directed her to the place, one of those anonymous Staff Only doors down bland corridors that are in stark contrast to the glitz of the Centre. And there was her child, in the care of a smiling security guard, a woman this time, matronly, comforting. Cloudy swinging on a stool, face tear-stained, but clutching a toy, a tiny koala with cantilevered claws that clutched on to things.

'Mummy!' she cried. 'Where did you go? I couldn't find you!' and flung herself into Lora's arms.

Lora couldn't speak at first, she wanted to burst into tears herself, or to take Cloudy and shake and shake her, for scaring her, or just to melt into a pool in the ground and never get up again. But she composed herself, took several breaths until she was able to say, calmly. 'I was right there darling. We must have just, I don't know, missed each other somehow.'

The woman smiled at Lora. 'She wouldn't have a lolly. Said she wasn't allowed to take lollies from people she doesn't know. That's good, you've trained her well.'

'How did she...get here?'

The guard scratched her knee and shrugged. 'One of the other guards just brought her in.'

'But... ' Lora thought, I'm losing it. I'm seeing that boy now when he's not even there. Lora sat on the offered chair and took Cloudy on her knee. 'It's OK now darling. Tell me what happened.'

Cloudy gazed up tearfully. 'You were just gone! And I went to look but couldn't find you. Then I was crying because I was scared. And I looked some more. Then this man came up and said was I lost. And I said I was. And he said he knew who I was, and knew my mummy.'

'The guard? The man in the brown uniform?'

Cloudy shook her head. 'No, the other one. He smelled funny. He had funny hair. He said he knew you and he would look after me.'

Oh God oh God, the litany of the pedophile. Please no, Lora thought. 'But I've told you Cloudy. I've told you a hundred times! If you are lost just stay where you are and let me find you, or you ask the ladies in the shop. You don't ever ever go with someone. Especially a man you don't know! Didn't I tell you?'

Cloudy's eyes brimmed over with tears and her mouth turned down. 'I forgot. I didn't know. I didn't remember.' Lora stopped. It was her own fault, not Cloudy's.

'Then what did he do?' she said as gently as she could.

'He said we should up the eskliators to see that policeman-man, with the brown hat. And they would call for you. And the brown policeman took me here and said did I want a lolly and I said no. So they gave me this koala. They said I could keep it. Can I keep it, Mummy?'

‘Of course. If they said so. But this other person. He didn’t...do anything else? Take you anywhere else?’ Lora knew she should not lead the child but she had to know, she could think of no other way.

‘No. He was nice. He took me straight to the policeman. But...’ Cloudy’s face turned thoughtful. She fiddled with the toy. ‘Look! You press here and the hands open. Then they close. When you let go. See?’

Lora licked her lips. ‘But what, baby?’

‘He said silly things. Can’t we go home now Mummy?’ Cloudy said. She was on the verge of tears again. ‘I want to go home. I’m hungry. I don’t like this place.’

‘Yes,’ Lora said, giving it up for now. ‘We’ll go. I don’t like this place either.’

Cloudy was quiet in the car. Lora, gently, asked again what the man had said, what was silly.

‘Well. He said he was an angel. He said he was my brother. But angels have wings, don’t they, like the one on the Christmas tree. And I don’t have any brothers. Emilia has a brother, but he’s a baby. Will you have a baby one day, Mummy? If you had another baby I would be a sister too.’

‘I, oh, I don’t think so darling. No.’ Lora forced herself to concentrate on the tricky job of getting the car safely out of the carpark. When she glanced back Cloudy had fallen asleep. A common reaction to stress, in small children, she knew.

Lora wondered if she should call the police. But it was absurd, she had nothing but conjecture. A young man I think I saw around the area might be watching us, or on the other hand might have just happened to be there in a public place. Or not. And if he was he did nothing wrong. Did, in fact, the best he could by the child. Go out and round him up, officer. Put him away. Lora shook her head. At the same time he was a strange man, saying disturbing things, maybe watching them.

Driving back from the shopping centre the car was pointed towards the city. At the turnoff for Falconara, Lora felt a momentary resistance to turning the wheel. The light wisps of suggestion and history and memory that Falconara Lakes emanated were beginning to gel together around her. She was tempted to keep going, to get out while she still could, to drive on. Just drive, and keep going, and

see what happened. But she had nothing in the car, no money in the bank, and a tired and traumatized child in the backseat. The car was not even hers, in any real sense. Turning them into fugitives was hardly a solution. Lora smiled, wanly, to herself.

At home, with Cloudy still sleeping, Lora sat with her hands around her coffee cup, staring through the back door towards the mirror house, though not seeing it. She stood abruptly, setting down her cup hard. She went to the shed. At the back of it were leftover buckets of paint, and she took the heaviest of them, a half full four litre tub of dark brown decking stain. The handle hurt her hand as she struggled with it through to the front of the house, outside, and around to the driveway of the For Sale house. She stood looking for a long time at the picture on the fence. It was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen, she thought, even as she wrenched open the paint, and heaved up the bucket with two hands, and obliterated it.

Piling

There is no place here for the boy. The empty lot is not empty, it is swarming with men thumping and hammering and banging. Their radios are set a full volume on different channels: *string the bloody lot of em up*, yells one. *Should be bloody shot*. Another, to thumping music, screams: *yo bitch whatcha gunna do, ho*. The ugly words are being hammered into the walls they are building, they'll never get out now. He turns away.

He finds a perfect small smooth concrete post, jammed randomly into the footpath, and begins his drawing. Then, someone is beside him. He can feel eyes. Mostly, people don't see him. Mostly, they don't want to. He keeps drawing, eyes rigid on the chalk at the end of his fingers. But a voice says, hey, and it seems to be talking to him. He hunches his shoulder and turns his head behind it, he slides his eyes only towards the voice. It is the girl in black. She is staring at him with her black-rimmed, black-teared eyes, outlined in silver dots.

A rat is on her shoulder. It bobs its head up. The boy knows what rats want. They want everything you have. It twitches and whispers in her ear. The girl looks at the wall, then looks back at his face. Is it you? she says. It is you.

It is alarming, this insistence. This knowledge which has come courtesy of the rat, which would eat him if it could. The creature stares at him, lifting its front paws, sniffing and nodding.

The boy ducks and fumbles, he gathers up his chinks and bag. All the time shaking his head, so fast the thick ropes of his hair hit his cheek hard enough to hurt. The rat smiles.

Wait, she calls after him. I'm sorry. Please don't.

These words are even worse, he has heard them before. Those words, a different voice. A flinching, a cringe, a resistance.

He runs blindly and keeps his head down. He finds himself in front of a gate. It creaks open with a long low moan and he shuffles forward, watching only his feet, until one of them is stopped short with a sharp jolt of pain. He squats. His toe has hit a flat surface the height of his ankle. It is an

orangey colour like clay, and smooth. These are the steps. There are thirteen of them and at the top is the door. He climbs them one by one, thirteen times until he is at the top.

This is not the brown house of the mother and child, and the man. This is the first house in this world.

He opens his chalk-box but there is no chalk left in it, only the small object filmed in dust. It is hard, and cold. The secret his mother gave him.

He takes it out and slides it into the lock, and turns the handle.

His secret opens the door.

Retreat

There are stories that lose power in the telling: I lost Cloudy in the shopping centre; someone found her and brought her back. People could grasp the facts, Lora thought, be sympathetic, but they could not understand the power of it.

The path had forked, their lives had followed one side, the good one, the right one, after all. End of story. The unthinkable one had receded back to where nightmares are stored. It was hard to describe the reality of that other path, how real it had been at that moment, how real it still was. A whole life with Cloudy gone, injured, molested, lost in one way or another.

Neil was sympathetic, but from that distance. 'No harm done,' he said, along with other hearty clichés. Lora adopted the same tone herself, for other people. 'Well there goes my bid for Mother of the Year,' she said to Ann-maree. 'I just hope she doesn't try it on again, to add to her collection of koalas.'

But it had frightened her, that she had lost Cloudy, and who or what had found her. I did not even want to be in that place, Lora thought. I hate big shopping centres. She felt that she had signed a contract without reading the fine print, without even knowing it was there, and was now living out some life that belonged to her less and less, that seemed to belong to someone else entirely.

It was Saturday, but Neil was working away at the computer. He was increasingly busy these days, almost frantic, hunted. It was a crazy time, was what he said, if she asked, and would say no more.

She tapped on the open door, now, and came in. 'Hey. Can I interrupt?' The chair in Neil's study was large and black and padded. His back was to the door, so she could only see the very top of his head, manicured salt-and-pepper waves, peeping over the backrest. He closed down a website, opened up a spreadsheet. His fingers worried away at the keyboard. 'What?'

Lora moved further in. 'I just wanted to talk to you. About the house.'

The tapping stopped but he did not turn. 'What about it?' His tone was flat.

‘Do you think...are you happy here?’ Lora eased her way, not entirely sure of where she was going.

‘Why not? Why do you ask?’ Now he swivelled to look at her. His face was smooth as always. Even on the weekends he shaved closely, and had a skincare routine as meticulous as any woman’s. A different kind of mask.

‘I just feel...I don’t know. I just can’t seem to settle in here,’ Lora came around to the desk and leant on the edge of it. She picked up a silver pen from a round device that held it at a forty-five degree angle. The pen was cold and surprisingly heavy.

‘New places always take getting used to. Of course you feel a bit thrown by everything.’ His fingers drummed on the arm of the chair.

Lora clicked the pen nib in and out. ‘Maybe. But maybe it’s not quite right.’

He took the pen out of her hand and placed it back in its holder. ‘What are you suggesting, that we move? Now?’

Lora shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I wouldn’t mind being closer to the city. Maybe not right now, of course, but we could sort of plan it, for later, maybe, next year.’ Just the thought, that there might be a way out, an open door, made her feel lighter. She could do some looking herself, check a few websites. There must be other places. Find another house, maybe smaller, closer in.

Neil took an audible breath. ‘I have to say your timing is excellent. The minute we are in the house, and settled, and Cloudy is in Kinder making friends, and everything is finally out of boxes and working, then you start thinking about the next move. Seriously, Lora.’

‘I’m just not sure if I’m comfortable.’

‘Comfortable.’ The chair creaked as Neil leant back. ‘Compared to those other places you lived? I would have thought comfortable is exactly what it is. I’ve gone to a lot of effort to make it exactly that. Besides, Cloudy is perfectly happy even if you’re not.’

Lora crossed her arms to stop herself fidgeting. ‘Oh no. I know she is. I am too. I’m grateful. It is all very pleasant, the house itself.’

‘Lora, don’t you think this is more to do with you? You seem to have had a problem settling in one place. Or maybe you just can’t accept finally being in a nice home. Maybe some part of you thinks you don’t deserve it.’

There was a fine line, Lora had always thought, between using psychology to understand people, and using it as a means of not hearing what they were saying. Amateur analysis as weaponry, both shield and a sword. So now she just said, ‘I suppose so. Maybe.’

‘I’ve often thought perhaps you should get some counselling, Lora. Deal with some of your issues. I can give you a number.’ He reached towards his business card file.

‘I’ll think about it. I’m fine, really. And you’re probably right, about being unsettled. I just wondered how you felt.’

‘Well, now you know. I really need to get on with this.’ He swivelled around in his chair and began typing again. Lora may not have understood the finer details of finance, but knew by his hammering fingers that someone was getting screwed.

He was still gruff and uncommunicative at dinner. It was spaghetti, and Cloudy, oblivious to the aura of adults, was chattering about Kinder. Mid-sentence, she reached across to grab the Parmesan, almost upsetting Neil’s wineglass. He grasped at the glass with one hand, and slapped Cloudy on her fingers with the other.

‘Neil, what the hell was that?’ Lora was gobsmacked.

‘What?’ Neil took a swig of his wine. ‘I’ve told her time and again not to do that.’ He wiped his mouth with a napkin and deliberately placed his glass further to the side. Despite his words, Lora thought that he was surprised himself, shocked even, at his action.

‘But you don’t hit her. You never. Hit.’ Lora had trouble getting the word out.

Neil sighed. ‘Don’t you start on me with that line. I’ve been through that once. There was no way any court in the world would call that a ‘hit’. It was a tap. A slap on the wrist. Literally. There’s a reason they call it that. Because it is nothing.’ He stood up and took his plate to the sink. ‘I used to give my daughter a few smacks and it never hurt her.’

This was news to Lora. And where is your daughter now, she thought, but did not say.

Cloudy, unhurt, more puzzled than anything, was looking up at their faces, one to the other, waiting to see if she was in trouble, or Neil was, or what the rules might have been broken, or changed.

‘Just don’t...don’t...’ Lora breathed and started again. ‘I just don’t believe in physical punishment. Of any kind. Ever.’ It was the right tactic, deflecting the issue back onto herself. It allowed Neil to sigh and ostentatiously closed his eyes for a count of ten. He opened them again and held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. ‘Fine, fine. Modern parenting methods. You’re the mother and all that. I shall never do it again,’ he said, the words mocking, overdramatic. He made a cross over his heart. ‘I promise. And Claudia, I deeply apologise for my unseemly behaviour.’

Cloudy was too small to understand subtext, irony, the battle of wills taking place through her physical being, but not about her. But she had an instinct for the falseness in his voice. ‘OK,’ she said uncertainly. ‘What’s for sweets?’

