1-1-1999

The world-swimmers

Patrick L. West
Edith Cowan University

Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

The World-Swimmers

by

Patrick Leslie West, BAHons, PhD, The University of Melbourne

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Award of

Master of Arts (English) in Creative Writing

at the Faculty of Community Services,
Education and Social Sciences,
School of Language and Literature

Edith Cowan University

December 1999

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis has two main parts. The first comprises a collection of nineteen short stories, entitled *The World-Swimmers*. The second takes the form of an exegesis, 'Framing Fictions & Fictional Friendships,' which provides a critical commentary on the collection, and on the nexus of text and context.

The stories vary in length from approximately 1,000 to over 4,000 words. Various writing styles are used to develop fictional explorations of a range of themes, which include: the relationship between the natural and the human worlds, the imbrication of local place and international space, obsession, entrapment, and desire. However, perhaps the most salient theme is that of the continuous interplay between ideas and daily life.

The exegesis begins with a consideration of the concept of the artistic frame. A general theoretical analysis of framing, inspired by the chapter 'Parergon' in Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*, provides an anchor for more particular speculations about a few of the frames, no doubt actually many in number, which close over the unstable boundary of *The World-Swimmers*.

The exegesis also argues that friendship—especially in its non-intuitive forms—constitutes a stimulating 'matrix of thought' for considering the relationships that my collection has, to its thematic concerns, to the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, and to certain literary genres. I suggest that *The World-Swimmers* is primarily a magical-realist text, which nevertheless presents many of the traits of postmodern writing.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signature: 

Date: 7/4/00

Acknowledgements

In Semester 1, Dr Richard Rossiter was my supervisor, a role filled while he was on leave in Semester 2 by Dr Susan Ash. Dr Rossiter and Dr Ash proved to be clever and generous supervisors, and I am grateful to both of them for their help in the production of this thesis. Maureen Sexton gave me valuable assistance at the proofreading stage. I should also like to thank Associate Professor Glenly Phillips for the interest that he has shown in my creative writing over several years, and for the support and advice that he has given to me.

There was a time when this neighbourhood was a friendship,
an argument of aversions and affections, like other things of love;

'Barrio Norte'
J. L. Borges

Table of Contents

Exegesis

Fence Scapes

I live on a street where most of the houses to both sides of me have no fences making division between them. There is as well a uniform absence of any manner of front fence. It is a simple matter to walk down between the houses, on ground of indeterminate ownership from front to back. The original boundary markers have long been lost. It is the oldest of streets in this not-so-old city.

Behind the houses, at a lower level than the street itself, are football fields, with marked-off by white chalk the areas forbidden and unforbidden to spectators and players in the course of a game. One such area comprises the actual playing surface; the other the rest of the world. I love to watch when a particularly skilful attacking player, evading a posse of descending defenders, makes a wide approach to goal, holding the ball itself still in play inside the boundary line, while he runs around the edge of the greater part of the earth. When the players leave the ground at the end of any club match, I think of them as coming back into the world. The low fence where the fields begin, and the land again becomes flat, never presents an obstacle to a footballer chasing after a stray or a loose kick, and is a barrier to none but the oldest or the youngest of the residents of the street. During the football season, in the winter, weak deltas of rainwater form sometimes on our properties—halfway or more down each sloping block—and tiny particles of the rubbish of the years (things abandoned and forgotten) collect in the faintly coloured silt, revealed, unrevealed, or partially revealed to the eye.

It is summer now, however—the football fields are fallow—and tomorrow I want to begin to convince those few householders still with fences between them or alongside them to have those fences removed. There are five doors I must knock at, and three fences to be gone. I find myself wondering what might make somebody want to retain a fence in a street almost entirely without fences. And what might I have to say to convince them to relinquish it? I wonder about fences, and about different doors with nothing between them and the flat street. I think about the task I have set myself of creating a fenceless street.

The next morning, although all night I have dreamed of beginning, it is as if Monday's arrival, with all of its labour, has with a rush surprised me. My wife's name is Magdalene, and she leaves for work early—farewelling me from our front door—before I take to their school Sophie and Zac, our children. In the summer sunshine, stepping out of the car, their blond hair is like the finest, palest grass. Sophie is the second-youngest child in the street, a year older than Zac, the youngest of all who live here. Neither they nor Magdalene will be home for ages. Ages. . . . I must decide how I want the rest of the week to unfold. Then I say to myself—in my head—'Daniel, your day is already unfolding without you.'

For hours though, I delay the beginning of my project; repeatedly, I drive the length of our street. Sometimes I try to take everything in at once, the way a tourist or a traveller might, if this inner-suburban street were a sight to see. But mostly I determine on a particular detail as I turn the car once more at one or the other ends of the street, and to it give my full attention, as I drive slowly again past the houses, close to the kerb, at times barely moving.

Driving, I crane my neck to see the one dislodged tile in the otherwise perfect pattern of a terracotta roof; squint through the windscreen at a girl's handkerchief tangled impossibly in a thorn bush; resolve on one of my last laps, slowly driving as always, to observe for as long as might be possible, from one end of the street to the other, a small, white stone on the road in front of my own house. I watch it draw closer and closer, and then see it disappear—unavoidably—under the body of my car, before emerging a few seconds later in the rear-vision mirror, still white and small. For the briefest of moments I am before my own house, not knowing where to look, unable to see the stone.

When I finally run out of petrol, just managing to glide to a halt outside a house not too distant from my own, I make the decision to try to convince one only of the five households to part with its fence on each one of the five days of the present working week. It's about time. And then I start to think about the actual happenings of the last of these future days, and about those of the two days after that. I imagine Friday as a day of quiet and lonely triumph, Saturday as a day filled with the mechanical details of the removal of all of the fences together, and I picture myself and my family waking on the Sunday with joy.

I decide to proceed from the westernmost house to the one furthest east. The sun is just marginally at my back—it being late morning—when I walk to the dwelling at the very end of the street. So marginally, in truth, that I suppose it will also be shining on me from behind when I return in the opposite direction after no matter how brief a visit to my neighbour. When I knock on the front door it is opened by an elderly man in a white singlet, clean and crisp, who tells me almost immediately, although we have never met before, that he lives here alone now. He tells me this as if I have asked

him a question of the most urgent sort, but I wait a few minutes before putting to him the one request that I have any desire to make. His side fence hides a roadway only slightly less trafficked than the one our two houses face, but he strikes me as the type of man who in his youth spent many hours looking over a fence to a horizon smudged with nothing but bush. All the same, "certainly", he answers, "certainly"; the fence can go. When he takes me out the back of his house he looks at it as if it had already disappeared, under a sun just beginning to sink.

I am not sure whether to feel overwhelmed with happiness, or to be disappointed at the ease of my initial success, which in its very lack of difficulty suggests that perhaps no-one in the street will ever understand the real importance of what I am now trying to achieve. Could it be so? In the evening of this, the first day, Magdalene tells me that George (for such is the man's name) would agree to anything put to him by anybody willing just to talk for a while. And in the night I dream of a sadness like a wind rushing out of the end house of the street, through the gap where the fence used to be, and disappearing into the quiet road running both north and south, searching impossibly for a bush horizon. My wife mumbles in her sleep beside me.

I try again, very early the next morning, before even our youngest, Zac, is awake, to explain to her the need that drives me to want a change in our street. And she tells me again, I am obsessed with fences, 'obsessed stupidly', and leaves for work terribly early. What will she do—the question comes to me—in the hours she will have free before anyone else arrives? With Magdalene gone, our empty hallway makes me feel for an instant as if I am living alone inside of a fence; then I hear our children stir and begin to

wake. Later, the whole sky is a tedious blue when I drop them off at their school, still sleepy-eyed.

The remaining four houses I must visit are all to the east of mine, and when I announce myself at the first of these—on this Tuesday mid-morning—I am once again welcomed inside. The householders are a couple of either the same age as Magdalene and I, or slightly older than us, who tell me that they have known each other since the time, as children, when they used to walk along the wide tops of fences for miles, in the suburb where they then lived, weaving a peculiar route between backyards, and alongside streets and lanes. They are childless, but have no objection to the removal of their fence for the sake of the children in the street; they show me that, anyway, the said fence is already rotten and sinking, and soon no doubt the girls and boys they hear and see on the weekends would have been able to run up and down its submerged length without even leaving the ground. I walk home stunned by the apparent simplicity of my task.

Going about the rest of my business for the morning, I am subject again to what are in effect misgivings about completing my project. Abandoning all my ordinary hopes and fears on the question of whether my dreamed-of street will ever actually come into being, I please myself with the thought that all of the residents I have spoken to so far are getting just so much of an idea of the sort of street I want to create as enables them in some measure to share in my enthusiasm for it, while all the same not understanding it clearly enough to start to baulk at what I only admit to myself constitute the more 'feverish' aspects of my desire. I wonder if having reached this stage of my project should not be enough to satisfy me; should I call a halt to it here and now, on this Tuesday just before noon? By the time Magdalene comes home early, however, with Sophie and Zac, all such doubts have largely

dissipated, and when she tells me that the family in the next house along the street that I must approach strike her as maliciously capable not only of rebuilding the rotten and sinking fence on their west side, but of erecting a new, metal one on their east side as well, I am more determined than ever to go on. The possible events my wife describes would be the clearest sign of disaster I can imagine in my world.

With the children settled, I go to bed early—although not as early as Magdalene, whom I think is almost past caring about me—and I am anxious all night for it to be Wednesday morning. I hardly sleep, and when I do it is only to suffer from extravagant dreams about fences and all they can mean. I dream I am falling through a world of sometimes no colours and sometimes of very few colours, a place randomly composed both of nothing but fences, and of everything that can be with the exception of fences. Later, close to morning, to the first sunshine of Wednesday, it is as if I am being forced by somebody to watch a television screen filled with a blank, violent light but for the faintest outlines of a wartime movie about soldiers and prisoners, the latter attempting to escape through or under fences, the former the guardians and patrollers of fences; the prisoners handsome in the way of their time; fences in every scene.