Neil and Lora laughed, and the tension broke. Lora hugged her. ‘Anything you want my darling,’ she says. ‘Anything that we have.’ She took up Cloudy’s hand and kissed it, a regular gesture of affection, not trying to make a point. But Neil noticed and turned away again. ‘Nothing for me,’ he said, and went through to turn on the news.

Lora watched Cloudy swirling ice-cream in her bowl. She liked to melt it almost to liquid, then scoop it up, just as Lora had when she was a child. Lora remembered staring into her ice cream bowl fixedly, swirling her spoon around and around, not eating it, but keeping her eyes down while angry voices criss-crossed the kitchen. Eyes down, stay still, don’t listen to the words. Put up the walls. Cloudy, her soft-edged child, was she laying all this down in her brain, her mind still growing, not yet formed? Sensing her mother’s gaze, Cloudy glanced up. ‘Look Mummy, it’s a chocolate lake, and here’s me jumping in.’ She lifted up her small spoon and brought it down hard. Drops flicked onto the table. ‘Splash! I’m swimming in the lake.’ Lora smiled. I worry too much, she thought. Or else not enough. She wondered exactly how much worry was the right amount, for a mother, about a child.

Later Lora settled Cloudy in her bath with her toy ducks, the whole thing apparently forgotten. Perhaps I overreacted, Lora thought. They had agreed that there was a point to teaching table manners, and Neil had often told Cloudy about reaching across the table. But the reality was that Neil's action was not a reasoned response to a pre-agreed program. It was lashing out. He was in a bad mood and frustrated, about what, he still would not tell her, and he had channelled his tension into causing Cloudy a small pain. Like a rehearsal, practising a gesture that would only become larger. Lora, chilled, thought: I have only his word for what happened with his ex, his own daughter. What would they tell me?

She wandered to the big back window and stared out across the lights of Falconara. The mirror house showed as a dark space across the water. She wondered about Catherine, and her husband, who lived and died there. They would have been happy, once. They must have been. They would have been in love, there would have been a wedding – huge, grand, no doubt, with a long guest list and a fancy reception place, and a dress costing thousands, and flowers, and speeches. A honeymoon on pale tropical sand. Trust, hope, plans. Two smiling faces, arms wrapped around each other. Behind the picture, something waited, and grew.

Lora dropped her eyes to their own garden.

At the edge of the lake a baby floated facedown in the water.

For a moment Lora was transfixed, her body simply refusing to comply with the demands of her mind. Then she fled, almost falling again down the stairs, ignoring Neil's shout, breaking nails at the glass doors, down the terraces, she snatched and cursed at the catch on the fence, and finally reached the water's edge. Even as she raced to the brink and leaned down over the water, before she touched the outstretched arm, she knew it wasn't a real infant. Too rigid, too small. She seized the tiny hand and brought up a plastic doll, the snaggle toothed thing that she had rejected at the market.

The purple mouth grinned and dripped. Icy water gushed from its armpit and ran down Lora's sleeve, chilling her. Lora just stared at it, numb.

She was tired of all this, too tired to try to make sense of it. To even begin contemplating the combination of circumstances that could possibly have led to this doll being here in this lake at this moment was exhausting.

Lora cradled the doll in her arm. Cloudy. She turned around and retraced her steps, almost as quickly as before. Neil was standing in the dining area saying, 'Lora, what the hell?' but Lora ignored him, racing back up to the bathroom, where Cloudy was singing and making the ducks talk to each other. Oblivious, happy.

Cloudy glanced up at her mother. 'Oh! You found her.'

'What?' Lora said.

Cloudy pointed. 'My dolly.'

'Yours? But Cloudy, where did this come from?' Lora had been completely unaware she was still clutching the doll.

Cloudy gave that look children give when their parents are being rather dim. 'From the market.'

'But. We didn't buy her. I said no.'

Cloudy smiled. 'But now she's here, I can keep her can't I?'

'No...yes...but Cloudy how did she get here?'

'I thought you got her. For a surprise.' Cloudy's eyes were wide and guileless and her answers were direct but Lora was no wiser. 'But. Did you see her after the market, but before this?'

'What?' steam curled from Cloudy's hand, still outstretched for the doll.

'When did you see her here first? Before tonight, but in the house, not at the market?' Lora's aching brain could not frame a question the right way.

'What?'

Lora stared at the doll but its purple mouth was smugly silent. She shook it, hard, over the sink, and some water dribbled out. She wanted to throw the thing back in the lake, or put it in the bin, but she knew Cloudy would ask. 'She's wet and dirty. She's been in the lake. I'll wash her first. Then you can have her.'

'She could come in the bath with me!'

‘No, Cloudy.’

‘Why?’

Lora sagged, and internally screamed. She would find a way, later, to ask the right question, to unpick the mystery. Maybe Ann-maree knew something about it. For now she took the plastic thing and left the room without another word.

In bed that night Lora dreamed, or maybe remembered. She was tiny, she was walking through a giant mouth. Her father was there, he had brought her for a special outing, on one of his sporadic visits. Clown faces turned and turned, they watched her as she walked. She was frightened, she cried, her father was angry because this was a treat, he scowled and turned away so that she could not see his face, only his short dark hair and the curve of his ear. Lora tried to smile, to be happy, because that’s what daddy wanted, but there was a ghost house and a monster burst through a door and laughed and frightened her again and her father swore. He thrust pink fluffy stuff on a stick at her but it dissolved to nothing in her mouth and stuck to her hair and her fingers, a sticky cobwebby tangle she could not put down. House of Mirrors, how about that, that looks fun, nothing to frighten you there her father said, shoving her through the door, there, nothing to scare you, you go through while daddy has a smoke.

Through the door Lora was surrounded by the long legs of grownups, she could not see anything other than the legs, she cried out daddy! but he did not come and she did not know how to get out. Then the legs moved as a group through a door and she was alone. Now she could see that all the walls were mirrors, all around, and the mirrors showed a child, a small grubby child with matted hair and pink smears on her face, her mouth open and turned down, an ugly expression. Lora was frightened and raised her hand to her mouth and the other child did too, and all the other children reflected in the glass raised their hands, and Lora was left with only this horrible child, so many of her. No one would ever come. She was trapped with only herself, forever. Hundreds of herself, and all alone. Tears streamed down her face, warm liquid gushed down her leg as she wet her pants, she was drenched.

Lora woke in a hot sweat. She could not bear the weight of the covers on her and scrambled out of bed. She went to the bathroom and splashed water on her face, stumbled downstairs and made a cup of tea. But then could find no place to settle with it. She did not want to sit in view of the mirror house, she did not want to go into the Sitting Room, its bare white spaces. Eventually she sat on the stairs.

She had made a mistake. This was not working. She was not happy. That strange young man was hanging about, she did not know what he wanted, she did not want to call the police on him but could not help him. She had been muddled because of his pictures. Because this place, where everything was doubled, everything was a replica of something else, was getting such a hold on her that for a moment she had conjured him into a son who was dead before he could ever be formed. But he was not. He was not her problem. As for Catherine, she was long dead, there was nothing Lora could do for her now, and imagining some connection was morbid and pointless.

The idea of leaving, that Lora could just pack a bag for Cloudy and one for herself, was like a door opening, just a sliver, and light coming through. If Neil did not want to leave, she could go without him. It struck her as revolutionary, the notion that she had always had that option. She did care about Neil a great deal, and was grateful to him, and felt sorry for him. But if he wouldn't listen to her, if he wouldn't talk to her, if he had secrets already he would not share, then they could not build a life. Not here. He could stay, if he wanted to.

She would feel guilty, too, for Cloudy's sake, for a time. Cloudy, after all, had been happy. She was making friends - she had Emilia's birthday party tomorrow - and she loved her Kinder and had nice things for once in her life. But that just showed how adaptable she was. She would quickly make new friends, in a new place. In fact maybe now was exactly the time to do it, before she started school. It was not right, here, and it was time to face that fact, and to move on once again.

She hated this house. That was the truth of it.

Anchor bolt

The door closes. Blackness inside, but the boy is not afraid of that. Empty spaces, but that is familiar too. The house settles and clears its throat and waits to see what he will do. The rooms are filled with thick darkness but when he stands very still for a while the house reveals itself to him, as if it is remembering. It shows only a little, though, just a few edges of walls, a curving gleam where the stairs are. He sets down his bag inside the doorway. He moves forward with his hand outstretched. It finds a wall and guides him through, to the back. He walks until he touches softness, and then pulls the dusty curtains open. Light leaks in from outside, and he can see better.

It is not so bad as he thought, in the house. Without furnishings and decorations there are only blank walls in the dim light. It is very still, and very quiet. And there are no smells of cooking, of perfume, of chemical fresheners. Just neutral air and emptiness. As if it is brand new. As if none of it has happened. Though that means it is all yet to happen and he does not want to think about that. The house is not just a place but a passing point from one to the other, a space where that passing is contained. From life to death, from the past to the future. The boy curls up in it, curls into himself in the centre of the tiles, at the bottom of the stairs, a hot shape of pink-brown against the cold black and white until the tiles push him upright again.

Some rooms, he can't enter. The air in the doorways turns him away. He constructs a cardboard and cloth bed in a room blank of meaning, but he can't sleep, not yet. If he does not think, but only feels, being here brings a glimmer of remembered comfort.

He climbs the stairs and stands at the top. The stairs have changed least of all. They never had any furniture, or any smell, so nothing is different about them, they are as they always were. The most neutral places are the most dangerous, after all.

Guilt and shame and anguish flood him though he can't remember why. He sits on the top step and begins to weep. Snot and tears slide down his face and drip onto the wood.

There is a soft nudge at his back. For a brief second, he feels someone behind him, then above him. His mother. Just for a moment. Floating, flying. Then she is gone, again.

Central stair

Lora was lying on hard, polished boards. There was pain, in her face, her wrist, her shoulder. Her left cheek was weighted by her heavy head into a puddle of sticky warm liquid. The air was thick and hard to drag into her lungs. Blood cell rasped against blood cell as they laboured to push oxygen around her body. If she opened her eyes, needles came in. She closed them and felt her eyeballs grate against her lids.

Her ears were the only part of her body that worked without pain, and for now she existed only through the threads of sound that found their way to her. The sounds were those of a house, and listening to them, she felt that she understood the house and everything inside it. That sudden creak was the garage door cooling and retracting, a metallic shiver. The electrical wires hummed as they pulsed power around the house to the many objects that were not being used, but needed to be ready. A refrigerator gave a series of small coughs in response. Vents rattled as warm air breathed through them.

But as the sounds washed over her, she caught the whisper of others, somehow beneath or beyond these. Almost inaudible, but there. Footsteps on empty stairs. A pot shifting on a stove in a distant kitchen. The ticking of a clock, when clocks did not tick anymore. A murmur of voices. A door opening, banging shut. Television laughter, turned on briefly and turned off again in response to a shout. Ordinary, everyday sounds from elsewhere, humming beneath the sounds of this house.

Lora forced open her eyelids. Her right eye could see, hazily, a piece of polished wood, at a ninety degree angle to the floor. The light bouncing from the polish was painful. Just in front of this was a small drop of blood. A bright red drop, close enough that she could see the meniscus, the tension holding it into a perfect curve so that it did not lie flat, but was raised up a little, balanced, contained within its own skin. As if the blood was caught in the act of rising from the floorboards.

But houses do not bleed.

Lora's mind cleared. That blood has come out of me. I am injured. Something has happened.

And now she could have moved but was afraid to. There might be more blood. That small drop might represent vast amounts oozing out of her body from some terrible wound. Or worse, she might command her limbs to move and they may not respond.

She had no memory of how she came to be on this floor. No memory of where she was at all. Or exactly who, in any real sense. She was a simple site for sensations, hardly Lora at all. It was tempting to lie there, to dissolve into the floor and become part of it, solid and flat and straight. But her soft and complex body was hurting, and commanding her to move. Lora put her hand down to push herself up, but fell back down as pain shot through her wrist and blood made her hand slip. She clung to the floor. Her heart pounded and her breath quickened. She slowed her breathing and managed to raise herself on her elbow, and look around.

I should know this place, she thought. I don't know it, but I know I should.

Her hand had a thin smear of red but the blood was not coming from her hand. She touched her face and when she looked at her finger it was slick. She raised her sleeve to her face and dabbed at it. The sleeve came away dark red. The sleeve was pale, soft terry cloth. A dressing gown.

That shiny wood, meeting at ninety degrees, that was a stair. There was another above.

I've had an accident. I fell down these stairs. I'm hurt.

Her mind was rational, it could accept the data around her and draw conclusions. But it had become detached from any continuum of time, any sequence of memory that could locate this event in the course of a life. She existed, but had no context.

She picked up the bottom of the dressing gown and wiped her face with it. More blood.

My face is bleeding.

Lora examined her body, first with her eyes, then her good hand. Her right hand was bruised, her right wrist sore, but she thought not broken. She could make a fist. Her shoulder was wrenched. Her face hurt.

She turned her head and felt some pain in her neck, though not bad. Now she saw a pink plastic doll in the middle of the floor. She could not place the doll but it recalled the thought of her child.

‘Cloudy!’ she whispered, then cleared her throat and called aloud. Where was her daughter? Not here, she thought. She had heard the house. No one was here.

Another snatch of memory – standing at the top of the stairs and seeing the doll on the floor, all the way down there. Down here.

Lora got to her hands and knees, sending sharp pains through her head, and hauled herself up by the banister, clinging to it with her left hand, her right crossed against her chest. She could stand, but was dizzy and almost fell again. She sat down on the step, then tried again, and stood.

I fell down the stairs.

There was a phone on a small table. Lora stood, shakily. It wasn’t far to the phone, she would make it if she went carefully. She slid one foot forward.

But as she did there was a movement, someone else was here after all. A woman, with bright red hair and unnaturally red cheeks and a long white dress. Maybe a nurse. Again Lora felt she should know this woman, did know her somehow, would remember soon who it was but could not place her right now. The woman stared at her. ‘Hello? I think I fell,’ Lora said. ‘I think I’m hurt.’ The words were calm and sounded normal. The woman did not reply. Lora blinked. Her sight was fuzzy, her eyelids matted together. She wiped them. ‘Hello?’ she said again. The woman made a gesture with her hand, as if waving her away. Lora staggered a few steps and clutched at the wall and closed her eyes.

A sound, a door opened. Air came through the door, the atmosphere in the house shifted, the temperature altered slightly.

It was a man. That was Neil. Yes. Neil.

‘Jesus Christ, Lora what have you done?’ Neil moved towards her and put his arm around her.

Lora’s concern for her child was the door through which she returned to herself. ‘Where is Cloudy?’ she said.

‘Cloudy’s at Emilia’s birthday party. Remember? Serena picked her up, a couple of hours ago, they went to the park. What happened to you?’

I am Lora. This is Neil. Cloudy is safe. The words were there but they were still detached, floating behind or before their meaning. 'I think I had an accident. I think I hurt my head.'

Neil said they should go straight to the hospital. He grabbed Lora's coat and put it around her shoulders and ushered her through the door. Lora gave herself over, gratefully, to being cared for. 'But then who was that woman,' she said, her head hurting as she turned to look back through the house. 'Who was that? Don't leave her there. Don't lock her in.'

'There's no one here. Just you. Just us. You've had a concussion, you're confused,' Neil said, as the door closed behind them. Lora felt the shudder of the wood, heard the metal tongue of the lock sliding into its groove.

At the hospital people drew back from them in alarm as she lurched through Emergency on Neil's arm. She was ushered through and seen without delay. Her memory came and went in small slices, single images projected on a wall. 'What happened? Where's Cloudy?' she kept saying, and each time Neil told her again. She was at Emilia's. Neil had rung, Serena was fine to look after her for as long as it took.

The doctors or nurses checked her over, x-rayed her shoulder and wrist. She was laid out on a gurney and inserted head first into a metal tube for an MRI. The cut on her cheek needed five stitches.

'A fall,' she heard Neil saying, over and over as each doctor came through. 'She fell down the stairs. Must have hit her face on the banister.'

A doctor held the shadowed film of x-ray and frowned. 'There's a small bleed on your brain,' he said. 'Sub-arachnoid. It's the covering around the brain. You've burst a blood vessel and bled into this covering.' Brains needed houses, too, it appeared, and Lora's had bleeding walls like some cheap horror movie.

Lora was put into a hospital bed, given a private ward. She was on Neil's insurance. They had cleaned her up, but she was appalled when she got a chance to look in the mirror. Her right eye was surrounded by a tide of deep purple and the right side of her face was already turning a strange

yellowish-grey colour and swelling just enough to make her slightly lopsided. A white bandage, already becoming discoloured, decorated her cheek.

‘God I’m hideous,’ she said.

‘Only half hideous,’ Neil said, trying to smile. He had a rigid, fixed look about him, clearly thrown by this blood, this mess, this disruption. ‘What next,’ he had kept muttering. ‘What next.’

It was true, though, what he said now. Neil was always precise. If she turned her face far enough to the right, the reflection showed her as she always appeared. If she turned around the other way, she was an unrecognisably grotesque mask of purple, yellow, grey, patched with a bright white square. Lora turned one way, then the other, mesmerized by how a different face could exist under the surface all along, needing only a blow to bring it out.

Neil collected Cloudy, and brought her in to show that her mother was alright. ‘Poor Mummy,’ Cloudy said, staring at her face. ‘That’s a big bandaid.’

Lora laughed, as well as she could. ‘It is. I have five stitches. But I’m OK.’

‘Are you coming home now?’ Cloudy was very small on the edge of the hospital bed.

‘I’ll be home tomorrow. They are keeping an eye on me.’

‘Keeping an eye?’ Cloudy examined Lora’s black eye.

Lora tried to meet her gaze normally. ‘Just a saying, sweetheart. It means watching me to make sure I’m really alright.’ She felt a pang at the thought of being away from her child, doubled by Cloudy’s anxiety.

‘We’ll be fine, Cloudy,’ Neil said. He dropped his voice. ‘We’ll have dinner in front of the television. But don’t tell Mum.’

Cloudy glanced at Lora and smiled, a little uncertainly, but her eyes were bright. Lora hoped all the anxieties of childhood could be overcome by such small comforts.

Hall

Lora tried to sleep in the strange hospital bed. They gave her painkillers, though she wasn't in much physical pain. She dozed and woke, disoriented. She had fallen through a hole in an ordinary day and ended up in this totally different world. Bits of the morning came back. A busy, disorganised morning, Serena picking Cloudy up, Lora still in her pyjamas, Cloudy going through the door very proudly with her wrapped present, waving. But something was missing, something important, momentous even.

The top of the stairs, the bottom of the stairs.

The woman. The woman was now just that single flash of memory, a single image. The woman with the red face, the red hair, the white gown, holding up a hand. It frightened her.

My reflection, thought Lora. The mirror in the hall, near the phone. I saw myself. I was concussed, confused. My brain was bruised, my face was painted with blood.

But however rational, this conclusion did not soothe her. The idea she had seen herself as a stranger, that she had called out to herself and expected a reply, was somehow all the more disturbing. Not to recognise your own image. Being frightened by your unknown self. This possibility was somehow worse than anything.

The next day she was given permission to go home. 'You'll need to be monitored. No driving until we give you the all clear in about six weeks. Take things quietly.' They gave her a brochure. It listed all the warning signs to look for, sudden headaches, blurred vision, nausea. She nodded, agreed to everything. Though she did not want to go back to the house. Not at all. But there was nowhere else to go, not now.

When they got home at last, the house appeared alien, as if it had shifted, or changed. Or as if Lora had been away from it for more than a couple of days, like the girl who went to fairyland for a night and came back a hundred years later. The garage doors opened. 'Wait,' she said, as Neil moved forward. He turned to her in surprise. 'What?'

‘Nothing. Nothing.’

The house took her back in.

Someone, Neil, she supposed, had cleaned up the blood from the floor. But there was the outline of a red handprint on the rail of the staircase. She climbed, step by slow step to the top of the stairs and tried to remember the accident. Nothing came, not the slightest flicker.

She and Neil pieced the story together, from where she was, from her injuries, from the bits of before and after that came back to her. The dressing gown had been a present from Neil, and always was too long. ‘My stumpy legs,’ Lora had laughed when she modelled it the first time. She had never got around to taking it up, it always trailed around her, the hem becoming faintly grubby. The polished boards on the stairs were shiny and slippery. Lora was distracted, seeing Cloudy’s doll, wanting to go and pick it up. She must have stepped forward, but caught her foot in the hem of the gown, tangled her legs and come down.

This constructed story was logical, and with repeat tellings took on the ring of truth. Sometimes she would remember to say, as a kind of postscript: ‘well, as far as I know, anyway.’ But as she got tired of going over and over it, she would more often simply say, ‘oh yes, my legs got tangled in my dressing gown, and down I went, right into the banister.’

But the reality was, there were no witnesses to what happened. Not even herself, and it was this absence that made her the most uneasy. She tried to tell herself it was no different, really, than sleeping. Not much different from daydreaming, or from those states in which you can drive the whole way home automatically and not remember a moment of the journey.

But it felt as if tiny portion of her life had been stolen. Some other person existed in the space between the top and the bottom of the stairs. Someone else now owned that small piece of time. Someone airborne, temporarily weightless, freed from the hard ground, and the past, and the future.

Joist

The boy has endless walls to draw on, now, so he does, until his hand can no longer hold a brush or pencil, until it is frozen and curled. He has been accustomed to drifting about unseen, but now that he has a need for objects, he is no longer invisible. Ghosts need nothing, those with needs are no longer ghosts. He begins to lurk where the new houses are being built. It is surprisingly easy to take things. The men do not always lock their trucks, where sometimes tools can be found. They do not pack away all their paints when they go for their lunch. They leave canvas on top of sand, they forget paintbrushes. He tries not to be greedy, but his fingers become hungry for all the things that are there for the taking, now he has a place to set them down, now he no longer has to carry them. He is out more in the daylight than he prefers to be. He is becoming visible, as well as solid. But he cannot eat in this place. Always thin, his hands begin to show bone when he clutches his chalk or his brush. He moves slowly, or he becomes dizzy. He does get water, from a fountain in a park, trickled into a found bottle.

The boy finishes a picture and sets down his tin of paint. He flexes his hand and its bony knuckles crack. His hands are disappearing under a crust of colours and chalk.

Through the curtains he can see the mother and child come out into the garden across the water, and he slips through the side door. He makes his way through the overgrown shrubbery at the side of the house to a place he has made. It is a bush, overgrown and low to the ground, but inside is a space, with air and the hum of insects and the leaves all around protecting him. The ground is smooth where he has sat before. He settles to watch them.

But the mother's face is wrong. The colour and shape have changed in some way he can't understand from here, though he has a sick feeling about it. He needs to get closer. He will wait, til the light fades.

Living

As a week, two, three passed, the physical wounds healed. Lora watched the purple ring recede from her eye day by day, from full plump circle, to diminishing 'u', to wide-based saucer, to thin dark crescent. The large square of gauze was removed from her cheek and replaced with a neat strip of tape. The swelling on her face went down, and it slowly resumed its normal colouring.

When the stitches were finally taken out and the last strip of bandage was peeled from her face, Lora was left with a curved wound on her cheek. The exact shape of a smile, she thought. At first it was rough and jagged, but as it healed it became smaller, flatter, less noticeable. But still the same smiling shape, smirking back at her whenever she looked in the mirror. For most of the time, of course, she could not see it herself. But she could see other people's eyes were drawn to it. They would stare at it while they talked to her, and sometimes it seemed as if they were talking this alternative face, not to Lora. While Lora's real mouth opened and closed, this second one stayed sealed tight, keeping its own counsel. Prim, sealed, puckered, secretive, and people gazed at as if waiting for it to tell the true story. It was harder to tell how her brain was healing. She had a few headaches, mild ones which passed. She was a bit confused, vague, though Neil joked this was no more than her usual personality.

Lora perched on the edge of her bed, to rest, and contemplated her brain. They were ugly things, brains, physically. She had seen a few in her time, in museums and butchers. She had eaten them once, long ago, when she was a student and working in a kitchen washing dishes. The staff had no say in their suppers, and she was presented with two lamb's brains, tiny and crenulated under a yellow lemon sauce. Even after a whole evening standing on her feet scrubbing dishes, starving and tired, she had managed only a few bites, unable to divorce herself from what she was eating. Though it was long dead, though in principle she felt if you were going to kill an animal you should eat all of it, she could not finish the brains. Eating the seat of a living creature's consciousness was like eating its soul, as if she was some ghoulish, some zombie.

Lora's body supported the small vulnerable lump of meat that contained her own meaning. She sat quietly and tried to feel it, which was of course impossible. Brains had no nerve endings themselves, she knew that, doctors could perform brain surgery on conscious patients and they would feel no pain. She tried to send mental feelers around it, but the mind contemplating the mind simply sent her into a spiral of confusion and provided no answers.

She was always in the house, now, often alone. Falconara Lakes was not designed for carless people. Public transport in the area consisted of a few desultory buses. Landmarks were an uncomfortable distance to walk to. Lora hadn't noticed it until this injunction against her driving. She should get a bike, she thought, but had not ridden for years and decided it was hardly the right time to begin again. She did not want another fall, any more damage. She began to get a sense, in a mild form, of how people began to close down as they aged, how they became aware of the terrible fragility of the body, to fear the damage that would limit them further.

They managed the practicalities well enough. Her work was easily put off by email. Groceries could be ordered on-line and delivered. Neil and Serena juggled the Kinder run. 'Just for a little while,' Lora said, to Serena, to Cloudy, to Neil. 'I'll be back to normal in a few weeks.' But everybody, Cloudy included, seemed to take it in their stride.

She fussed about Cloudy, talking to Serena about it when she came to pick her up. 'I'm just a bit paranoid, you know, having lost her, and then the accident,' she said. 'Makes you nervous.'

'Don't worry,' Serena said. 'I'm just the same. Whatever they say about statistics and so on, I just think you can't be too careful. I'm always there at the end of Kinder and drive them straight home, and then we stay in the house or the backyard. I don't let them out of my sight. Which reminds me, the girls have been talking about having a sleepover. I'm happy to have Cloudy here, so let's make a day. Give you a break.' The idea made Lora uneasy. But she was so tired and knocked about that the thought of a quiet night had appeal, added to the enthusiastic endorsement of the girls themselves. And a reminder to herself, again, that Cloudy was growing up, that she had to let go. They made a tentative date.