So when, exhausted and sickened by fences, I walk down the street to the house that, if I am to believe my wife, intimates the ultimate and complete failure of my project, I am necessarily as plain and as simple in my thinking as a soldier or a barbarian. I plan only to make my sole request of whoever answers to my knock at their door, and to accept without question the reply that they shall give me, which I pray will be immediate and unambiguous.

And it is. For the rest of the day, quietly, I celebrate my third victory.

By now there are rumours from house to house of madness and of mad desires. I must keep my nerve. Perhaps Magdalene has been speaking to the people on the other side of the street. What baleful force, I wonder, could they bring to bear on the almost fenceless row of houses facing them? I long for Thursday.

On the morning of that day, however, I am more disappointed than relieved when I discover that the house at which I had planned to make my penultimate appeal—for the removal of the last fence in the street—is occupied by nobody. I feel I can proceed, but I am also plagued by the thought that I have somehow cheated the street and its people by too readily taking the emptiness of the house as an affirmation of my private project. Then, looking down between this house and the next, I see a young woman from the household I would have visited on Friday hanging her body over the dividing fence, making it lean and sag in the middle. I have no longer any need to talk to her when she smiles at me. It is over.

There has never been a fence at the eastern end of the street.

The first, longest and most difficult stage of my project is completed more than a day early. It will be Thursday in its slowness for a long time yet. I do nothing in the way of employment or amusement. Friday comes eventually, and the day begins to happen, but nothing happens—nothing can happen—to remove the fear past simple understanding that it holds for me. I want not to stir from my bed all day. I imagine a blank world outside. Magdalene, my wife as I say, drives the children to their school, and I lie here beneath two white sheets, desiring almost not to be—a pulse of life unnoticeable to every other animate thing—in envy of whatever is a single degree short of

death. For how might my active living presence in this street on a day the entire meaning and purpose of which had resided in a task I have already completed many terrible hours in advance, affect in unknown and perhaps deleterious ways the hopes and dreams I have for the weekend?

Saturday follows, however, and I wake to the sound of heavy equipment being operated. All three fences are removed in an hour. Who could have arranged for this? Magdalene? The children? Anything could come through here now.

And then it is Sunday, and in the early morning light I walk to the eastern end of the street, behind the row of houses. Something should happen now, I think. There should be joy. I imagine the youngest and the second-youngest children in the street, my son and my daughter, Zac and Sophie, running and skipping, children with toy footballs in preparation for the start of a new season, but then I realize this will never happen, and instead I see Magdalene, my wife, beginning to walk towards me from the far end of all the houses—she must have gone round the front way to do this—and I realize that what I am seeing is real. The wind is blowing strongly, and while now there are more than a few white clouds overhead, nothing will stay in this sky for long.

Monday beckons.

House-Moving

The way things are between the ocean and the land is not understood, and the wet and dry grains of sand I am now on are an omen for our failure, and a sign of our inability to imagine that somewhere—perhaps many miles inland by now—some pieces of the dry world were yesterday pieces of the wet. A subspecies of a rare species of parrot never seen so far from water before by the teenage bird-watcher in his hide, the rubber strap of a diver's waterproof watch lost by the edge of a windy highway, a plastic ballerina that a child in an iron bathtub clutches to herself underwater as her parents wait by the front door: these were all formerly, if not yesterday then surely (being by nature fragile) sometime this century, pools of water not then distinguishable from the ocean around them. Pools within a pool, outlined only by the watery knowledge of what they will become, unreadable as the white of an eye, homes to mites of water.

What remains of the ocean is just land that, division prior to division, has yet to become dry. Clouds are part of it, and they might turn into things the shape they are, but clouds are not essential to the reflex that leaves unblinking the worlds of ocean and land: the smaller wet one and at once the larger dry one. It happens as things happen in the water of the mouth: wet, dry then. All that is not ocean is land, and the rivers that flow abjectly into the sand of our beaches are a wrong-turning of our imagination, which shades over our refusal to acknowledge, even to ourselves, that on some days water can feel just a little less wet. And all that is still ocean will in no

time—as fast as the years pass on the white backs of calendars—one day become land.

To change what is real a man must above all imagine things as they are, and to deliver the dry back into the wet one must know—and more than know, imagine—how first the dry was born. Believe me, it is all a question of speed. I am a man of imagination and knowledge. This is why I am on grains of sand where the dry and the wet jostle over existence together, where all other minds but mine have failed, and where the speed of transformation must be invented by me for the human race. I might be thought of as mad, or as a brave soul, but at night, on the beach, I can picture what happens, and is real, regardless; I feel the invisible quickness of it all. I am steady and do not drown in my dreams. The pools of water have a certain distance from me, measurable in miles or fractions of miles, and a particular depth below the ocean's surface, which can be reckoned in inches or feet or miles. They never touch the dry land, air and sky and horizon being not ocean, that is above them.

Change. . . .

The next morning I notice something that I have never seen before: a car wreck perhaps, leaching rust-coloured water into the pores of the rocks at the end of the beach, the skeleton of a frog, a leaf that lets through the sun, or an idea, which since I read no books here, and talk to no people of consequence, must be new from the ocean. Even history, like all else comes from the ocean, is not ocean, and is therefore land, as the idea is land. My grandfather fell victim to the land in the year that the ocean—but what am I saying?—gave out, with everything already planned in advance in that

terrible pool that starts all this, the year of his death. I swim for an hour and then begin my studies for the day.

I am working on the history of my maternal grandfather, Joseph Wade, who left the country he had never left before, to come on a ship to the country of my birth, which in the way most people reckon I have never since left. He was a young man on the morning of his departure, but he felt like an old man when the captain declared that the war no-one had really expected had just been announced. Yet he was still a young man. That same day, although the ship's final port of call was only two days away—or perhaps because it was—another man of about my grandfather's age looked all afternoon for a precise place in the ocean. Finally seeing it, he jumped overboard without hesitation. When he heard this news, Joseph felt as if someone had mixed a little water into his blood; he let his wife know that he feared he too would be thought of as a coward when the ship was shifting up to the quay before the end of the week. Because crowds are always unfair, he thought.

On the last day before their arrival, my grandfather and his wife watched a gang of men painting a victory slogan on a steep hillside of the country that they had almost arrived in. When the evening came, Joseph did not pen a full description of the scene in his daily diary, referring only to the wooden house that he had observed amongst the sand-dunes beneath the waving and shouting men. The dwelling interested him. So taken was he by the view of the house, in fact, that he drew a rough sketch of it sometime in the last hours before the ship docked at the place where several relations he had never seen before, except in photographs, were waiting for the Wade family. His sketch was drawn from his memory of the house without reference to the description that he had recorded in his diary the previous evening. My grandfather's wife smiled when he showed her the sketch, but her smile

meant more than one thing, because she wanted them to live in a house like that. And so did he, not a coward as he was, but not so much not a coward.

As they walked down the gangway, and while his wife was already looking for the home-made sign promised to them months before, Joseph told her that he did not consider this their true arrival, because he wanted to return as soon as possible, on the same ship or another ship, to the country he had thought he would never go back to. And within a week he did. He saw the house again as he had remembered it while drawing his sketch, not in the way he had described it in his diary—both of which things he had unpacked without repacking. He saw it set back a little from the ocean, in the misty region where his children and his grandchildren would go on holidays in the future without him. In the meantime, his wife and his daughter (my mother) lay on the same bed embracing, crying tears of the same substance, and for almost the same reasons.

The diary interests me for the sketch it encloses, but first my grandmother and then her daughter passed it on from generation to generation without a thought or a care for the browning sheet of paper pressed between certain of its back pages, like a flower that with age and pressure begins to show its vegetable skeleton until, at last, it lets all of light and vision through. I looked right through my grandfather's sketch one day and knew I could see something, believe me, that others weren't able to. I am certain of this because when the telegram that is so often a feature of war movies arrived—this is something else that I know—my grandmother thought not of any house, but of how anxious her new relations had said her husband looked in the few days they knew him outside of photographs. Then her tears fell

like rain into the ocean, except the ocean was really the cup of sweet, Australian tea that she was still holding. Salt into salt; salt into sugar.

As of this winter, my grandmother has been irritable and sick for a whole year; now she can only sip beer, she says, because taking anything else is like eating dirt. But she gives me her blessing whether I am there to receive it or not. It is for her that I am using my grandfather's diary, to write a few lines each day of a personal history of the First World War from the point of view of her husband. I have already written the last paragraph—a sort of coda—in which I describe the French hamlet that my grandfather only arrived in after his death. I believe my grandmother likes to think at nights of the kind souls who transported his body the few miles there for a Christian burial. On my beach, however, which is where I always picture myself, the local surfers, if they think of death at all, would never connect it with either a French hamlet, or with what they see me doing even on the days when the wind and the waves keep them in their sealed cars on the top of the cliff. We are similar though. As they go again and again with their boards to where the waves curve before breaking, so too I am trying to move something through the often-cloudy water near the shore.

I gave you the impression a while ago that I swim for an hour out of pleasure before beginning my work for the day. In a way that is not true, although I do not credit that the surfers understand why everyday I need to swim directly through the breakers to a place in the ocean, and always the same place, where I turn myself over and stare back at the land. Perhaps that time when two of them paddled their boards out with me, one on either side, they were making an effort to understand. But all the way they were laughing, laughing. Staring back at the land, laughing, laughing.

I do not sleep in the house at night, although there is nothing to stop me from doing so; everything of it is still in the same condition it was in when I first began my work, and in the evenings I replace in exactly their original position any parts of the house's construction that I have all day not been able to push beyond the lines of breakers for all time. The patience I have for my task is not diminished but preserved and even enhanced by the routine and repetition. I anticipate the particular feel each one of the wooden pegs that join the house together will have as I prepare to tap it into its place, and I know the sensation that it will give me when its head is flush against the surface of the exterior. It is best that each morning from the ocean I see as much of the house as remains from the previous day in the form in which my grandfather would have seen it, on that day in the past that will not always, I believe, be unchanging.

Frequently, I gather together a number of the sheets of paper out of the assorted pages of the unfinished manuscript of my personal history of the First World War, in order to arrange them on the lower bunk bed of my caravan into the shape of the house as it was when I last saw it, minutes or hours, never days, before. It is always a complete model; I am always a perfect modeller. On every corner of the horizontal sheets I place a grain of sand with my fingertip to replicate the head of one of the wooden pegs, and on every corner of the vertical papers I likewise fix in place a grain of dry sand, with a dab of spittle. When I go to sleep, which I always do in the lower of the two bunk beds, or if I become disturbed by my model, I collect the grains of sand in a twist of paper, so that on the next occasion I will not have to search afresh for new grains that approximate to (what more can I hope for?) the texture and appearance of the wooden heads.

I'm not stubborn though. If I do happen to come across a better copy for one of the heads I am sure to replace the inferior version with it. To lessen any possibility of confusion in the future, furthermore, when my failing senses might increasingly lead me to replace an actually truer replica of any given head with a grain that only resembles it almost as well, in such a circumstance as I have just described I swim with the by now tainted grain in my clenched fist to the point at which I turn on my back for my morning viewing of the house and the land, where I drop the grain and watch its descent from the corner of my eye for as long as I am able to in the dark water there.

It is only on days without any wind, or even the suggestion of wind, that I am able to build my model. Even a knock on the door from one of the surfers in their moulting wet suits can upset its balance. Perhaps some of them know my habits and intend this act of destruction, but I grant them their harmless requests anyway. They often ask me for water, and I am happy to provide them with what passes for water in their world. I even set out the cups they never bother to use.

As for me, I don't drink water anymore, although I like the feel of ocean water around my lips. It has also proved useful to the increase and the improvement of my courage—for it is this more than knowledge or imagination that counts now—to watch the disappearance of the depressions I leave between caravan, ocean and house, which is simultaneously the cold return to evenness of the wet grains and the dry grains of the surface of the beach. There have been no signs of actual violence from the body of surfers yet, but I fear the interruption to my work when their amusement turns to impatience. Do they think I also mean to mock their sport when, for my own secret purpose, I make my way through

the swirling water and the breakers with a part of the house that in a crude way resembles their smoothed and beloved boards? As they tighten the straps across the roof racks of their cars, can they understand why I don't leave a mere plank of wood to founder in the gutters and rills of the shallows?

But these are creatures of land who tarry over the surface of the pure ocean, on boards that could not either be anything but land: my muscles turn into sharp vibrations of flesh when I see the water in beads on their waxed surfaces. Surely when they increase their speed across the huge, unbroken face of one of those uncommon waves that form at a much greater distance from the shore than the more everyday type of sand-filled wave, they must feel themselves within reach of that particular act of transition and transformation in which beginning and end are compressed into an instant? As well, for the land itself they have no real affection. And yet that is not enough. Perhaps one day very soon I will gather together a small group of the surfers who seem to have more to them than their peers, or I will call to one separately from the others, and talk to them, or him, or her, about this and that. But I feel comfortable for now. I have all the time in the world to invent that one split-second—that one split in a second—after which, after only a few minutes, or an hour at most, spent in my daydreams chatting and laughing with the surfers, a young man will appear walking up the beach with a face more alive than even a photograph is alive.

Inexactitude

It always used to surprise me how small my father looked in the company of other men.

Things change given time. When I think of my father today, I picture him in the company of primitive wood: sometimes the dust of many sorts of trees; more often chips and shavings of jarrah, particles of trunks as heavy in death as in life, once hauled to distant Melbourne from the southern forests of Western Australia, as different from each other as are crystals of snow—every piece a veritable treasure of its species. But black-red jarrah, I know, was not my father's only passion. Sometimes the excess layers of a paler and softer type of wood were revealed to the eye by his work. Flaxen chip mountains would form around him, or paper-thin curlicues of karri might cling to the golden-bronze hairs of his arms and his legs. The weft and the warp of his clothes would grow tiny stems and branches. All this was good.

Three or four times a week, I would help my father to sweep the fine sawdust—along with the chips and the shavings—into sturdy, cardboard boxes. These we would empty under the trees or bushes of our garden: shallow heaps to keep the moisture in the soil. If there was too much fresh-scented wood to distribute, my father and I would pile the remaining contents of the boxes in drifts against our fences. Each coffer of dust that we emptied added to the scattered record of all the things that he had made. Our

garden became a garden of every type of wood. I liked to imagine that a new jarrah tree might one day grow—by some magical, seedless process—out of the millions of chips and shavings that we had deposited onto our little square of Melbourne's land. Only the finger-slicing shavings of metal—the curly-wurly detritus of bolt-cutting and rod-threading—were set aside for the rubbish collection on Wednesday mornings.

Given an hour, the proper tools, and a piece of wood not refractory to human shaping, my father could midwife into the world an object of lasting usefulness and beauty: a spoon; a bowl; a board with a grain like the fossil of a crab, for slicing cheese or bread upon. All of them treasured, none of these things—once finished and at rest in his hands—were ever, I think, entirely forgotten. It was, however, the ceiling-scraping dressers, the giant's tables, and the book-shelves designed for a lifetime of reading—the work of many days and nights—that gave him the satisfaction which lives in the innermost pocket of the soul. I know this to be true, if I am now left to speculate as to why.

Perhaps it was no more than the tremendous weight, aware of itself just beneath the bark, of a fully mature tree, joined to the strong earth which supports it, that my father respected, albeit a weight sometimes as tragic as it is honest, for careless mill-workers, or for those trapped in a storm-driven forest. Perhaps it was this that inspired him to spend many hours working on a tabletop of a scale to suit a family of twelve children, until it had exactly the smoothness—neither a degree more nor less so—of a dam on the very stillest of days, when the muddy water has just a wonderful inexactitude to its flatness. I have never known another person able to use an adze to produce a surface with the most delicate, the merest, swells and depressions,

guaranteed to tantalize the sensitive hand that runs (like a pianist's) undulatingly over them, to make the nerves of the fingertips quicken.

The adze is a tool that has almost been forgotten today. It is an instrument of neither absolute smoothness, nor of puncture and wooden injury. Not really a partner of the plane, even less like a gouge or a drill, in its uniqueness is captured a reflection of the human uncertainty of our lives. These days it languishes, unhappily so, tipped over on its side, not handy for use, in sheds and attics and dark cellars around the country, in the cramped spaces under houses that have known the passage of many winters and springs, abandoned to rust and to decay. Or worse still, it has been transformed—out of the pious vandalism of ignorance—into a vegetable-plot mattock, its once keen edge blunted. Few people are able to appreciate what the adze might reveal in the surface of any species of wood; tools more alien to our hands have taken its place.

My father knew how to use an adze properly. It is necessary to become a croquet-player of the grain. The worker of the wood should first choose an area of level ground, upon which—balanced as if floating on a millpond raft—it will be possible to maintain the metal head of the adze in a perfect sympathy and accord with the encircling horizon. The blade should have almost begun its upstroke when the wood is contacted. In this respect, the adze is akin to the billiard-table and the bowling-green. It is an assertion of the value of the horizontal over the more spurious attractions of the vertical. Adzing is rather a shake of the head, left and right, sweeping across the land, than a nod up and down, into the emptiness of the sky. One must imagine oneself a living version of the metal apparatus from which a pendulum swings steadily. Each arm requires nerve and purpose. But every action must be also as smooth as an underwater glide.

I used to watch my father adze for hour after hour, his unflagging stamina for the labour seeming to come from an energy never before released from the heart of the wood. I sometimes think that the conclusion of his work for the day marked a return, for him, to a world of a somewhat clumsier humanity, bereft of the precise art of the adze. When they were not being used, a sort of leather envelope (complete with strap and buckle) would protect the oiled blades of his adzes from whatever might injure or dull them.

My mother's is another story, of course, but as my father's life was a part of hers, so too was hers a part of his. As is the weft and the warp, the leaf and the limb. It is impossible for me not to recall her also in this piece of writing. My parents were both born in the first days of WWII, learning to walk on the brink of the years of 'great possibilities'. They met for the first time on the pier in St Kilda: he was fresh from the country—and had brought some of it with him—she loved to ride the Coburg tram from terminus to terminus. They were not really young anymore. Before it was too late, or rather, before some people in Melbourne at that time would have thought it was too late, they married. I was their only child, and I have been told things that only an only child is told.

The wedding was in December, and by the end of the summer my mother had managed to start work as a primary-school teacher in one of the new suburbs on the northern edge of Melbourne. Not too long afterwards, I was born, a little overdue as it turned out, and my mother started staying at home during the days. In the first few years of his new disposition as a husband, meanwhile, my father had worked as a night-watchman, a television antenna installer, and even, for a week, as a tram conductor.

Nothing really suited: he hated heights, disliked the dark, and the constant jigging of the tram made him feel nauseous. Finally, about the time that I was beginning to say my first words, he took a job that required him to weld huge pieces of iron and steel together all day. My father used to come home at night covered in black.

It was his lungs that caused the trouble. Perhaps they were weak from the very beginning—an ailment any doctor might be forgiven for not noticing in a chest bred in the country air of Maldon—or perhaps even the healthiest of men would have been at risk, working hour after hour in a factory where a sapling branch, introduced for a dubious lark, could shrivel and buckle, inside a week, until its ends were almost touching. Or perhaps it was something only more nebulously of the body, a certain misunderstanding in the palms of the hands of the qualities of metal, which, over time, transmitted a doubt to the brain, and from the brain to the surrounds of the heart. Whatever happens, my mother said, he is never to go back. A man cannot live for nothing.