Lora found herself in the centre of the white room. Just standing there, empty handed, with no recollection of why or how. She had always been a bit vague, it was not even particularly unusual for her to wander absent-mindedly into a room and forget what she had come for. But this was different. Having no recollection at all of the last...how long? Lora glanced at her watch. It was ten o'clock. She thought back. She had seen Cloudy off. Talked to Serena. Come back inside. An hour, perhaps, a bit more. She backed out of the room. There in the kitchen was the newspaper, open on the bench. Her coffee cup next to it. She glanced at the headlines and remembered the story, another political scandal. The facts, but not herself reading it. The cup was still faintly warm, and when she rubbed her tongue across her palate she could still pick up the lingering metallic tang of old coffee. Though there was something not right about it. She peered into the cup. Among the few dark roasted grounds were clear crystals. She touched them with a forefinger and tentatively tasted them. Sugar. Lora didn't take sugar in coffee. She peered at the pattern of light and dark like a fortune teller, trying to deduce not her future, but her past.

Lora shook her head, and put the cup down. She pulled the hospital brochure about post-concussion from kitchen drawer. Memory difficulties, confusion, foggy thinking, mood swings. Anxiety. Mild behavioural change. They were all listed as common symptoms, with the assurance they should be gone in a few days or weeks. She supposed what she was experiencing was more or less covered by this list. She had a follow up appointment at the hospital in a couple of weeks. She folded the paper and returned it to the drawer.

The pamphlet told her to get plenty of rest and Lora went back to bed. If she could sleep, she would at least have an excuse for her absence of self, and when Cloudy and Neil came home she would have witnesses to tell her she was real. But it was too early, she was full of coffee – and sugar – and she twitched and tossed in bed, her heartbeat fast and uncomfortable.

If she was made up of only a perishable string of memories, and a minimal and replaceable impact on less than a handful of people in the world, it hardly seemed enough to qualify as a person at

all. She got up again and set about the housework. That, at least, was real, and necessary, she told herself.

And the house caught her in the rhythms of its needs, nudged her from room to room, from chore to chore, soothed her with the knowledge that the tasks would all be there to be done again tomorrow, that her day was accounted for before it had begun, that nothing else was required of her but to clear away hard surfaces and assist them in reflecting the light.

Formal eating

Lora had sunk so deeply into this muffled comfort of silence and solitude, that her first instinct was to decline when Ann-maree invited them for dinner. But she had ambushed Lora on the footpath, and would not be put off. 'We never did pay you back for that lovely barbecue,' she said. 'It's been worrying me.' As if there was some grand ledger somewhere, where hospitality was balanced, and Ann-maree was overdrawn. 'Give yourself a night off cooking, and we'll look after you.'

Lora smiled, nodded. It was hard to lie to someone able to watch your comings and goings, and she wasn't at her most alert. But when she told Neil after work, he was not happy. 'God, Lora, couldn't you have made an excuse? I'm really not in the mood. I've got enough on my plate. And that man is insufferable.'

'What's on your plate?' she said.

He shrugged. 'I'll need to have a shower. What time are we expected?'

Cloudy insisted on bringing her dolly. 'Come on Pozest,' she said. 'We're going to a party.'

'It's not a party. Wait,' Lora said. 'Did you say – Possessed? Is that dolly's name?'

Cloudy grinned and glanced sideways at her mother. 'Yes. That's what you said she looks like. Remember?'

A sound came out of Lora without her volition, an expulsion of air, part laugh, part huff of exasperation. She wondered at her child's instinctive capacity to provide a precise meeting point for the confusions of Lora's life.

They climbed the stairs to the verandah of the mock-Federation. There was an enormous wooden door surrounded on all sides by elaborate stained glass panels of intertwined native plants and birds. Cloudy was settled into the guest bedroom. She was already fed and bathed and in her pyjamas, and had her own sleeping bag to put on top of the bed, to create the least inconvenience. Ann-maree had initially raised her eyebrows at this arrangement. 'Wouldn't she be alright, just next door? You could lock the doors, and then pop in now and then to check on her?' But Lora had felt faintly ill at the thought of locking Cloudy into the house, alone. 'Cloudy won't be any trouble,' she had said,

decisive for once. ‘And I will be able to relax more, if she’s here. She’ll just sleep anyway. Not a peep.’

Ann-maree’s house gleamed and managed to smell of both cleanliness and cooking simultaneously. ‘Can I get you a drink?’ Keith said. Neil was already settled on the couch with a glass. ‘We have Spanish sherry, gin and tonic, or some bubbles? Genuine Champagne, this is, they are not allowed to call it that any more unless it’s from the region.’

Lora declined, still careful of her fragile mental state.

When they sat for the meal, every plate, every mouthful, every sip was given its provenance and value, its rarity. Canapes of miniscule toasts piped with olive tapenade, rounds of cucumber topped with lobster salad with red gloves of caviar on top (‘that’s real caviar, very hard to get these days,’ said Keith, ‘they’re almost out of stock’), smoked salmon with crème fraiche. Lora was overwhelmed, almost embarrassed, at the amount of effort that had gone into the dinner for them. The main course was a whole baked barramundi. Ann-maree brought it in triumphantly on a fish-shaped platter. It was wild-caught, not farmed, they were assured.

‘Poor thing,’ a voice came from the doorway.

Lora looked up from the plate where the fish lay, its doleful eye withered but still staring, surrounded by parsley. The voice was Ash’s. No rat this time.

‘I thought you were going out tonight,’ Ann-maree said in the same pleasant conversational tones she had been using all evening. The girl just shrugged.

‘Neil, I don’t know if you met our daughter Ashlee?’ Ann-maree was still the hostess, though her smile was becoming more fixed.

‘Not formally. But I think I saw you at the barbecue,’ Neil said.

Ash nodded at him.

‘Why don’t you have some dinner with us?’ Keith said, gesturing at the table. ‘Since you are here.’ The tone of the question was complicated, part challenge, part mocking. Ash pulled a disgusted face. ‘You know I’m vegetarian. Look at that poor dead creature. Swimming around, minding its own

business. Then someone hooks it through the mouth and thrashes it to death. Drowning in air.

Imagine. Just so you can have a certain taste in your mouth for five minutes.'

Keith regarded her levelly. 'Ashlee, either come in and join us for dinner, or go and find something else to do. You can't just stand around in doorways attacking us. You're being very rude to our guests, apart from anything else.'

'Oh that's alright,' said Lora.

'No it isn't,' Keith said. 'If you want someone to respect your opinions you should present them rationally.'

'And some fish would do you good,' Ann-maree said. 'It's not fattening at all, you know. Full of omega thingies. Very healthy.'

'Not for the fish,' Ash retorted. Lora hid a smile in her napkin. Goal to Ashlee. The girl sat at the table, but did not eat. Lora could feel her parents battling their dismay at this development. Keith and Ash continued to bicker, teetering between affectionate argument and genuine dislike in a precarious balance that threatened to tip at any moment into full scale hostility.

Lora saw Ann-maree's head droop over her plate, saw her push the food away, and knew she was suffering. 'Let me clear these,' she said, getting up to collect the plates with their shreds of bone and skin.

Dessert was sorbet dusted with gold sprinkles. 'Real gold,' said Keith.

Lora poked at the glittering specks. 'Really?' she said. 'Can you eat it?'

'Of course,' Ann-maree said. 'It doesn't really taste of anything. But it doesn't do you any harm.'

Ash had been shooting glances at Neil, and now she turned her gaze on him. 'I saw you the other day. At Stonefields. In the Food Court.'

Neil hesitated. 'Oh yes. Had to pick up some stuff for the office. Hadn't eaten all day. I was desperate. In a hurry.'

Keith grunted. 'Doesn't sound like you, Neil. Botulism Central, that place,' he said, stifling a belch behind his napkin.

‘Didn’t look like you were in a hurry,’ Ash said, sounding more surprised than surly.

Neil was scooping up his dessert, gold and all. ‘I don’t believe in hurrying food. Even nasty Food Court takeaway. You were there too?’ He ran his eyes over her, from silver studs to black nails. ‘I wouldn’t have thought hanging out at the shops would be your sort of thing.’ There was just enough condescension in the statement to put Ash back in her place.

She shrugged and turned away. ‘Whatever.’ She turned to Lora. Her expression was pleading. ‘You should get out of here. Can’t you see what will happen if you stay? You’re turning into them. Don’t you see it?’

Keith tossed down his napkin. ‘Come on Ashlee. I’m sure your oracle-of-doom act wins points with your little friends. But spare the grownups your performance, will you?’

Ash turned her cats-gaze to her father. Lora could see her internal struggle, knowing she was being baited but unable to resist. She stared around at all of them. ‘You can’t digest it. Gold. It’ll just be gold plated turds tomorrow,’ she said. ‘Gold plated turds. That sums up everything around here.’

‘Thank you Cassandra. If there’s nothing else you’d like to add, you can leave the table. Now.’ He put his hands on the table and pushed himself up. He was a tall man, and bulky. Ash was very small and frail as she stood too, wrapping her thin black lace shawl about her shoulders.

Ann-maree ignored the exchange, fussing about at the table. ‘Now. Would anyone like any more? Or shall we adjourn to the living room for coffee?’

The sorbet had melted to slush in Lora’s bowl. The gold, heavy, indigestible, sank to the bottom. She pushed it around and smiled, equally bright, equally fake, at Ann-maree. ‘I don’t think I could eat another bite.’

Keith shrugged off his daughter. ‘Now tell me Lora,’ he said as they went through to the other room. ‘We haven’t heard the full story of your accident. Exactly what happened?’

Lora went into the standard explanation, with the usual coda ‘but of course I don’t really know.’

Keith leaned back and tilted his oversized glass over his face. He turned back to Lora, and hooded his eyes. ‘But of course, how do you know? Might have been someone else. Someone in the

house. Crept up behind you and...wham. Come to think of it,' he lowered his voice conspiratorially, 'what's Neil's alibi?'

There were fake chuckles from everyone, except Ann-maree. Lora detected a brief slipping of the façade, a glimpse of weariness at the gap between how things were meant to be and how they really were, however many times she tried to align them.

Lora decided that she needed to take the edge off the evening. 'Perhaps I will have a drink,' she said. 'A port would be lovely. Thanks, Ann maree.'

The wine was fruity and smooth and dark, and she imagined it oozing around the webbing inside her skull, pushing through the thin tubes, probing their weaknesses.

They stayed only as long as was polite. Lora was tired, and Neil was clearly itching to get away. They made their thanks and faked enthusiastic plans for further get-togethers, and gathered Cloudy up and carried her off.

Neil slunk off to his computer and called out 'goodnight' through the closed door. Lora went to bed alone, again, and turned the evening over in her mind. Keith had called the girl Cassandra. The name had become a shorthand to dismiss someone who was always negative, but the thing about Cassandra was that she told the truth. Even if it was doom-laden, it was true, but no one ever heeded her. She wondered why Neil had been in the Food Court. It really wasn't his style, even when desperate. Why he had been at Stonefields at all. Didn't his sort of work have multitudes of assistants to do their chores for them?

She knew him so little, really. And he was becoming more closed, if anything. Not the gradual opening out, the increasing relaxation with each other that she had expected. She had thought there was a solid enough base of maturity and affection, and they would grow together as they shared a life. She hadn't expected that what they had would be as good as it got. She closed her eyes and slipped into that state where conscious thought began morphing into the illogic of dreams, swirling images of rats on the dinner table which was now in the Food Court, when Keith's words returned and snapped her back to waking. What was Neil's alibi?

Alibi. Latin for 'in another place'. From the same root as alias. Alius. The other. She cursed Keith for challenging the story they had so carefully constructed, the most likely scenario. The only scenario, honestly, anything else was an absurd construction. It was ridiculous to let the foolish man's words get to her. Occam's Razor. The simplest explanation that accounts for all the facts is the correct one. Usually. She had seen Cloudy's doll, and stepped forward, and fallen, and that was the end of it. But it took some time for her to finally fall asleep.

Kitchen

The next day Lora regretted the wine. Her sleep had been disrupted and she felt a little dizzy, slightly off, the whole day. She should not take chances, she should not threaten her fragile recovery. In any case she still tired so easily. She got through the day and let Cloudy watch television in the afternoon, so she could rest.

Rational thought led her around and around in circles. Everything involved the future but she could not plan, could not make decisions while she was so incapable. To soothe herself she took to constructing fantasy homes in her mind. A cottage in the bush, at the end of a long, rough, winding track, with its own solar power and water tanks and vegie garden and chickens, completely self-sufficient. A houseboat moored in the middle of a lake, approachable only by rowboat. An island, warm, lush, with a palm hut. Solitude and self-sufficiency and safety, just herself and Cloudy. Fairytales, but the only thing that calmed her thoughts. She half-dozed and woke and dozed again.

Then sat up with a start and glanced at the clock.

Cloudy had become bored with the television and was drawing pictures on the desk in the upstairs area.

‘What do you feel like for dinner,’ Lora said.

‘Pasta!’ Cloudy said, without so much as looking up from her pencils.

Lora smiled. ‘You always say that. I’ll see what I can do.’ But in the kitchen the oven was already on, humming quietly as if pleased with itself. Lora frowned at it and pushed the button to turn on the oven light, which reflected off foil wrapped around a baking dish. She pulled on her oven mitt and took it out. The steam had a rich, unfamiliar smell, when she lifted the foil. It was some creature, roasting. It startled her with its form like a scrawny infant, legs tied together. It was covered in slices of orange. Duck, she presumed. She had no memory of preparing this. No memory, come to think of it, of ordering this creature, or unpacking it, or having it in the fridge. But there it was, and there was the chopping board, damp with nameless juices and blobs of fat, there was the sharp knife with a thread of blood along its edge. Orange peels sat in the compost bucket.