Doorsteps were the best. Out of old houses, cured of any future warp or split, tempered by uncountable comings and goings, jarrah doorsteps were the best for furniture destined to last. With more time to call his own, my father started to keep a lookout for houses being wrecked in the older, more prosperous suburbs like Hawthorn and Kew. Sometimes these were advertised in the newspaper on Saturdays or Wednesdays. More often, there would just be a chalked signboard on the main road, saying 'Wrecked House'. In our two-toned grey Holden—my mother sitting in the front passenger seat, me in the back—we'd turn-off. A snick with his pocket knife would determine for my father the species of wood. Then often a smile: doorsteps of jarrah were the best.

This part of the house was always the last to be removed, because everything else rested upon it—the architectural equivalent of the tap root. Having negotiated a price with the wrecker on the spot, often standing directly beneath the lintel as he did so, his head in no danger of bumping against it, my father and I would return days or even weeks later, when, depending on the time of the year, the house-site by then would be mainly either mud or dust. The original blue of his trailer became burnished with many shades of another colour.

My father loved driving home with his wonderful prize securely behind him: a piece of wood of a rich black-red beneath the surface. It was one of his greatest delights to make, out of something older than himself, a new object with all the transferred strength, of a house that had managed to resist the many degradations of its years as a shelter for people, of a tree that had defied, for a century of summers and winters, the bushfires and the wild storms of Western Australia. And on my lap, in the front seat next to my father, there was often a prize of my own: perhaps a suburban newspaper from 1919, hidden safely under kitchen linoleum for one or more lifetimes, or an ancient cricket ball, its red leather now harder and tougher than the hardest of woods.

My grandfather worked with wood also; without any desire, or so I like to believe, to be any sort of worker of metal. He had been the one who taught his son how to properly handle an adze. Stories lead to other stories. . . . Once, my father and I used an orange rope to pull a dead branch out of the leafy crown of a river redgum. Don't look up! As the blackened limb crashed down through the foliage, he spoke as if we were trapped on three sides by a fire. A million splinters of dry tree, potentially injurious to the eye, were

falling to the ground all around us. It had seemed like it was raining wood. I was twelve years old. A century or more after its birth, a jarrah tree is removed from the forest and hauled slowly to a distant city on the other side of Australia, part of the trunk becomes the front doorstep of a house in an eastern suburb of Melbourne, where it remains motionless until babies begin to grow old, until the house itself shows its age. My father pushes down on the accelerator of our two-toned grey Holden, and we cross over an intersection in the few seconds while the traffic lights are amber. The trailer and its wooden load whistles along behind us. In an hour we are home.

Our suburban block of land descended in three miniature tablelands, each exactly a third of a quarter of an acre in size. There was only a single hill in our neighbourhood, and the house that we occupied was built securely into its northern side. Each level patch of land was merged with a declination of lawn unscattered with any chips of karri, which in its contour resembled, for one aware of such similarities, the upside-down head of an adze. The bulk of the house was on the middle plateau, only its hindmost section extended down to the lowest of the three levels. The highest of our suburban tablelands was presided over, like a rooster always crowing to the dawn, by a letter-box of stained jarrah.

My father's first workshop was dug into the original slope of the land under the rear of our house. It ran parallel to the length of the back wall. Although many paces long, the workshop was squeezed between blue-grey bricks on its southern side, and a hundred tonnes of black earth to the north. There were two entrances, the one at the eastern end not much bigger than a sort of hatchway, handy for little more than kneeling access to the bags of rough-sawn wood that we used to feed our water-heater. (The wood you cut yourself warms you twice, my father always said.) From what was really only

a corridor at its edge, the underpart of the house stretched like a mystery away into the darkness. This made what little useful space there was seem even more confined. It was not somewhere congenial to the mind and the hands of a worker of the wood that came from the wind-blown world above. Only roots could ever be at home there.

The first items of adzed furniture that I can remember my father making were manufactured in various spots here and there throughout a suburban garden as yet unstrewn with every type of wood. On dry mornings or afternoons, any level place out of the sun would do. On days when it was raining, my father erected a large tent, the corners of which—like canvas sails being filled by a wind that blows in fits and starts along the shoreline—became gradually the baggy repositories of chips of West Australian jarrah.

It was soon after the day when my father and I had stood together amidst a rainfall of wood that he told my mother of his plans to extend the workshop nearly as far back under our dwelling—into the only hill in the neighbourhood—as would bring about the creation of what could almost be called another house, hidden from sight beneath the surface of the earth. I like to imagine that my father's blue-grey eyes took on, at this prospect, the slightly speckled appearance Indian teak is supposed to have when it is polished with the juice of its own leaves. What I know certainly to be true, is that he told my mother of his ambition to one day make a wooden sail-boat, in the old way, without any power tools, in the workshop he would dig out of the earth. It was for this that he needed more space. A craft big enough for the roominess of the ocean could never be built in a bath-tub of a workshop.

My mother was working at that time as a visiting teacher at schools spread across the suburbs of Melbourne. After her years at home with me, she was

hoping to find settled employment again. She looked with love upon my father's visions for the future. One Sunday he started to dig. The buckets that he emptied into his trailer contained something more like ashes than dirt, so long had it been since nourishing rain had fertilized the soil beneath our house. Like many men of his generation born in the country, my father—the boat-builder to be—had never learned to swim.

Eventually, the new workshop was completed, a basically open space underlying the rooms and the several corridors that existed upstairs; it implicitly poked fun at the house's many divisions. Both above and below, the days passed by in changed combinations of work and habits of leisure. Slightly different routines were established, if not observed without exceptions. Sometimes my father would appear unexpectedly in the house, or my mother would come into the workshop on a whim, home from the local school where she had soon enough found new employment. For my part, I used to move incessantly between the two places, all the while creating between them, with the endless comings and goings of my footsteps, an imaginary connection, knitting house and workshop together the way a shoelace closes a shoe.

In the meantime, a boat started to take shape beneath the earth. Neither the hull, nor any other part of it, was actually created using an adze; but, I believe that my father's project depended for its steady advancement more upon this tool than on anything else. His inspiration, with spokeshave and coping saw, with drill and mallet, seemed to derive mainly from the hour or two of every day that he devoted, without exception, to adzing. This parergon resulted in the creation of so many additional items—of all sorts of wood—that one summer, to make more room again under the house, he needed to have, held downstairs around the half-completed boat, an

exhibition and sale of all the things that he had newly brought into the world. He showed people his collection of adzes. My work invites use and not protection, he told them. What my father didn't sell could have fitted inside a bath-tub. On the first day of the autumn, he returned to his work on the sail-boat.

As I write these final words, in the hour before midnight, the anniversary of my father's death is almost upon me again. I will call my mother first thing in the morning, letting the telephone ring for a long while, letting it almost ring out, to give her time to come upstairs, into her house, from the workshop where sits a finished sail-boat of three types of wood. Later in the day I will also visit her, to talk over the things that a man can and cannot do in a life neither very short nor very long. Then, in the evening, I will go into the workshop myself, to patiently rub linseed oil into every inch of my father's boat—inside and outside—making sure of its preservation for another year. Nothing beneath my mother's house stretches away mysteriously into darkness anymore.

On the Edge of a Desert

There is more than one thing you can say about desert; but, more about desert than you can say.

I am going to tell you the story of a man who one day walked purposefully on the edge of a desert. The man would have become almost he who is telling this story, in the years that would have followed if stories were lives. That's to say, I'm talking about an excursion I made when I was a much younger man than I am now. With the qualification that I imagine myself back then as the sort of callow youth who, on a misty afternoon in his future, would never begin to write down what he remembers of a certain day in his life he finds it difficult to understand. There is this detail between us. You could say that he is an 'almost man', and that I am only almost the man I believe he would've become.

There is nothing special about either of us. Understand me and forgive me if I refer to the young man from time to time as if he were a hero or a striking figure. It is for no reason but the merest, which is to lay bare the truth that this story is his, for he is no hero truly at all. Of courage and bravery, he has actually a touch less than the usual run of men. How can I, student of uncomplaining dirt and earth that I am, make this clear to you?

Movement has always been the human fault and weakness, and I believe most men deserve to live buried far beneath the surface of the world, free to move only painfully, at the level where the soil becomes hard and the

hidden rock begins. By this I conjecture the poor bravery of my desert-walker should put him into the rock a great distance. If all men were so judged for their courage only heroes would live above ground. But I stray from my purpose.

In the years before I was married, I visited many deserts, crossing what I thought of as the green and youthful land between them by any and every means. In my travels, I read every book I found by the way that even remotely or tediously dealt with desert. I laughed out loud when I came across the single detail that showed all of the ancient mariner's disasters to be actually the jumbled recollections of a solitary desert-life. Dearest to me of all, however, were the theories and autobiographies of those who feared or hoped that the whole earth was on the way to becoming a desert. I sometimes looked into the eyes of the person nearest to me, and pictured there a certain dryness with the power to join continents, able to stretch under oceans. The day my wife died, I was too frail to resume my travelling where I had left off forty years before. Instead, I restocked my library, and with growing enthusiasm began to pass all of my leisure time in research, filling pages designed to haunt the minds of even the greatest of my rivals with melancholy thoughts of dampest rainforest. I was sure I alone knew the purity of true desert.

Almost a year ago, though, that which I'd least expected, happened. I started to take more of an interest in air than soil or sand. Perhaps even the men who live with me in this building noticed a change in my behaviour. If they did, they would have been wrong to think it permanent. Only today, as the preparations for what one wit has dubbed our mass evacuation proceed apace, I saw the workers leave their earth-cutting machines for a moment unattended. In a row, under full power, they cut through the yellow clay in a

flash and spun wildly in the air. This was enough to put me straight back on to deserts, and I'll not change again, until I'm buried (if hopes are warrants) in the middle of what I've identified as the least fertile desert on the planet.

Desert is as much not air or water or cloud as you can get.