The door slammed and Neil came in. 'Wow, what's all this? Very fancy. Not your usual style is it? Smells fantastic.' He picked out the orange peels. 'Orange peels don't go in the compost,' he lectured.

'Yes,' said Lora. 'Yes, I know.'

He glanced at her as if he was about to say something, but restrained himself. 'How long til it's ready?'

'I'm...not sure,' Lora said, standing there with the lid of the dish in her hand. 'Not long. I suppose.' Lora put a hand to her head. It was just the injury. Flashes of amnesia. The blood circling her brain. She poked uncertainly at the meat, then closed the oven and hurriedly tossed a salad. She called them for dinner, and set a loaf of bread on the table.

'What is that?' said Cloudy as Neil sharpened the knife and cut into the breast. 'I thought we were having pasta. Why are its legs tied together?'

'It's a roast. Roast...duck.' Lora could read Cloudy's face, the lips drawn together and pushed forward, and knew what was coming. Sure enough the child turned her wide eyes on Lora earnestly. 'I don't want to eat a duck.'

'Don't be fussy Claudia,' Neil said. 'It's good food, your mother has gone to a lot of trouble and you should eat it. You are very lucky to be in a country where you have plenty to eat. Some children don't, you know.'

Cloudy pouted. 'But is it a duck from the lake?'

'Duck is duck. Mummy would have just got it from the shop, like our other food. Don't be silly.' Neil pushed the plate towards her. 'After all you eat chicken...'

'Neil!' Lora thought he had better not start down that line. 'Cloudy...Neil, it's alright. She doesn't have to have it. It's OK. You start.'

Neil scowled, but shrugged. 'I'll wait. No reason not to be civilised.'

Lora took some cheese from the fridge. 'Here,' she said to Cloudy. 'You can have this, with some bread and lots of salad, and we'll call that good enough.'

Neil turned his face away, flicking his napkin. 'You shouldn't indulge her,' he said.

‘How was your day?’ Lora said.

‘Same old.’ Neil set her own serve of the meat on her plate. Lora found that she was glad Cloudy was not eating it. She did not want to either, any more than Cloudy. But there was no way to articulate what she was afraid of. No explanation other than she had prepared this dinner, in a daze, and forgot she had done so. She picked up her knife and plunged it in.

‘Delicious,’ Neil was cutting and lifting neat forkfuls to his mouth.

‘Yes. It is.’ Lora chewed the stringy flesh. The meat had a strong gamey flavour, cut with the sweet orange glaze. She told herself she was imagining a brackish, watery aftertaste.

‘If you say so yourself,’ he said, smiling.

‘Yes.’ Lora hid the meat under the salad leaves and picked up a walnut half. It looked like a tiny crisp brain. She put it down on her plate and topped up her glass of wine. ‘If I say so. Myself.’

Later, cleaning up, Lora glanced across at the mirror house. It occurred to her that the sensation of Catherine trailing about after her, the feeling of company she had become so accustomed to, had vanished. Perhaps the fall knocked some sense into me, she thought, if it did nothing else.

Retractable doors

A week later it was at last time for Lora's follow up appointment at the hospital. She hoped to get some simple medical reassurance. Even the chance to talk it over with someone. To put into words the absurd sensations assaulting her. Most of the time that's what we want from a doctor, Lora thought, assurance that we are not crazy. Or dying. Neil went to work, Serena took Cloudy to Emilia's, and Lora caught a taxi to the hospital.

Once there she was directed to more tests, more x-rays, then sat to wait her turn to see the doctor. The waiting room was like an airport lounge, moulded seats stuck to a metal beam, people bored, anxious. Some reading books, some simply staring into space. Lora handed in her form and waited to be called. She couldn't concentrate on the inane magazines on the tables, so out of date the pregnancy bumps of their starlets on their covers had already turned into teenagers with their very own drug habits. Lora tossed them back on the table. She pulled out her mobile to make sure it was on, set for loud ringing, to check for messages. She restrained herself from phoning Serena. I have to learn to trust it will be OK, she thought.

Phone in hand, it occurred to Lora that she had got Neil to take a picture of her on it straight after the accident. She tapped through her phone pictures find it, to remember, to compare her progress. She skimmed back through various ordinary pictures, smiling at ones of Cloudy. Then she came upon a photo she could not have taken. It was herself, asleep. A very unattractive picture, mouth open, scar livid. Why would Neil do that? But the next photo was of him, also asleep, hands clasped under his cheek. Lora took a deep breath and after a long pause brought up the next photo. Cloudy, thumb in mouth, hair rampant on the pillow.

Lora snapped the phone shut, and closed her eyes.

Catherine, a voice called. Catherine. Lora looked up. The nurse was staring at her and she half-rose. But at the far corner of the room an ordinary middle-aged woman, unknown, unrelated, was standing. The nurse smiled at this woman and guided her into a room. Lora sat back, and pulled out the phone to check the pictures. Perhaps there was some logical explanation she had missed, perhaps

she had overlooked something. But she could not find the pictures again, however many times she scrolled through. She sat there with the phone in her hand until the screen went blank and only a shadow of her own face was reflected in it.

It took a while for her to realise her own name was being called. Lora. Lor. Raa. Something about the pronunciation, the way the syllables were drawn out, made it sound detached and unfamiliar. She shuffled her things together and hurried to the designated room.

The doctor was a weary-looking man, as if he had seen far too much damage in his lifetime. He glanced up at her, pushed his glasses up to his forehead and rubbed his eyes. A pile of files on his desk was in danger of sliding sideways and he grabbed hers from the top. 'How have you been?' he said, scanning through the papers inside. 'Any headaches? Nausea? Giddiness? Blacking out? Fainting?'

Lora tried to articulate her experience. But the doctor was distracted, busy, there were others waiting who were far more serious. She shook her head. 'No. Well, not exactly. I mean I'm still functioning. I'm not blacking out as such. But I forget what I've done. I have these...I feel sort of like someone else is...as if I'm not myself.'

'Well, it will take a little time to get back to normal, of course. You have to expect a few memory lapses.' His phone buzzed and he excused himself to answer it, turning away.

The trouble with clichés is that nobody hears their meaning anymore. But I'm really not myself, Lora thought. The doctor held the phone to his ear with his shoulder and pulled out an x-ray from a file. Still talking, he clipped it to the light. Surrounded by murky grey-black darkness, was a skull – Lora's skull. The rounded dome, the eye sockets. But most macabre, its mouth was wide open in a scream. Or a laugh. Stripped to the bones they would look the same. Lora had to remind herself that this was part of her, an ordinary part of her body that she carried around with her all the time.

The doctor put the phone down. 'Sorry about that.' He checked over the films and scans and results. 'But it seems everything is in order. You haven't had any pain?'

'No. None at all. Only the scar, a bit, but not much.' She tried again. 'But I feel like...I don't know who I am.'

The skull screamed on behind the doctor's head but he paid it no mind. 'Of course! You've had a bad bump. But you're making good progress. If it was a spontaneous event we might be concerned. But given its traumatic origin, you have nothing to worry about.' He gave her a small professional smile. 'Just watch that...what was it again? How you hurt yourself?'

Lora saw a vision of a red haired woman with hands outstretched. The story, so long practised, hung heavy in her mouth and she could hardly get it out. 'Stairs,' Lora said. 'Down the stairs.'

Damper

The boy broods inside the house. He has seen the purple and red and white mask the mother wears. He knows what it means, and what will come next.

He climbs his electricity tower. It crackles companionably and the barbed wire grabs at his arms. It is lonelier in the daytime, without the bats, though birds fly by. But they are not mammals, they keep him no company.

The boy comes here now every day and watches the man's yellow car. The man is not so regular as the mother, he drives off at the same time every morning but not always in the same direction. Sometimes the car disappears one way down the freeway, sometimes the other. Sometimes it does not go very far at all. Every now and then he goes only as far as the little park with the bench, near the bus stop, where the boy once saw him.

The boy stops climbing the pylons and instead catches the bus to the little park, every day, and waits. In the middle of the park is a circular structure, with pillars all around holding up a curved roof. It is grand in design but small in dimension, so that the boy, standing in the middle of it, can reach out and touch the pillars on either side, one with each hand. In the centre is a drinking fountain. Despite its solid protection, the fountain is broken. It dribbles water endlessly from its spout into the basin below, where the water trickles away. Sometimes the boy cups his whole mouth around the spout and sucks at the water to soothe his thirst. He sits there, resting against the cool metal base of the fountain, listening to the water whispering behind him.

Bar

Lora ran a cloth over the shelves and watched the dust lift off, drifting casually away to find somewhere else to settle. Bits of herself would be in those particles, she knew. Flakes of skin, of hair, dirt that had absorbed her sweat and then dried and fallen. However much she cleaned, there were motes of her embedded in this house forever, simply moving around and around. It was soothing, watching them float, and settle.

She could not find the phone photos. Who was to say they had been there at all? I am, Lora thought. But the 'I' that knew this was a very small and isolated creature. Her bruised brain lurched around scenarios that were perfectly logical. She was still just recovering from her head injury. Foggy thinking, the pamphlet had said. Blurry eyes. There was no one she could talk to. Neil, the doctors, Ann-maree, she knew what they would say, would think. She was inhabiting the space of Lora, fulfilling her functions, and that was all people saw.

I am losing myself. But no one can see.

Except perhaps Cloudy, Lora thought. She caught her child looking at her speculatively, uncertainly. She was starting to play up more, to be more defiant, less easy-going, and Lora thought it was an attempt to get the attention of her mother. The real Lora.

'You're just a bit rattled,' Neil said, distracted, dismissive, when she talked to him. Lora thought the word appropriate. She felt like she should indeed rattle, that the fall had shaken something inside her that was not visible on any scan, that all the parts of her were misaligned, clashing and jangling against each other.

Her work had ceased to interest her. She had often been half-hearted about it, but now she questioned the whole idea of it, of setting down histories. She had sat down and opened her files, but had ended up simply staring at them blankly. It seemed foolish, this endless looking back. Dead, and dry. What did it matter, what was gone, and done? Why were people obsessed with it, some old ancestor, some crumbling building? She discovered that if you ignored emails long enough, they stopped.

The world itself receded, until it was hardly necessary, really, to leave the house. Everything was right there on the Internet. Lora had once been wary of ordering things on-line. A life of frugality, where any loss was a disaster, had made her conservative. Now she found it quite easy to spend a morning trawling through shopping sites, to come up blinking and find three hours had evaporated.

Using nothing more than her fingertips, objects could be drawn from around the world, across the seas and skies or the whole width of the continent, to fill the spaces of the house. Rugs to soften the floors, ornaments for the shelves, luxurious heavy curtains and blinds, Lora ordered them all. All she had to do was wait. She could become absorbed, not even buying things, but theoretically redesigning the entire interior in Modern Scandinavian or Mexican Adobe or British Old Colonial, from bedroom suites down to place mats and hall runners. It was all there, all for the asking, and it could soften and muffle and blind her, as much as it did the house.

Lora was sweeping the front porch when she heard a shout, voices arguing, a bang from Ann-maree's house. Ash stumbled down the path. She was crying, tributaries of watery black dripped down her face and from her chin and she held a shoebox clasped to her chest. She paused, huddled over it, in front of Lora's house.

Lora raised a tentative hand. 'Hey, Ash, what's happened?'

'I'll kill her. She's the one who deserves to die.' Ash was hardly coherent.

'Come in. Come in a minute,' Lora said, taking her arm and leading her inside. 'Can I get you a drink of water? Anything?'

Wordlessly Ash opened the box. Lora took a step backwards. Bubo was inside on a nest of cloth. His eyes were staring, he was dripping foam from his mouth, his breath came in gasps, his paws clutched convulsively. Ash sobbed. 'She poisoned him. She says she didn't but I know she did. He was fine this morning, now look at him. She won't take him to the vet. I hate her. I'll poison her. See how she likes it.'

Lora stared in horror at the grotesque thing. They were in the kitchen and Ash made as if to put the animal down on the bench.

'No! God, not there, we eat there,' Lora said, before she could stop herself.

Ash looked down at the creature then glared up at Lora. 'It doesn't matter anyway. He's dead.' She peered down again, confirming. 'Dead.'

'Oh Ash, I'm sorry.' Lora felt for the girl, but was quietly relieved she would not now be expected to take any action.

Ash scowled at her. 'No you're not. You're gone. You're lost. A lost cause.' She rubbed at her face with the heel of her hand, smearing the black further, then spun out of the room, holding the wrapped bundle to her face.

'No, Ash, come back. Wait. I'm sorry.' Lora felt a desperate need to reconnect to the girl, not to lose her.

Ash was almost at the door but stopped and turned once more. 'Don't think you're so perfect. You think Neil goes to work every day? He doesn't. I've seen him, sneaking around the place. In the middle of the day. I saw him yesterday. You people are all so blind. You think you're different. He's a creep and you're too pissweak to do anything. Just the same, like I said.'