Do you imagine my time here in retirement as dull? It is anything but that! Even my flirtation with air was an experience worth talking about. And my first and lasting love has the world over air, for good reasons too. . . . The children of the families that come to visit us often sit on the lawn below my window, where they draw pictures of what I call 'possible deserts'. (The weaker children sometimes have to sit in patches of bare dirt, because the water in the well is often out of reach of even the longest ropes; this liquid has a foul odour at the best of times: things hate to grow in it.) When the last family has left by the south gate the staff bring the forgotten or abandoned pictures in to me, something they know I appreciate. Amongst the pictures of possible deserts I have arranged on my wall are ones that other folk might interpret as drawings of cities or inland seas. But I know the young man of this story could never mistake them for anything other than what they are. And it's him we should go back to now.

The broad area this man disturbed with his footsteps on a particular day many years ago was called the Big Desert by its first explorers. They christened it thus on the basis that wherever they stood on its dunes or ridges the horizon seemed to intrude in front of the darker land that marks that region's boundary. For my part, I have other ways of measuring desert, using the accumulated knowledge of dryness and earth that I have gathered, and by my estimation the Big Desert is of a middling size only. I refuse the explorers' conclusions in this and all other matters. They would lead us only

to perversion and magic. Their unwavering belief that the desert they had discovered could be entered at any time of the day or night, but could only be left in the evening, or morning, twilight, makes them unworthy of even the lowest name that a man can possess.

The day he arrived at the Big Desert, the young man was like one who fears he will be carried away in a sack. He parked his car where rivulets of water were coming out of the sand, wetting the common dirt that was, he would have said to anyone else present, privileged to lie on the edge of a desert. The young man did not know then that there was somebody else already in the part of the desert he was looking at. She was exploring what I am only now convinced was the source of the water that I have just mentioned. The lie of the land made it inevitable that they would meet.

A few hundred paces into the Big Desert, only in small measure like an artificially constructed tank, was a sunken area. There was ancient, desert vegetation on the bottom, and the retaining walls were of a natural substance, moulded into a form that only hinted at human construction. At most, they seemed the work of a craftsman anxious to leave no traces of a characteristic style. More than this, the tank appeared to have no connection to anything of the human world. It was here that the young man came across the young woman as she was digging for something or water along one edge of a vein of darker dirt-sand.

The young man saw the young woman, her lowered head and short-cut hair, some time before she saw him. In the briefer period between her noticing his presence, and his dropping himself over the side of the sunken area, however, the young woman thought much more deeply about who he might be, and what he might be doing, than the young man thought in his

own curious way about her. There were some things they had in common though. They were each as strange to the other as the other was strange to each, meeting as they were for the very first time in a square of low ground far from the centre of the Big Desert. They were also both engaged to be married the following winter. And one other thing: they each pondered over desert more than you, my reader, would consider wholly justified.

A moment ago, I referred to the ground on which the young man landed after his drop into the tank as low ground. This is not satisfactory; it would be better to call it lowered ground, although some nights as I lie in my narrow bed I am not afraid to think of it with deepest sympathy as pounded ground, forced beneath the surface of the Big Desert with what magnitudes of violence I cannot imagine. The young man thought not at all of this matter, however, as he strode through the vegetation towards the young woman. His mind was instead full of the idea that he was now in the ruins of a former desert, which had once showed itself (with signs lost to the modern world) as a very different sort of desert from the one whose boundary it lay near.

The young woman's eyes betrayed nothing of her inner state as the young man drew closer and closer to her. Only her mouth changed its shape in the smallest degree as he placed his weight on the dirt-sand itself. There were desert animals in the ruined desert, and as the young man stopped before the young woman his feet dug into the soil like shallow-burrowing creatures. In a single motion the young woman put out her arms as if to resist him and welcome him both. The young man and the young woman were the same height as each other, and at this point in time and space their mouths were level with the surface of the Big Desert, and with where the dust of the ruined desert they were standing in would formerly have settled.

When the young man spoke it was as if his throat were clogged with earth. Deep-rooted, native lilies were growing in one corner of the sunken area.

My sentences expire. . . .

As the young man left the Big Desert he felt himself empty of everything. There were only two thoughts sometimes, that sometimes came together. He wondered how he would pass the hundred days before he got married in the winter. And he thought of the sand stuck to his body as a skin-desert, which would never really leave him. When he was almost back to his motel room these two thoughts were combined with a third, or made into it: what would a life be like lived forever on a single patch of soil where nothing moved?

Just now, as I was polishing off the last paragraph, the bell-ringer came down the corridor. She continues to sound the bells strapped around her body in a way that none of us have ever heard before, but all of us can understand. We must leave this place today. My hopes of being buried in a desert set apart from all others seem to have disappeared. Even now, as I write these words in precise copperplate without looking down at the page, I can see the young woman who has asked my permission to be the one to wheel me outside, coming across the lawn. She has spent the whole afternoon perched on the edge of the well. Could she have known? Whatever the case, I wonder if I will have the courage to give her these leaves as she pushes me over the grass hillocks on the north side of our building, into a new sort of life that I had never believed possible until I composed in my mind the sentence you are about to read, and the sentence after that.

Understand him and forgive him. . . .

Little Desert

As I had hoped, when we arrived at the lake we were the only people there. Neither of us had seen any other cars at the place where the road ended and the desert began. Yet perhaps there was another way in we didn't know about; or somebody had decided to camp overnight on the shore of the lake. Somebody who didn't have a car, perhaps. But there was no-one.

The evening before, over a shared ice-cream dessert at a local restaurant, my wife had told me that she would be going to bed as soon as we got back to the motel, to be rested for our early start the next morning. This she did. I had stayed up for some time after her though: getting together the things that we would need for our trip into the desert; estimating distances and times.

Our room was next door to the reception area. The manager had his television set turned up loud; he kept switching irritatingly between the channels. There had been a movie on, and the local news, and it wasn't until after the movie that I had turned off the main light. Getting into bed myself, next to my wife, I lay on my back and thought of the pair of empty fish-tanks on the manager's desk. And then I think I took a long time falling asleep, because when our alarm clock went off it seemed as if the movie were still going on inside my head.

There had been no lights shining in the motel complex when I eased the room door closed behind us, and unlocked the passenger side of the car for my wife. (In a moment she was leaning over as far as she could to push

open the driver's door for me.) The only artificial illumination came from the frosted lamps around one side of the motel swimming pool, which made the water bright green. Although I had remembered thinking, upon our daylight arrival, that I had never seen water so blue. There had been some clothes-pegs on the bottom then. Children were diving for them.

Some of the fainter stars had been dimming-out as we drove along the road that would soon veer left and become the main street of the town of Nhill, Victoria. Our motel was about at the point towards the end of a long stretch of highway where the speed limit begins to be lowered on white-and-black signs. My wife had a tourist map on her knees, and she read out the names of the cross-streets as we came up to them in the darkness. We had both seen a rabbit in the headlights.

A few minutes after we left the motel, my wife had spotted the turn-off to the desert before I did. Even with my glasses on her vision was much keener in the pre-dawn light. We had not needed to go into the centre of Nhill. The road to the desert ran alongside the railway tracks on the edge of the town. Our tourist map showed us that halfway to the desert the road and the tracks would diverge, meet again, then finally part for good. As I slowed the car down to take the left-hand turn, I saw a diamond-shaped kite hanging from the power lines by two lengths of cord. It had been swooping back and forth, upside-down above the earth, as if the black fingers of electricity overhead were of a contrary nature to the last weak winds of the night.

While the light continued to increase and alter, I had been the one to say the morning had broken.

The sun had flashed across my rear-vision mirror as we parked on a slope of earth at the entrance to our destination. We had arrived at the Little Desert. I turned off the engine, and for the first time that morning it was perfectly quiet. We stepped out onto damp soil. I had walked around the car checking all the doors and windows, while my wife was doing something with our backpacks. We had prepared enough sandwiches and bottles of cold water to see us through the whole day. In a minute or two, we were ready to go.

For a while we hadn't even been sure if we were really in the desert or not. Then we came to a turnstile in a short run of wire fencing, and we knew. The turnstile had a counter attached to it, and as we went through the white numbers noiselessly turned over. It was probably part of someone's job to note how many people went into the desert. Perhaps this information was important. But I had thought about those people who deliberately went around the fence, or used the turnstile more than once. My wife must have read my mind. She had said quietly, perhaps it all evens out in the end.

That had also been the moment when we first noticed the real sand mixed with the soil beneath our feet, and that the Little Desert mainly consisted—the vegetation falling away—of a serried formation of low rises and shallow dips. We were now into a new landscape, walking across the first of its modest plateaus.

Tucked into my shirt pocket was a map of the desert produced for walkers, and we weren't long in our progress towards the lake before the cartographic marks like the diminuendos and crescendos on a page of music became signs we could interpret. The map gave the lake a smooth contour, filled in with a colour that naturally indicated deep water. But my wife and I had speculated that at that season, and at the very centre of the desert, the lake

would be a salt lake. Its water would be shallow and its shore uneven, we had guessed. And in this we were proved to be right.

All the length of the morning, off the surface of the path and from the rest of the ground, the air had been rising in warm waves. What little there was of copper-coloured, needle-like grass had been the first to respond. An hour later, the same waves had brushed around our faces, slowly continuing to ascend, moving through our hair like fingers of gentleness. This was a sensation that we hadn't felt before, out there in the relative flatness of the Little Desert. And then, when our watches showed that it was almost noon—the long hands about to touch the twelves on our wrists—we noticed something else of a peculiar nature.