Lora stood speechless as the front door slammed. The truth was, she had been so muddled and self-absorbed since the accident she had hardly noticed Neil's comings and goings. She rationalised. Ash was a difficult teenager, given, apparently, to flights of imagination. Lashing out. But she wondered about Neil, his silences, his increasing taciturnity. His unspecified stresses. She could not picture him being unfaithful. He hated disorder, he wanted calm and domestic peace, he was sexually unadventurous. So far as she knew. But surely not an affair, not now, so soon. She thought to go into his study, to do the traditional wifely snooping. But stopped. What would she do if she found some evidence, if it was true?

She could do nothing, right now. She couldn't even drive a car. The exact extent of her powerlessness hit her. She went to the bottom of the staircase and the great house pushed down on her with all its weight. It was the house had done this to her. Pulled her in, set her up, rendered her helpless. Made her its slave. Its borders were large, but when they marked the edges of her world, they appeared small indeed.

When the doorbell rang she thought it was Ash back, or perhaps Ann-maree. But it was a delivery man, with a heavy box at the door. He thrust out an electronic device, scarcely looking at her. Lora did not recognise the company or the order, but her name and address were on the box. There was a pen-like thing attached to the device, and with it she scrawled something that resembled her signature across the slippery screen. Even when she took the box inside and ripped open the cardboard, she still did not understand. She had not ordered any glasses, but there they were. Black crystal. Pure black, etched with a design of silver diamonds around them. She set them on a shelf, where they certainly matched the colour scheme of the house beautifully.

Neil noticed the glasses when he came in that evening. He frowned. 'We don't need glasses.'

'I know,' Lora said. 'I didn't.'

'What do you mean? Why did you accept the package if there was a mistake?' His lips were thin, he looked far more angry than he should over a simple mixup. If that's what it was.

Lora shook her head. 'I'm so forgetful, lately. I don't remember ordering them, at all.'

Neil strode to his computer and called up the bank details. He jabbed a finger at the screen. 'There. Last Monday, eleven in the morning. On our credit card. Delivered to this address. If someone was hacking the account I hardly think they'd have them delivered here.' He folded his arms, glaring at her as if she was a dubious witness in a court drama.

Lora flushed, feeling the same shame as if she'd been caught in a lie. 'I know.'

Neil frowned. 'Lora I can't afford...to have this happening. Not now. If you're still so vague and confused perhaps I'll take charge of the credit card. Just in case. If you want anything, just ask me. I'll check the details and if anything else is on there, I'll cancel it. We don't need anything more for the house.'

Lora bowed her head. 'OK.' Somewhere was a protest, but it was muffled, an echo from some other place, it could not catch at her. Not to be responsible for anything. Surely there was a kind of freedom in that?

The walls of the house shuffled closer.

Finger joint

The boy sits in the park, and watches.

The man comes. He walks. His eyes are on the ground and he sits heavily when he reaches his bench. He has a small computer which he sets on his lap and types on the tiny keys with heavy fingers for a while, squinting at the screen and pursing his lips, then typing some more. Finally he shuts the computer and stares away down the road.

Now he is here the boy does not know what to do. He walks silently towards the man and stands behind him. The man's neck is exposed, gleaming white bone showing through the skin. He could wrap his hands around and tighten.

Except that he can't. These things are not possible, not for him. He hears a voice inside his head. From a long time ago. A man's voice.

He's nothing to me. He's nothing to you either, from now on understand? I decide who comes into my house. My house.

The man turns around and stands up suddenly. Jesus. What the...can I help you?

The boy raises his hands and drops them.

The man fumbles in his pocket, brings out a handful of coins, looks at them. Do you want...?

The boy shakes his head. He tries to summons words. But they come out soft and whispery and mocking, the voice changes the meaning, and he is not sure he remembers them right.

You have to get out. I decide. I decide who comes into my house.

What the fuck are you talking about? Who are you? the man says.

The boy is unused to talking. He licks his dry lips and starts again. But he can't go on.

The man stares at him for a moment. Their eyes are locked together over the back of the park bench. Then the man stands up, rears up, his face turns red, he is enormous, he blots out the sun and the boy shrinks, but not enough to hide, he has never been small enough for that.

The man yells. You don't know me. You don't know anything. Get the fuck out of here before someone gets hurt. You are nothing. You are no one.

And the boy freezes, then turns and flees. Past the shelter, past the playground where the children don't cease in their swinging as he rushes past.

But he has to slow. He has no energy. He floats, he stumbles, he falls and walks until he is back in the house. He is back in the house and is once again no one.

He thought he could make it different. But the man has seen him again and is angry again and it will all happen again, and it will all be his fault again. The boy is trapped in these returns and there is only one way out for him.

Spare

Lora knew it was important not to let her anxiety show as she helped Cloudy pack for her sleepover. She had been reluctant about the idea at first, and was still a little worried. But now she thought it might be for the best. To give herself a chance to rest, without half her mind being on Cloudy's needs. To talk to Neil, finally, properly, to ask him what was happening, to make him listen. Just themselves in the house, and a chance to have it out. Make decisions, make plans.

Lora tried to stop herself itemizing all the things that could go wrong. Serena was a very careful mother, after all, they were not going anywhere or doing anything. Cloudy would be fine. The worst thing that could happen was the child might be a little upset at bedtime.

She took Cloudy's gumboots out of the large solid suitcase the child had dragged from the wardrobe.

'It's only one night,' she said. 'You don't need too much stuff. And not too many toys, I'm sure you'll play with Emilia's things anyway.' Cloudy wanted to debate each item, until finally Lora said as long as she packed a clean pair of underwear and toothbrush, she could include whatever would fit in to her daypack.

She looked up as she heard the front door open. It was four in the afternoon, a very odd time for Neil to be home. She went down to meet him in the hallway. 'You're home early,' Lora said.

His eyes were down, his movements uncharacteristically jerky, his words abrupt. 'I have to go on a trip,' he pushed past her. 'Business. National meeting. Sudden.' He appeared in the grip of some sort of agitation or excitement.

'But it's Cloudy's sleepover. We were going to have a night alone.'

'Oh. Yes. I forgot about that. Sorry. Not my choice.'

Lora trailed after him, up the stairs, into the bedroom. He pulled down his own overnight case from the top of the wardrobe and began folding things into it. His movements were still hasty but he rolled his socks and folded his underwear with his usual precision. Lora sat on the bed. She supposed

she should help, but Neil was so particular that he would only redo anything she packed anyway. ‘So, how long will you be gone for?’

He grunted in irritation. ‘I told you already, a couple of days.’

Lora smoothed the bedspread. You think you know everything, the girl had said. But it wasn’t true. At this moment, it was all Lora could do to keep track of herself. Whatever Neil was doing, what its consequences were, she would have to deal with it later. When she was stronger. Right now she could do nothing. Pissweak, the girl had said, and Lora felt that summed her up. Liquid, lukewarm, a by-product serving no purpose.

Neil slammed the cupboard door, and moved into the bathroom, lining up his toiletries. He had a set of small bottles especially for travel, which packed into a nifty toilet bag that unfolded with its own hook to hang on a rail. Unexpectedly he raised his voice and said, ‘Do you get homesick? When you talked about moving, a while ago, were you talking about going back home?’

Lora was too tired to fathom what he was getting at, and thought a neutral answer was safest. ‘Oh. Maybe. I’ve got used to it here.’ Was she to be discarded, discharged, sent packing again? Perhaps the decision was not to be hers after all.

Neil came and stood in the doorway, staring at her, and opened his mouth as if he was about to say more. But he only nodded, and went past her to put his toiletry bag in his overnight case. He zipped it closed, a sharp vicious noise.

‘This seems kind of sudden,’ Lora said.

‘Well, that’s the business world. We can’t all sit around all day doing what we like.’ He was printing off his boarding pass, checking his wallet, jingling his keys into his pocket. He glanced up at her face. ‘Kidding.’ But he was not smiling.

There was a beep and Lora went to the window. A taxi was there – bright, cheerful, yellow, as if it had sprung from the distant canola fields. ‘Why don’t you just park in the airport carpark?’ Lora said. ‘If it’s just a couple of days?’

‘For God’s sake Lora, enough with the questions. It’s a long story. I have to rush.’ Neil smiled at her now, a tight curve, and put a cursory arm around her shoulder. ‘Sorry about this, I know it

seems abrupt, but it's important. You'll be alright won't you? Just for a night? Ann-maree is next door if you need anything. Or call Serena. See it as a good chance for you to take it quietly. Have an early night. I'll be back tomorrow. Probably. ' He kissed her perfunctorily. 'Well, bye.'

'Aren't you going say goodbye to Cloudy?'

'Alright. Quickly.'

Lora called the child and he gave her a brief hug, muttered a few words about a present, and disappeared. The taxi was a bright moving spot of primary colour in the silver and grey and pale gold landscape.

Lora stood watching him go, itemizing her emotions. Fear, of being left alone for the first time in this place. Mistrust as to what he was up to. An undertone of anxiety about Cloudy. But from somewhere, there was also a wash of relief in the mix. She could stay up all night without worrying about waking anyone. Or she could go to bed at eight, if she wanted, with no one to see or judge or comment. Watch silly movies all evening. Maybe being alone might give her a chance to get back to herself.

She called to Cloudy whether she was ready yet.

'I can't find Pozest,' Cloudy called back. They searched everywhere, but the doll was not to be found.

'Why don't you take good old bunny, instead,' Lora said. Cloudy pouted and began to argue, until Lora finally said, 'Well, if you won't go without her, you just can't go. Shall I ring Serena and tell her not to come?' and the child gave it up.

Finally Cloudy was organised. Serena arrived and the two little girls shrieked and jumped about with excitement. Lora tried not to give Cloudy too many instructions or warnings or reassurances. 'Best be quick,' Serena whispered in Lora's ear. 'Quick and cheerful. That's what I've found works best. Don't drag it out.'

So Lora gave Cloudy a hug and kiss and plastered a grin on her own face as a last minute look of uncertainty crossed Cloudy's. 'Have a wonderful time,' she said. 'I'll see you tomorrow and you can tell me all about it.'

Serena bustled them through the door, and once Cloudy was strapped into the car she was immediately distracted, engrossed in conversation with Emilia. She didn't so much as look up to respond to Lora's wave.

It all happened so fast, this stripping away of her last layers. Lora was left alone, very small in the portico, with only the silent house behind her.

Vent

The boy drifts a last time past the house where the mother is. The man is gone, the sister is being taken away. The mother droops on the front porch and does not see him, she turns and goes back into her house and shuts the door.

He crosses the lake to his own place. It is all darkness, and when he goes inside and looks back across the lake, the mother's house is all light.

He can feel the house pushing at him. It never wanted him, and it seems right that he can finish things by leaping from the house into nothingness. He can follow at last the path the man showed him a long time ago.

The boy does not mind the idea of falling from the house. The worst thing about it is the loneliness. But he was born of that, and will die of it, and only wishes he might have known something different. He stands and looks up the stairs and for a moment is too weary to begin the climb.

He remembers the feel of the child's hand in his, rising with her into the light. He smiles and sets his foot on the step.

Entertainment

Lora walked back over the threshold. She stood in the empty hallway with the space of the house all around her, feeling diminished. Insubstantial. She went upstairs and turned on her computer, but could think of nothing she wanted to type into it. She lay on her bed for a while, letting images float across her mind. Some were from the past, so random and distant she hardly felt any connection to her at all. She closed her eyes but they sprang open again of their own accord, staring at a ceiling so featureless it became irritating.

In the kitchen she peered into the fridge, but the idea of eating seemed somehow pointless. She ran water into the kettle and clicked it on, but wandered away again before it had boiled.

I don't know what to do, she thought. Her body was a haunted house, and any idea of her real self was the ghost – thin, shrivelled, incorporeal and unable to touch the world.

The evening light caught some crumbs on the dining-room table, and the shadows doubled their bulk, making them significant. Perhaps now was the chance to set the house properly to rights, without any danger of someone charging through the door and disrupting the order.

Lora, having found a purpose, put on an old tracksuit and took out all the cleaning products. She polished the rail of the staircase until it gleamed, she cleaned all the mirrors, she swept, she mopped, she lined the food up in the cupboards and the fridge.

She began to feel she had never really appreciated the pleasure in this work. None of her homes had ever given back to her this soft gleaming, this air of perfect order. It was a sensuous act, rubbing of soft cloths over varnished wood, smoothing a single wrinkle on a satin cover, pressing her face into the fresh cotton smell of folded fluffed towels.

By the time she had finished it was dark. She turned on every light in the house, to gleam on the surfaces, she pumped up the heating so that the whole place was shining and warm. Artificial reproductions of the smell of lavender and lemon and eucalyptus rose on their currents.

Now she was hungry. But when she walked into the kitchen, she could hardly bear to disrupt the order. The thought of smearing the gleaming benchtops overcame her desire for food. Even to

take a piece fruit from the pile she had so carefully arranged would have upset the perfection. And the idea of bringing in greasy containers from a takeaway, with their thin damp plastic bags leaking onto benchtops, was abhorrent.

The picture of a gin and tonic drifted into her mind, and immediately she had such a thirst for one it felt like her mouth shrivelled and only that would soothe it. I should not, she thought. The doctors warned her to keep away from alcohol, especially spirits. But she took one of the black glasses, and went through to the bar. She made it stronger than she intended, as if someone tipped her elbow as she poured, added ice, tinkled a glass swizzle stick. It hissed and fizzed in the black crystal like a poisoned potion. She had never been fond of G and T's before, but now she could see why people raved about them. It was delicious, delightful, with its sparkling silver bubbles. She walked around the bright warm clean place.