Although there wasn't a breath of wind, the few trees at first appeared to be straining against their confinement in the earth, all of themselves rejecting the land from within. But the next moment this had curiously seemed not to be happening. Precisely the absence of even the weakest breeze then manifested itself as decisive, as if the trees that we could see here and there on the landscape, not needing for their equilibrium to be rooted and heavy and thus not being so, now were no longer rebelling against their connection with the lowest part of the visible desert, but were touching it with just the smallest possible touch, nothing of them actually buried into the loose soil. As if roots had withdrawn completely into trunks. As if something had turned utterly around. As if the few trees were sheerly held up by the rising air—a delicate balancing act—and into its cloud-headed warm waves.

I had walked with my binoculars around my neck, seeing two eagles. Or perhaps the same eagle twice.

At times, the silence was extreme.

There had been low signs by the side of the path at irregular intervals, sometimes three or four clustered together. They had on them descriptions of the interesting aspects of the desert and its life. Here were indicated two trees that had grown into each other in a cleft of rock, and become one; there, the same thing had happened, but with one of the trees having died. A few of the signs had referred to rainfall or temperature change in the Little Desert's unique microclimate. Others said that at this spot one could often see a particular bird, or furtive animal. My wife had told me that the signs looked a little like church-lecterns springing from the ground, or like tombstones made to resemble open books. (A rare parrot we read about had last been seen in 1961, by N. Green.)

Our route to the lake had taken us through a part of the desert supporting very little in the way of scrub or other plant-growth. The ground had to it what my wife called an angry tone. In places the sand gathered in drifts deep enough for our legs to disappear up to the bare flesh of our calves. We soon took care to recognize and avoid such traps. We wanted, if possible, no delays.

At the point where we understood from our walkers' map that we would arrive at our lunch-spot by the salt lake in just under an hour, we had found ourselves on a slightly higher plateau, where the fine sand gave only a few grains of cover to the shale beneath. In view before us was an expanse of clumpy bushes of a bleached-green colour: a prospect of palest olive. Obviously we were on the edge of fertile soil. It had almost looked as if we might walk, from where we were, right across the top of the scrub to the next

low rise; although by careful observation, if nothing else, we knew that we couldn't. The surface of the scrub was even and uninterrupted, but the smallest bird to alight on it sank beneath the feathery leaves and tips. Sank to fly out of the scrub's surface bafflingly elsewhere. (The same bird? or another?)

I had related to my wife what I knew about a certain type of mixed bush-growth in Tasmania—now rare if not extinct—which was often able to sustain, for considerable distances, the weight of people who simply wanted to walk above the land for a while. My wife had just grimaced in response. She was becoming tired, and the comparison was a vague one. The scrub we were faced with then was not only unable to support us, but allowed no sort of passage through its web of lower branches either. We were therefore forced to make a long detour, by the fainter trail around its stunted-grass border, in order to regain our path to the lake on the farther side. For no reason at all, my wife had taken one way, and I the other. I had seen tiny desert mice, and much larger desert rats, in frantic motion within the scrub. They were all chittering amongst themselves, without regard to size or species. Under the sun, it had felt nevertheless as if I were looking into darkness.

There was orange peel on the ground where the main path took up again: the first sign of recent intrusion that either of us had seen.

I had taken my time listening to the rats and the mice in the scrub, and my wife was sitting on the ground with her arms around her knees when I found her. Taking a wad of toilet paper from my backpack, I went a few metres away out of sight, where the luxurious droppings of desert animals were scattered about. I had recognized unidentifiable insect-parts, tiny wings,

sand, and seed, in the pellets. Moving on, we caught sight of the salt lake just a little later than we had planned.

As I had hoped, when we arrived at the lake we were the only people there. Neither of us had seen any other cars at the place where the road ended and the desert began. Yet perhaps there was another way in we didn't know about; or somebody had decided to camp overnight on the shore of the lake. Somebody who didn't have a car, perhaps. But there was no-one.

Across the lake we could see three water-birds being very still, a little way in from the opposite shore. They did not disturb at all the few centimetres of water they were at rest in. It gave out almost nothing, that salt water: without movement and shallow at every point. Reflections from the surface of the lake were mixed with the appearance of its bottom. It was difficult even to be sure about what sort of a body of water we were looking at. An over-sized puddle? Ridges of land that began well back in the desert around us continued out into the lake as thin fingers of earth, which dropped under the surface only when almost to the middle. They were the ribs of the Little Desert, I had thought to myself, and this was its watery heart.

The ducks' heads were nestled comfortably into the plumage of their napes. Nothing moved. All between our words was without noise. For a moment I almost believed that I could watch the silence that surrounded us. It had been as if the visible landscape—the few trees; the copper-coloured, needle-like grass—were listening to what we said, finding it eventually acceptable, and then allowing our utterances to pass back into the quietness unhindered.

We had arrived. The two of us. At a heart of salt.

It was hard to have to quit the lake's irregular and pockmarked shore so quickly, now that we were finally where we wanted to be. But it was past the time to have our lunch, we were both tired, and the path to the nearest shady place to eat and rest was going to take us a short distance away from the lake. My wife and I had removed our hiking boots and socks to test the temperature of the water, and now we needed to sprint across the burning ground to the spot that we had decided upon almost immediately after our arrival. Even several long steps from the edge of the salt lake, however, the sand was cool and moist.

Water usually darkens whatever it touches, and I have read somewhere that this proves it is not really crystalline, but pure black, which is to say that it makes things black by an invariable law of change and resemblance. The Little Desert then? Nowhere in even the immediate vicinity of the lake did the colour of the sand vary from the salty whiteness presented by other parts of the desert. Even the thin fingers of land like the spokes of a gigantic wheel had a pale and glazed hue. And more than likely the same went for the bottom of the lake, although through the shallow depths of the water we couldn't tell for sure.

As we opened our backpacks, ate our sandwiches, and splashed our cold drinks into our mouths, we talked about such things. A million days of evaporation, my wife said with a mouthful of bread and cheese, had done something to the Little Desert to make its surface so impervious to the effects of water. An element in the rain was not taking on the sand, I had thought to myself.

When we had finished our lunch, and felt rested again, we pulled our hiking boots and socks on over our gritty feet, and went back to the shore of the lake. The ducks were exactly as they had been when we first arrived. And we just stood on the damp sand and watched over them.

There was nothing mystical about anything in the end; no presence suggested itself in the shallow water. There was only the salt lake precisely as it was, and a sky that all day had not been disturbed by an aeroplane. (No flight paths divided the Little Desert into pieces from above.) But it was a place, the lake, the sky, the desert, that you didn't want to turn your back on—as if you might miss something.

When we made up our minds to go it was in sadness.

Call it holy? my wife asked. Touching melancholy, I replied, pronouncing the last word to rhyme with hers, and with a tone as if I were wanting my voice to carry to my wife's ears with almost no volume at all, just the smallest increment above the lowermost limit of her hearing.

****

That was Saturday, when we made our way back through the Little Desert to where we had left our car on a slope of earth. After unpacking at our motel on Friday morning, five hours after leaving Melbourne, we had driven around the town for a while, stopping at the one hotel for lunch and a game of pool, before taking the highway that led to the South Australian border.

We were barely over the first rise in the land between Nhill and Adelaide, when I had startled my wife by leaving the main road at a point where no minor road or track was visible, only a clear area.

I had seen a sign to the house-museum that was the former home of the nineteenth-century romanticist poet John Shaw Neilson. It stood alone in the middle of the sort of dirt clearing where long-distance truck drivers sleep in the cabins of their trucks overnight. Neilson must have built it himself. Where the bush began at the edge of the clearing there were piles of gravel and sand for repairing the road. The house-museum was closed-up, and the chicken wire tacked across the windows made it hard to see inside. But we had spent several hours wandering through the gumtrees near the back fences of the town of Nhill, before returning to the main street in our car.

The helpful woman at the tourist information office had told us later that day that five years ago, after its restoration, she had sat for weeks and weeks in the house-museum, waiting for someone to stop and come in. If we were interested, she said, she could meet us there after work the next afternoon, and show us through.

Our return hike through the desert took much less time than the outward journey that we had begun just as the sun was rising. We walked quickly, made no stops, and only parted company once, each of us taking the grassy route around the pale-olive expanse of scrub that the other one had taken when we were still making our way towards the unknown salt lake. And this wasn't so as to privately linger, but just to be able to say that we had made a complete trip. Our voices sang out across the even surface of the clumpy bushes so the other might hear.

We were in a hurry because of our special arrangement to meet the woman from the tourist information office located in the main street of Nhill. We had left our motel while it was still dark, but neither of us had anticipated the sort of delay that we would encounter when we had thought ourselves less than an hour away from our lunch-spot. The fertile soil and its thick scrub: that was why we needed to quicken our step.

The sign requesting that visitors leave the desert around either end of the short run of wire fencing is easy to overlook, as we had overlooked it, when walking in the direction of the lake. We saw it for the first time simultaneously with catching sight of the turnstile, which had been our point of entry in the morning. My wife and I hurried past the sign and its message. The turnstile looked easy enough to climb over. We took hold of one of its metal arms together.

Perhaps it was the influence of our very different grips on this object—four hands, two people, a man's grip and a woman's—that made it suddenly move the wrong way, accidentally pushed backwards from the side of the salt lake. Whatever the reason, as suddenly as easily we were outside of the Little Desert again. Checking the white numbers—the dry bodies of insects caught between the discs of the meter—I realized, by some fluke of memory, that they were exactly as they had been after our passage in the morning. That seemed to mean two things: no-one else had come through; our contrary passage had not registered on the counter.

We had always felt ourselves alone that day. Yet perhaps the white numbers had, in fact, noiselessly registered our exit, had clicked back twice while we fell out of the Little Desert. And two people that we had never seen had entered after us. Or not.

Starting the car, I suddenly thought that our trip to the salt lake was somehow never to stop happening. And then I had the impression that I was having the same thought distinctly and clearly again.

We were silent and almost without energy as we sped along in the late-afternoon sunlight. The limit was generally 75 k.p.h. At one point my wife moved her arm weakly in front of me, touched her index finger onto the dusty windscreen—making a dot—and pointed out the acres of sloping rock that somebody had told us did service all year round as the catchment area for Nhill's water supply. To divert the rainwater there was a low wall of slate and concrete following the contours of the rock, just above the ground. It served its purpose well, I'm sure, but it made every other part of the rock unsightly, as if two wrong things had been added together.

We arrived at the house-museum to find that our guide had already unlocked the door, opening it wide to light the interior. There were no rooms inside the house, although perhaps the house itself could have been called a room—a room on the outskirts of Nhill. None of the period furniture installed in the process of restoration was left. The woman from the tourist information office told us that it had all been returned to the original donors. Pinned to one of the walls were several newspaper items about the redevelopment of the house-museum, along with a booklet, hanging limply on a piece of red-and-green twine, detailing John Shaw Neilson's contribution to Australian literature. I asked some questions of our guide. They were answered. Then my wife and I left, and we were driving back down the highway even before the process of locking up was complete.

In a mood for not going out again that night, we went straight back to our motel. Our only topic of conversation on the way was how unusual it was for the young woman from the tourist information office to have such an old-fashioned name.

The next morning we had breakfast sitting on the double bed in our room. Then I swam some slow laps of the swimming pool. One clothes-peg lay on the bottom.

We had no interest in going into the town on a Sunday, when everything would be closed, so we paid for our two nights accommodation, and left before noon, as the manager had requested we do. With the car gathering speed on the highway back to Melbourne, my wife perused the back of our tourist map. The Little Desert and the Big Desert, she read aloud, are two unique geographical and climatic regions. Each is different from the surrounding countryside, and each is different from the other. She pointed to the north, and without turning her head my way told me that the Big Desert was less than one-hundred kilometres—pointing vaguely northwards, with splayed fingers—over there. . . .

When we were just about home, I opened my mouth to say something that I knew I would regret once I'd said it, but I somehow wanted to have a foretaste of the full burden of regret and sadness that I knew was about to come upon me very soon. So I spoke anyway. Turning into our street in the bay-side suburb of St Kilda, I saw the green water of Port Phillip with such clarity that I felt it would never seem so deep to me again. And then my wife told me, and I listened to her with great care, that everything was going to be fine in a little while. And each word that she used sounded as if it were

travelling to me through both water and air, and from further away than she really was.

Jar

In a voice quivering with no economic desire, a description of the house is requested. No trembling lip betrays a moneyed fear. Bids for what is being offered are then called for.

Something is given for something. The reader observes always only what has already passed.

In the background, guaranteed to catch the eye in the window displays of any shopping mall—where realtors make jottings in offices like jungle clearings after a long drought—the house nestles itself into the snug depths of its appearance.

At its centre was a windowless room. At the very centre of the room—at the footstep level—was an empty jar, chipped a little around the rim, otherwise unadorned; also at the centre of the room, at the exact centre of the house, was a small depression in the carpet, in the shape of a wheel: Egyptian perfection.

Positioned no less distantly from any corner of the room than from any of the other intersections of walls, the jar exerted dominion over the whole of what it surveyed. Although contained as well in the same modest space were things besides the jar, their presence was only the offhanded cause of more limited influences, which extended not nearly as far around themselves, pushing diffidently into the world.

Arranged here and there about the jar, some of these things were like strangers to the room, but most of what spread out to its extremities had belonged to the renting occupant for years. Many of these objects, over a few moments, were now becoming gradually a source of comfort in human sadness.

Donna could see only nothing in every place where several things of importance to her might have been. She reconciled herself to their absence for ever from her windowless room. The available light had no qualms about what it failed to reveal, or about what it revealed.

As far even as the perimeter of the house, a certain energy reached, like a cell of the body straining at the limits of its imprisonment in life. The people who had remained in the room for a period of many days in advance of this day, sometimes for hours at a time appearing to be motionless, like statues against the walls, were gone now.

Clouds passed between the sun and distant cities. Things of the room had been moved and broken and shattered and lost.

Donna began to contemplate herself, looking over the jar, in the solitary mirror of her windowless room. She thought of her skeleton within the blackness of flesh beneath skin, dared to think of what was contained within her bones. Then she stopped her mind abruptly for a moment.

Returning to the thought of her white and grey skeleton, which she imagined would remain always unchanged until the day of her death, she began a silent description of herself, from the inside out, moving by

unspoken words in the direction of the external world of crowds and other houses. Her appearance came back to her from a mirror that reflected much less than what it retained, like a sullen lake of weeds on a dark evening, in the greenish flaws on its mercurial surface.

By the time she had worked her way through the flesh to her freckled skin, coming progressively nearer to, before finally entering, the light of her windowless room, Donna had remembered perfectly a past conversation with a friend: "You'll always look the same to yourself, in mirrors everywhere, no matter how old you become, moving by uncapturable degrees through time and the years."

But the shock, she thought suddenly, that photographs never fail to deliver. And the naked woman began once again with her skeleton.

Around the windowless room was the remainder of a house, somehow never entirely at ease with its inhabitants, located a few miles to the north of the centre of what over a hundred years had grown into a city, in a street to the length of which it gave a variable character. The house made the street resemble itself to an extent, but for all that the building no more fitted into its surroundings.

On the inside, without direct access to the surrounding garden, near a point in the house's architecture where an unlikely stairway appeared, a woman, in a room where light fell gently on unclothed skin, at just this time, was crying. The outside, as she wept, was in brightness.

Pedestrians in the street were frequently taken aback by the glinting panes of glass that, without any visible joins, reached almost all the way around the

house—stymied only by a door of a stronger substance at the back—and which allowed light from every direction to illuminate what was clearly a single space, which likewise circumscribed, but for its only visible entrance, at the back, the whole of the dwelling. It was there that Carl lived, in a room that contained always at least a little illumination, in at least one of its narrow wings.

At the centre, therefore, Donna; Carl, meanwhile, at the perimeter. The others, a couple, lived between this man and this woman, in that part of the residence that only a quantity of dollars neither too great nor too small, but right on the money, could encourage me to describe.

More recent arrivals in the house, Kristine and Angelo had found room for themselves, and for their belongings, without having either to encroach into the windowless room, or trespass into the room of windows.

They were both students at the College of the Arts in the city. For her major project in the final unit of her course, Kristine was making a short video (working title 'Video Invisible') to which she planned to attach a statement, as an expression of her intentions as a director, to the effect that video makes invisible only what is inessential to a culture. Angelo was a first-year student in the same department. The knowledge of their perfect unaided vision was one of the numerous things that made this couple, presently not at home, happy to be doing what they were doing.

Every minute of a typical student film costs approximately $1,000. Video is cheaper.

Carl was the only member of the household to need glasses for most everyday activities. As Donna cried at the centre of the dwelling, he was waiting, with closed eyes, for the arrival of a young woman, whom he had asked to present herself dressed conservatively, as if for a business meeting or a funeral. The advertisement in the local paper read "working two weeks only, to pay bills." On the telephone, she had called herself Kim.

Over the previous few days, Carl had allowed his only pair of glasses to become in need of cleaning. The tallish woman (a little older than you might imagine) failed to notice this, however, as he paid her upfront in crisp banknotes fresh from the ATM that morning, in part because she had just realized what sort of a room it was that she would be required to perform in.

When Carl directed her towards a point before the glass where she felt that she would be most exposed to all who might pass by in the street, Kim almost insisted upon returning his payment. But he persuaded her—even offering to take her outside to have a look for herself—that at just that spot where she felt most exposed, she was actually, by a subtle freak of the glass, unable at all to be seen by anyone in the external world.

Not wholly convinced, but more or less mollified, the stripper waited as Carl settled himself, in the narrow space between the glass and the interior wall of his room, almost at her feet. Then, to pay her bills, Kim began.

When she was only halfway through her routine, however, Carl directed her to stand without moving, while he, although already excited, thoroughly and deliberately cleaned his glasses, breathing on them and then using a clean handkerchief, as one does. The song on the portable cassette machine continuing to play—verse/chorus/verse/chorus—a minute or two

later Kim therefore had to remove, first her bra, then her recently purchased G-string, in near silence.

Somewhere, close by, only what? weeping? Several men walked past on the footpath, without even the slightest hesitation in their step, or the merest inclination of their heads.

Finally, in an unplanned act of bravado, Kim removed both of her blue-coloured contact lenses, the left and then the right, pinched delicately between finger and thumb, and affixed each with a dab of saliva to the glass behind her. And the stripper managed to produce on her face exactly the expression that she had worked on for hours in the mirror at home. Her eyes were naturally green.

Replacing the contact lenses before starting her car, using the tilted rear-vision mirror to help her, Kim felt a slight grittiness in her eyes, which produced a single tear at the inner corner of each orb. But she blinked rapidly several times, got rid of the irritation sufficiently, returned the mirror to its original position, and drove off.

In Persia once, a thief paid for his crimes with the loss of an eye. He was given the privilege of choosing which. The topless barmaid stands with her hands covering her breasts. A man swivels on his heel, orders three VBs. Thanks love.

The tears of the naked woman at the centre of the house had dried by this time, and Donna was silently curled around the jar on the floor of the windowless room. She watched her world through its hollowness.

Carl, meanwhile, having waited until he heard Kim's sedan disappear around the corner at the northern end of the street, changing down a gear as most cars did, without a noise was beginning to masturbate, left-handedly.

He tried not to think of any part of the woman's actual performance, and least of all of how, for a few seconds, white, freckled and naked, she had stood before him, almost over him in fact, with a strange expression creeping from her face down onto her neck.

Rather, Carl replayed over and over in his mind, like a loop of film, his memory of how, still a little freaked by all that glass, Kim had been unable to prevent him from glimpsing various parts of her body as, the stripping act over, she dressed hurriedly beneath the gown that had suddenly been produced, after it all, from a bag with the name of a local high school on it in faded letters of green.