Lora allowed herself to imagine the taxi having an accident, or Neil's plane crashing. There would be some sort of money, insurance, superannuation. She could stay here, she and Cloudy alone forever, in the house. She could order everything she needed from the outside, and never again have to present herself to the world. It was big enough that she did not need go anywhere else. She made herself another strong gin, and sat at the bar in the front room, sipping the clear bitter liquid, imagining solitary futures, getting up only to make another drink. The haze of drunkenness, with its delayed hit, was pleasant too. It had been a long time since she was truly, properly drunk, and she had forgotten the sense of letting go involved, the dissolving of the rational self. The way sharp edges became fuzzy. The way you became less than yourself, and more. And there was no one to stop her, no one to tell her to take it easy.

She needed more ice, and she not so much walked, as floated down the hall to the kitchen. The huge silver fridge had its own icemaker, and she thought what a fine invention that was. All she had to do was push her glass under a little trigger and down it came. Someone had invented that device, had put their skills into creating this built-in lever to save Lora from having to pull an icecube tray from the freezer and twist the ice out herself. She raised her glass in a mock salute to the ice-lever-inventor.

Her mobile, sitting on the bench, began to ring. When she checked the number on the screen, it was the house number, their own number. Lora walked through to the hall to where the solitary handset in the house sat motionless on the bench. Not possible. Her mobile rang and rang, not stopping, not going through the voicemail, and at last the trilling became so insistent she could no longer ignore it, she pushed the button to answer. Hello?

Lora woke up cheek to cheek with cold dead skin, and opened her eyes to pure white nothingness. She was blind, snow blinded to whiteness, and stacked in a pile with dead people.

But when she blinked and scrabbled up, it was only the back of the white couch in front of her. She had been lying along its cool length. Closing her eyes made her dizzy but when she opened them she was dazzled by brightness. She half-closed them as a compromise and sat properly, and put her head in her hands. She was an idiot. To drink so much, when she was here on her own, when she was injured, when her grip on her own identity was fragile enough. She had done many stupid things in her life, but this was one of the stupidest. She sat up straight, sending pain sloshing through her head, from the back to the front, like gritty water in a bucket, and her mouth felt like it had chewed on the grit too

The thought of coffee motivated her. Warm, bitter, strong. She rose carefully from the couch and crept out of the room.

The clock in the hall said it was after midnight. Too late to call anyone, though she was desperate for human contact. Nor did she did want to sleep, though that might have been the sensible option. She wanted to be alert, present, conscious of herself, until daylight. Until there were people about, until she could go next door and talk to Ann-maree, until her family returned. Until there was someone to confirm who she was, to see her face and know it, to hear her words and offer back their own. In the kitchen the coffee hissed and dribbled and spat out of the fancy machine, angry grumbling noises as if annoyed at being woken at this hour. Lora thought she would watch movies until dawn, then go for a walk.

Fleetingly she recalled her old neighbourhood where people were always about. Not here. The silence here informed her that there was nowhere to go, no open bar, no half-filled train carriage, no all-night supermarket selling chocolate biscuits to red-eyed desperadoes. No interaction of strangers close enough to gather up its sounds and shunt them across the air through her open window. But if she waited til daylight she might find a power-walker, fists pumping, to nod to, to affirm she was alive and real. Ducks, at least, to take her bread when she threw it on the water. Lora went to get milk for the coffee. But there was a cup already on the bench. It was half-empty, but still very hot to the touch. She took it up, and sipped at the sweet bitterness.

She was sitting at her desk upstairs in her study. In front of her was a pile of paper, the white A4 sheets they used in the printer, and a soft pencil. Each paper was covered in detailed sketches of a child. A boy. Drawings of him as a baby, as a toddler, a schoolboy. They stopped at about age ten or eleven. Beautiful drawings, detailed and shaded like photographs, page after page of them with him smiling, looking away, grinning over his shoulder.

Lora had never had talent for art. But the fingers of her right hand were grubby and stained with graphite, the edge of her left hand smeared with it. Catherine was an artist, it appeared. But she had no children. They had no children.

It occurred to Lora that those sentences were not the same. A whole life could be held in the difference between 'she' and 'they.'

Lora moved to rub her grubby hands on her thighs. But she was not wearing her old tracksuit anymore. The grey peacocks stared back at her from the soft material of the dress. She looked at the little mirror on the wall and saw a face in full makeup, hair blow-dried and gleaming, lips crimson, freshly done. Lora tried to clear the fuzz in her mind, but it swayed and swirled and could not fix on anything firm. Except the single thought that if she could get out of the house, everything would make sense again.

She was almost afraid to test whether her body would obey her commands. She tensed her thighs and her body obediently slipped off the chair, and her feet agreed to walk through the study

door. She got to the top of the stairs and slid out her foot over the step, but then there was only emptiness beneath her.

She was in the kitchen. Her hand was moving around and around, rhythmically. Steam rose to warm her face. She was in front of the stove, and the large cast iron pot was on the stovetop. A red sauce simmered, tiny bubbles formed and popped around the edges of it and there was a thick, rich, smell. Lora dipped the spoon and lifted. The red sauce dripped away, and resting on the spoon was a piece of meat. Oval shaped, crenulated, split in the middle, doubled. Lora tried to cry out. Her mouth opened but no sound came, and the spoon brought the steaming meat closer.

She was facing the back glass doors, moving towards them. Her reflection walked towards her on the other side. But as she got closer she could see something was not quite right. The image did not exactly match. The colour of the eyes was not her own, the nose was broader, flatter. Only the hair was the same. She raised a hand to the glass and the reflection's fingers rose above the edges of Lora's own, they were a little longer, a little thinner. As she touched the glass it flexed, the window dissolved, and Lora fell forward into the dark.

Egress

He heads up through the middle of the house. It is hard to climb the stairs, his legs are very weary. He puts one foot up, and drags the other up to join it. Then the next. He goes up and up but there seems no top, it seems he will be trapped here forever on these stairs, they keep reproducing under his feet, appearing and disappearing, an escalator with no top. He can't stop, he can't go back down. The only escape is at the end of the stairs, but they refuse to end.

Second bath

Lora was underwater. She came alive with the shock of it – her skin tightened over its muscles, cold and taut, her heart thumped, most of all her brain pounded with the need for air. Her mouth sealed tight, fighting the awful compulsion to open and draw in the dank water. She was meat and blood that could be doomed by the lack of a few molecules of oxygen, an excess of liquid. It was pitch black, she could see nothing as she thrashed and struggled. She was held down but when she raised a hand to find out what it was, to pull it away, she grasped the hand of a doll, and came face to face with its smiling mouth. She felt herself slipping, giving in, sinking into the murk.

Lora's body rebelled. Her past was wholly collected in this singular piece of flesh, stretched by childbirth, wrinkled under the sun, worn by work, scarred by accident, a body worn and aging, but vital still. Strong enough to fight. She struck a bargain. There was only room in this body for one history.

Mine.

Me.

Lora.

Her face broke the surface, and the sweet air came in.

Pit

There is a sound below, and at the noise the stairs stop forming and disappearing under his feet, and he has arrived at the top. The void is thick with the past and the boy can't breathe. He slides the glass doors open and walks through onto the balcony. Out there is the air and he thinks how nice to fly. The white railing feels familiar when he leans on it. He climbs up and stands, and stares out across the roofs of the houses. All he has to do now is to step out, into the past.

Void over

Lora was cold and dripping wet, and it was dark, but her feet stood on a firm surface and the air was once again there to be breathed. She was standing at the edge of the lake. It was still dark, but a solitary bird began to peep a warning and there was the hint of light in the sky at last.

Lora took a deep breath, icy in her lungs.

She looked up and across the lake and instead of the mirror house, there was Neil's, just as she had left it, every light blazing, glass doors wide open. Lora had crossed the lake. She felt an unbelievable weariness, she was tempted to simply lie down here in the garden and sleep, to wait for the sun, or discovery, or for whatever else these houses had in store for her. But she was cold, very cold. And the thin sliver of self she had fought for was precious, and to be protected. If she slept, here, she was not sure what would happen to it.

Lora was still clutching the doll, one of its plastic fingers pressed urgently into her palm. She settled it more comfortably under her arm and crunched up the dead garden, prickles piercing her soles. These small pains were welcome, her body was her own again and every flinch and shiver confirmed this. She stopped at the back glass wall of the mirror house.

The dull curtains still hung in the windows, but behind them soft light flickered. The dawn was beginning to break, and a pink and grey light diluted the darkness. When Lora touched the door with her hand, it slid open eagerly, and she crossed the threshold.

Everything inside shimmered in tones of pink and red and black and grey. For a moment, in the dull light, Lora thought the kitchen had somehow been furnished. Shelves were lined with plates, and there was a refrigerator, its door standing open to show food inside. But when she moved closer she could see it was all drawn on, though with perfect perspective and intricate detail, down to the jagged pencilled edge of an open box of corn flakes on a painted shelf. In the dining area, a birds-eye view of a laden table showed an ordinary family meal, with three settings. There were three real candles stuck in the middle of the painted table. Lora knelt and prised one up from the wax sticking it to the floor. She cupped her hand around the flame and walked forward. Hot wax dripped onto her icy

fingers and dried instantly to a white second skin. The house was mostly dark but the candlelight caught the walls. They were painted or drawn over, all of them. She knew the drawings, the style, but here they were complete, real people with real faces. A woman, and a child. The woman holding a baby, the baby growing. At first Lora thought, it's me, and Cloudy. But as she made her way around the walls the child grew into a young boy. Other images of a little girl and boy, playing. The drawings drew her around the walls, through the rooms, one after the other. But they were warm pictures, happy ones, and held no threat, in fact guided Lora through the house until she was almost surprised to find herself at the front doors. She set down the candle, and the doll, on the floor. There was nothing to prevent her exit. The outside world was available, there in the crack beyond them. The air behind her gathered itself and thickened, nudging a little at her shoulders as if the house, in fact, wanted her gone.

But she paused at another sound, from above. A shuffle, a thud. She had made a bargain, there under the water. An agreement.

Lora considered her hand, about to push the doors open. I am in control of these hands, she thought. I can choose what makes me afraid.

She turned away from the doors, and turned back. In the room matching their white room, there was a nest of cardboard and cloth, a few grubby plastic bottles, a tattered satchel. Nothing else. She climbed the stairs. The master bedroom and ensuite were closed tight, dusty and untouched. In the room matching her study, there were handprints on the sill, on the window, as if he had leaned and watched her. But he was not there.

A little cool air blew through the upstairs void. The balcony doors were slightly open and there beyond them he stood, balanced precariously on the railing, a cutout darker shape against the dark sky.

Lora walked to the doors then froze, not wanting to startle him. She tapped on the glass, softly, just enough to get his attention. He turned his head, and she slid the glass open and came out into the air. He wobbled, but stayed balanced on the railing, glancing at her, then turning away again.

'Hey,' Lora said gently. 'What are you doing up there?'

He was silent at first. 'You're dead. It's my fault. He killed you because of me.'

'No,' Lora said. 'It wasn't your fault. It's never been your fault. And I'm right here.'

The boy considered this. 'But you're a ghost.'

'No more than you are.' She held out her hand.

The boy stared outwards again, considering, but then bent down and sat, facing the house, straddling the railing. He held his hand out. His hot fevered skin met Lora's chilled flesh, the one cooled, the other warmed. Lora could feel the tiny sliver that was herself expand out to the point of their meeting.

The boy slid off the railing into her arms.

Double-skinned wall

She was made of cool moist cloth that eased the heat and gave him strength to stand on his own feet.

To open the doors and walk out.

Last time, she went first, wheeled away, nothing but a draped white sheet shaped in the form of a loved face. Last time, he was invisible, he was nothing.

This time they walk through the front doors together, upright and real.

Entrance

The hard neat roads of Falconara Lakes were never intended for people's feet. Bare feet, in the middle of the morning, in the middle of the road, in the middle of this suburb.

But here was Lora, walking along the white line down the centre of Constance Way, barefoot, damp dress clinging to her skin, hair dragging down her shoulders. Under her soles the painted lines were cool and soft. She kept her head high, and her eyes straight. The houses of her neighbours lined the street, each standing sturdily next to the other, along both sides. It was just at that time of the morning when, as if at a signal, the garage doors collectively hummed open and the shiny cars backed out into the road, carrying their contents of suited men and women and children, ready for work and school.

The cars stopped. Some of the engines stuttered into silence. The faces of the people turned and stared at Lora, at what she had pulled out into the light and was bringing home. But for once she did not care much what these people thought. She had set herself far beyond explanation. She let her face assume whatever expression it might. If anything, she felt an urge to discard her clothing too, to stand completely exposed and say, See? Here I am. But she had no time for the neighbours. She needed to get the child home.

She adapted her pace to his slow one. He walked as if the air was a thick substance he had to push through one step at a time. She would have carried him if she could. When they got to the house they hesitated at the gate, both looking up.

'Is it the same?' he said.

'No,' Lora said. 'It's not.' She was about to say this was her house, but this was not true either. Though she was no longer afraid of it, did she not belong to it; she could enter it but could not own it. It was simply a space she was passing through, that would contain a small portion of her history. 'It's just a house,' she said, and guided him in.

The whole place was as clean as a display home. The bar was closed up tight, the glasses polished on the shelf. There was no sign of last night's gruesome stew in the kitchen. Lora silently thanked Catherine. We clean up our own messes, she thought.

Lora set the boy down at the bench and made food, heating leftover soup, slicing bread, buttering it to a generous thickness. He ate, dipping the bread so that the butter dripped onto the bench when he tore at it with his teeth, scattering crumbs, picking up the bowl and draining it so that the soup dripped down his front. Lora poured another ladleful, and another, and he slowed down a little. Finally he wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He kept his head bowed over the bowl and belched – an ordinary, human sound.

Lora ran a warm shower in Cloudy's bathroom, with its smiling fish, and found some spare clothes of Neil's, a tracksuit and some underwear and socks and a warm jumper, and set them on the stool.

'Will you be alright?' she asked him, uncertain if she should leave him alone.

He looked up suddenly, smiling, his teeth murky and neglected but the smile transforming his eyes. 'Yes. I can do it myself.'

Lora sat outside the room for a while and listened to the quiet splashing. After a long while she heard the bathroom door. The boy came out as naked and pink and unashamed as a toddler, though with a body tall and impossibly thin, white bones all but visible. The light came through the window behind him. It caught the steam rising from his skin, and made him a luminous but indistinct human shape with vapour trailing a split second behind his movements.

'You look like an angel,' she said. She got him to dress, and examined the sore on his hand. She pierced the wound and pulled out the splinter, and let the pus run out, wiped it and dabbed it with disinfectant, smoothed a bandaid over it. 'All better.' Finally she took him into the unused spare room and tucked him into the fresh bed.

He turned his head. His eyes teared and his lips trembled, like a much smaller child. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm sorry.'

'It wasn't your fault.' Lora smoothed his rattail hair.

‘I was your secret. But he saw me leaving. He thought I was a man. He got angry. Because of me. It was my fault you died.’

‘Shhhh,’ she said. ‘It’s alright. You have to believe me. It’s OK.’

‘He was on the balcony. He saw me. He was frightened. He fell.’ The boy hesitated. ‘I wasn’t going to hurt him. But I’m not sorry. Not about him.’

‘That’s OK too.’ As she pulled up the covers, Lora said gently, ‘I am not your mother, you know. Not really. She’s gone. It wasn’t your fault, but she is gone.’

He was silent for a while. ‘Then who are you?’ he said.

‘I am Lora.’

‘Lora,’ he said, giving her name back to her.

‘And who are you?’ she said in turn. He whispered a word she could hardly make out, a soft sibilant hissing. Then fell asleep, quickly and solidly. She pulled up the covers, and left him sleeping.

Lora had a shower herself, and dressed, and made toast. She ate it staring at the mirror house across the way, wondering if it belonged to the boy. His heritage. In the warmth and the light she could tell herself the whole thing had been simply a complication from her accident. She had drunk too much, and in one of her fugues had walked through the lake, and happened to find this poor lost young man at the right time. That would do as a rational explanation. But under the water she had sworn, I’ll do it, I’ll take care of him. But only as myself. And Catherine had let her go. That was less rational, but more true.

Catherine and Max had no children. But the boy could be Catherine’s, from before perhaps, a child she had to keep away from a violently jealous man. Or he might be something else altogether, something conjured up out of her own loneliness. Catherine was a creator, her art bottled up into the house, but the house was never enough.

When she asked him his name he had whispered something like ‘Solis.’ Solus was the Latin for ‘alone’. Or it could be Solace. Solitude, or comfort. Or maybe it was not a name at all, perhaps he

wasn't answering her question, perhaps it was simply the final sigh of someone sinking, exhausted, into sleep.

Lora licked her fingers and walked away from the mess of crumbs and jam on the bench. It was time, too, to face what was happening with Neil. In this time and place, Bluebeard's secret was not kept in a small locked room with a forbidden key, but a portal opened with a password. Lora tried a couple of passwords with no success. Her name, Cloudy's. Then she paused, and thought, and tried Neil's daughter's name. Antoinetta. A pretty name, she always thought. Neil's secret electronic world opened for her. And sure enough she found a kind of deceit, a form of betrayal, but nothing so banal as an affair. Neil had lost his job. Crossed the wrong person. One of those brutal dismissals, from what she could make out, where he was escorted from the building by a security guard, his personal effects in a cardboard box, the locks changed. Humiliation, as well as rejection. Every day for weeks he had dressed himself in his suit and packed his briefcase and gone out into the world, heading off with the pretence of his usual purpose. Waiting for the hours to click over til he could go home. Unable to tell her.

This trip was for an interview for another job, back in their old city, a lesser job on a much more humble salary. I would have understood, Lora thought. But she of all people could hardly blame him, for playing a part.

She opened another folder and checked the finances. He hadn't been making payments on the house, the bank was becoming demanding. But property values were still down, he was heavily mortgaged, maxed out on the credit cards, he would not necessarily get his money back, so selling the house was not the answer. The image of ownership, that was the final illusion.

Lora thought briefly, but seriously, about burning down the house. That would be one solution. Traditional. And not completely ridiculous. It happened. The insurance would pay, the house would be gone, and that would be an end to it. Lora wandered into the white room. For preference she would start it there. The candle, cold, still stood on the mantel. She touched the couch. Did leather burn? It was skin, after all, so she thought that it would. She could imagine the fire spreading throughout the rooms, flicking along the polished floors. The red glow taking over. The whole house, lit up from the

inside. Flames coming from the roof, reflecting in the lake. The mirror house would be singular again, staring across into a void.

This house was only ever a copy, anyway, a reflection, a reproduction.

But she knew it would not burn so easily. Brick and tile would resist, and survive. Nor was it easily containable, and the neighbours were there, vulnerable, trusting. Violence, even to the house, was not a solution, and in any case, Lora knew she was not really capable of it. The houses would stand.

She turned on her own computer and logged onto e-bay. Room by room, item by item, she listed all the things in the house and put them up for sale, to the highest bidder, to whoever wanted them. Everything. Feeding them back into the electronic world they had come from. It was a start. It took a long time, and Lora's eyes were burning by the time she was finished. Then she went to her own bed and slept.

When she woke she went to check on the boy. The bed was empty, though the shape of his body remained. The mattress was dented, the coverings distorted, his body had sweated and drooled and shed skin onto the sheets. He existed, somewhere, she thought. He had a body worn by hurt, but which could be healed; and a mind distorted, but capable of truth.

A horn tooted below, there were the ordinary sounds of car doors slamming, happy children's voices. Cloudy was home.

Lora was herself again now, singular, solitary. She ran down the stairs to open the door for her child, to take her warm firm flesh into her arms.

Pathway

‘What on earth were you doing wandering about in the middle of the road yesterday morning?’ said Ann-maree, the next day. ‘I saw you through the window. You looked dreadful.’ She had dragged Lora in for tea. ‘Really, Lora, if you’re going to start sleepwalking or whatever it was, you might want to think about deadlocks. You can’t be out alone like that. I mean, it’s a safe neighbourhood, but still, anything could happen.’

‘Did you see him too?’ Lora asked.

‘See who? That’s the kettle.’ She hustled away to answer its screaming.

Lora caught Ash’s eye and asked the girl to come into the garden. Cloudy, who was playing, ran up to show Lora a tiny snail on a curled leaf. Lora admired the creature, self-contained in its home as thin and small as a fingernail. She handed it carefully back to Cloudy. ‘Put it back where you found it. Gently. We don’t want to hurt it.’ Lora glanced up to see a flash like tears in Ash’s eyes. ‘What is it?’ Lora said.

‘Nothing. Just. I wish I had a mum like you when I was little.’

‘Really?’ Lora was taken aback.

‘God yeah. Look at Cloudy. She’s awesome. You do a great job.’

Lora baulked at the praise at first, but then allowed its implications to unfurl. She considered the amount of effort she had put into constructing hostile images of herself in the gaze of strangers. Letting go of those spectres would be like stepping off that cliff into the air, expecting to fall but finding herself flying.

‘That boy, your imaginary friend,’ Lora said. ‘Tell me about him.’

Ash gazed across the lake. ‘It was when we first came here. I’d only see him now and then. He said I couldn’t tell anyone about him, that his mother would get into trouble. I didn’t mind, I liked having a secret friend. We used to sneak out and play, in the sites where they were building the houses. Or we’d go down into the hole where the lake is now, where we couldn’t be seen, and draw. When I let slip about him to mum, she teased me about being too old for an imaginary friend. People

don't believe children.' One of the studs in her eyebrow shifted, catching the sunlight, as she frowned. 'He seemed real to me. But then, after they died, I never saw him again. Never heard anymore about him.' She shrugged. 'I thought I saw him the other day. Some homeless kid. I thought he'd come back. But he disappeared. Again.'

'Tea? Cakes?' called Ann-maree from the back porch.

Ash turned towards her. 'Maybe I did make him up. I was so lonely here.'

'I know,' said Lora. 'I know what you mean.'

Light well

A week passed, two, another. Neil did not return. Daylight savings arrived. Time, in a minor, ordinary way, buckled and folded back on itself. Lora and Cloudy sat outside on the decking, eating from a camping table, at what would have been seven o'clock yesterday but was six o'clock today. Late or early for Cloudy's dinner. Lora tried to explain the concept of turning back time to her. 'But how?' Cloudy said, looking around as if some huge invisible hand might be hurrying the sun. It occurred to Lora as an astonishing fact, that Cloudy would grow up to be separate from her, to be her own person with her own life. She kissed her gently, and smoothed her hair, while she still could.

'Time isn't real,' Lora said. 'Time is just what people decide it is.' Cloudy appeared unconvinced, and ran off down to the lake, where the elements were less subject to the whims of 'they.' Pozest dangled from her hand. The doll was Cloudy's firm favourite, being far more amenable to bathtimes and the changing of outfits than old bunny. Serena had gently suggested shortening the name to 'Posie' but Lora was pleased to see Cloudy was holding out against the pressure. Lora had developed quite a fondness for the doll, and its name, herself. Let other people wonder about what it meant.

She set her plate on the card table, and her folding chair wobbled. She had sold so much of the furniture that she had left hardly enough for normal life. Material goods had their uses, after all. I might have overdone the e-bay, she thought.

Neil had phoned. They had talked, but made no decisions. His voice was slower, softer, lower pitched these days. At that distance, it could be someone else altogether. Lora thought that however much worse things could be for others, there was still something to be pitied about the punctured alpha male. His overtures were tentative. Lora felt sorry for him, but she was tired of moving. The mistake was in thinking the new was not haunted, that novelty denied history.

She had an idea she would like to write the story, of this particular place, a longitudinal study of the women who had lived here over the years, what their homes were, how they had lived, and died. Beginning with Catherine in the mirror house. But well before Falconara Lakes existed there would

be women as farmers and growers and mothers of children, before them the first women who had walked the plains, living and dying, of childbirth, of old age, through the natural decay of the body or through violence left unrecorded. Dig back as far back as she could through the years, all the way down, so she could come all the way up again. Though to make it complete she would have to include herself, and it was not possible, of course, to write your own end. For that you needed someone to come after.

She would need to find some other place to stay, too. Some modest space, new or old, to make a home for the two of them, her and Cloudy. She thought about the cottage in the shopping centre carpark. Maybe they could live there, take care of it while the dispute dragged on. Put up a proper fence, fix up the house, plant a garden. Make a claim, for it and for herself. It would be an odd life, but the judgements of others loomed far smaller than they used to. If she wanted to do it, she would. For now she was content to pause in the present, and let possible futures disappear in their different directions.

Lora stared across the lake to what was no longer the mirror house. Now, it did not look the same at all. The solid brick and glass were disguised under an intricately painted mural of a landscape. The bottom half was detailed with a swathe of dry grasses and rocks and native scrub, in perfect perspective. The upper level was painted with clouds, in the silver-grey shades of an imminent storm. The roof was darker grey clouds, almost black, ominous. The effect was not to render it invisible – it was too solid to be erased that easily. And in the hard light of a sunny day it looked artificial, absurd. The plastic-faced neighbour had complained it was an eyesore. Council officers were examining the relevant by-laws.

But at the right time, mornings or evenings usually, and in just the right light, from just the right angle, the painting gave the illusion that the house did not fully exist. That it was simply a memory of an old house long demolished; or else the outline of a possible future house raised in relief from the skyline. Lora raised her glass to the artistry of it.

Cloudy came running back up the terrace. ‘There is a nest! Come and see.’

Lora stood and they walked down to the water. Cloudy pointed, and there amongst the rushes was a mat of twigs and reeds woven together, barely connected to the shore. On this construction sat a large egg, creamy coloured with spots of brown. No adult bird was in sight. The egg rested there openly, neither on the land, nor on the lake. The creature inside would be held tight, requiring nothing, until the shell cracked and released it into the world. But for now it simply existed in its closed, curved space. Unprotected, innocent, sealed.

Finial

The boy lies on the earth. It is cool and smells of old rain. He opens his eyes. A cockroach antenna connects with an eyelash. They regard each other for a moment, then the cockroach nods and scuttles away, to the hole that is its home.

Home.

The word catches on the sharp edge of the boy's thoughts, the word itself is a cockroach hole. He tries it out. A forced breath sealed outside with pressed lips. He considers the puff of air and the shape it makes in the cold early morning. Home to a boy is not the same word as home to a man. He is not sure how much time has passed, but long enough for him to change from one to the other. A long time.

Time.

This puff makes the same shape, exactly.

He pulls himself upright, and dissolves into the words.

-end-