More than once, preventing himself carefully each time, he almost ejaculated; until at last he gave way, his glasses slipping forward on his nose, just as Kristine and Angelo entered the house, through its only door, simultaneous with Donna slipping out between them, running fast into the street. A net addition of one to the household, was Carl's first thought as he watched this activity.

Soon after her escape, from her room, through all the rooms surrounding it, and finally through the single gap in the glass surrounding them, Donna had felt the world coming back to her, herself coming back to the world, and the equally welcome disappearance, from within her, of a strange paleness, the clothing in recent days of her mind.

She walked to the main business district of the city. The crowd was not dense enough to become lost in it. Teenagers rolled alongside her, on scuffed skateboards.

An hour passed.

Making her way home, detouring through a park on a whim, Donna watched for a while a swarm of bees that had taken-up their insect residence in a discarded box, which must once have been packed with computer equipment, made, she would have said, in a country like Japan or Taiwan. The word 'digital' was printed on the outside of the box in several languages. The crazy, digital swarming of bees, she had thought to herself.

Later, just before leaving the park, she wondered whether bees know of the death that they deal themselves with their own sting. Or is each needle's loss followed by a double shock? of death itself, and the shock of death unexpected?

The afternoon ended.

Back in her room, calmly, Donna cradled the jar in her lap.

When Carl entered this was how he found her. And like her, calmly, he set to work to conjure up a chaos of things. Other persons filled the windowless room at irregular intervals, but nothing they said or did was of any consequence to Carl.

His preparations were like a Zeno's Paradox of Activity—the smallest action, or detail of an action, infinitely divisible—yet there was an end to them in

the end, just as every long-running TV soap opera, set seemingly for ever in its ever-present, seeming world, eventually deals out its own death, makes all glances insignificant, all silences meaningless, banishes every banal instrument of change or deceit or despair or happiness, cuts the string of all possible joys or sorrows and, in a final scene of final scenes, abruptly ends.

It was hard to see anything in that windowless space, where as each hour passed the darkness seemed not to change at all, although the night sky outside grew darker, and lighter, and darker again, at intervals, as night skies do. Only a weak light-bulb of indeterminate wattage provided an unchanging measure of illumination. This was the lowest common denominator of the windowless room, the degree zero of its pale-grey world.

Just before the dawn, a woman who was as old as Donna, but a woman who was not Donna, told Carl that she liked what he had said about not taking sex too seriously.

Minutes later, just as the rising sun began to actually change the colour of the sky over the city, Carl asked Donna whether, with her eyes closed, she could tell if the light in the windowless room was finally becoming brighter, or not.

I know you want a description, a few hours after the dawn, of this woman's room. Consider the following as words scribbled onto a banknote. At its centre was the jar, badly chipped around the top, with a crack extending down one side almost to its base, and at the centre of the jar, was nothing but the same air that filled the rest of the windowless room. It exerted no dominion over what it surveyed, gave no order to it, balanced nothing for the eye.

Meanwhile, back in the city, thinking everyone she was seeing around her was somehow terribly familiar, was Donna.

Weeks later, with no-one having slept in the windowless room at the centre of the house for many days, Carl took a walk around the perimeter of the almost empty garden, his right shoulder brushing the fences at the back and the sides of the quarter-acre block. Some of the dirt that he was now and again throwing at the window of his room stuck to the glass, while some clods fell straight back to the ground.

Next door, an auction was about to begin, on a good day for it, sunny.

Dear Semmelnazi

I was the youngest of the three women present at the birth; and yet, although by several years the youngest, almost a child myself, not untutored in the ways of midwifery. The mother I do not count in the number there gathered, for I had observed already (young though I then was) that no woman about to give the gift which is that of this sometimes cruel and sometimes beautiful life, can ever be said to be fully present in this world. The miracle of blood and tears, and of flesh transformed, is witnessed by none save those who produce it, in their silent and private realm. Mystery of mysteries, one becomes two, in a place wanting for nothing from this other, less knowing world, in which—on this occasion of birth's splendour—I was the third and least of three.

With the greatest modesty, a woman gives a child into the care of women she knew once, and will know again, but whom for long minutes of her life are strangers to her. Though naked she is clothed by secrecy and distance. And if sometimes she stays marooned in that other realm, a little nearer to death, within hours succumbing to a fever, then things must be as things must be.

Certainly the labour of which I am now speaking was not without difficulties of its own: the breathing of the mother strained, and discomforting to the ear; sweat abundant like the night-sweats of the river below; the waking neighbours fractious at the noise. The moment after the birth, however, it was as if two travellers were safely returned to us from

foreign shores; there were four and then there were five—the guided and the guide—born together as light broke over the city of Budapest on July the first, 1818. Mother and child were saved, the midwife said, and the boy was promptly named Ignaz Philipp, and Semmelweis after his father, who had been washed away in a flood the previous winter, where the Danube meets the Black Sea. Only later did I give him the nicknames 'Nátzi' and 'Semmelnazi'. The child cried out as the midwife cut the cord, and into wonderful Hungary he was completely born.

I was twelve at the time, and nurtured the ambition to become a practising midwife, a desire which, although this art and science still has powers of fascination for me, I was never able to fulfil, for events and circumstance have determined my life's course otherwise. In 1818, I thought I knew already the ways of blood, having stolen some little knowledge from my mother about the secret redness that appears between the legs, and begun to know its cramp and clutch, on those days when the moon was at its fattest.

In that Hungarian summer of 1818 there were new desires as well: desires already consummated—I was given to understand by smile and wink and word—by the other young woman present at the birth, first assistant to the cronish midwife by virtue of the few years she had over me, and favoured heir to the position I sought for myself. I was sure of her intimacy with one of the black-haired boys who swam each morning in the river-pools. To the end of my life, whenever that may be, I will remember every word of the song they were singing, those beautiful boys—black hair already shiny with water—on that very morning, as the midwife held the baby Semmelweis up to the breezy window—to open his eyes wide to the world, she said—and all of us breathed in the air of a city with one more soul within it. It was only afterwards that I began to get very frightened by happiness.

There is some insect or animal stirring in the grass, not far from my place of rest. Dear Semmelnazi. . . . My Semmelnazi. . . . Time rings us around with death.

There were no other births imminent in the midwife's neighbourhood and dominion on that first morning of July, and so she stayed conversing with the mother, all the time chewing on a sliver of African gum, while her first assistant and I attended to the practical needs of the hour. We were friends who were becoming rivals, and so becoming something less than friends. On that morning, however, there was almost perfect communion between us, an effect of the shared satisfaction that death had once more been eluded, by dodge and feint and ploy of womanhood, by act and sleight-of-hand of the midwife's, through all the trials of birth we had been witness to. The ferocious chewing of the midwife was a certain sign that mother and child had been made fast to life. Dividing wisdom from folly and evil from good in matters of the world and the day, now and again the midwife adjusting the child at the breast, advising the mother in sure tones, the two women discoursed on into the morning.

Although I had not once known sleep's relief the previous night, I felt no tiredness upon finally leaving that riverside room, experiencing only a sudden coldness as I passed by the gates of the Budapest General Hospital, the terrors of which no woman without the means of employing a midwife had any choice but to submit to, knowing only too well that of three who might enter there, at least one would emerge with the blueness of death on her lips. Fever was like a heaviness in that place—a casket of iron for the soul—weighty as a winter's torrent on its muddy bed, pressing children into cemetery dirt, leaving mothers fit only for the grave. I had at that time been inside its gates just once—its bare corridors and rooms the courses of fever:

slaves of a crazy moon—fearfully afraid, barely breathing, in the smallest of breaths. When I make myself very calm, I can remember the two wards in the Obstetrical Clinic, the one for medical students, the other for the instruction of midwives, and as well a third place, the dissecting room, where bodies and objects were without difference from each other. I can remember the sickness of this room; the air moving over the flesh. I can remember many unmoving, fleshy things.

My home when I was twelve was on the shore of the Danube, and indeed few of the two- or three-storey buildings in my neighbourhood were far from water, the river twisting and turning on itself in that part of Budapest, before flowing through the centre of the city straight as a Roman road, which is what some say it once was, the Danube having shifted its bed over the centuries in ancient times, searching for open passage to the sea. There was something I greatly admired in the Romanism of the river: its ideal of strength, perhaps, the homage it paid to absolute purpose, or perhaps the beautiful violence of the darkness that awaited the unwary swimmer beneath its dark and choppy waves.

There was nothing at all Roman about the small, unbeautiful rooms that I shared with my parents, and a hulking brother in 1818 twice my age. I still shudder at the thought of that clutter and confusion of all the things that several lives combined could not fail to accumulate. (I had dreams of the sparseness of Rome, its streets wider even than the Danube.) Yet I remember this permanent clutter and confusion less well than the impermanent passage through our shared rooms of the various animals and flowers that my brother and my mother were wont to introduce amongst us. Where my mother found her wonderful flowers in the unlovely city of Budapest, or my brother the cruel desire to both nurture and torment some frightened

dog or shivering Moroccan monkey, I will never know. But there they are in memory, like fingerprints on the mind that still connect me to that time, to that place, and to all that was to follow.

> *The air touches everything, but cannot be touched; the grass around me stirs on this day without wind, as if insects or animals are making disturbance from below. Dear Semmelnazi. . . . My Semmelnazi. . . . There is life even in rocks and stones.*

As the years passed—the river always changing and yet never changing—I sometimes saw the child Semmelweis and his mother in the sorts of places a lonely couple such as they would find pleasure in being. Ignaz soon came to know who I was, and would approach me without prompting through the gay crowds that used to form on warm afternoons on the bridges over the thousand-mile Danube, making a little journey in my direction over a patch of the journeying river. Talking and laughing as friends do, his mother and I watched him grow in knowledge of this so ordinary and so extraordinary world, and a comfortable happiness was then ours, until in 1825 (the year of Nátzi's seventh birthday) I began to believe that the greatest of joys was soon to be mine.

The long rivalry between the first assistant and myself to become the presiding midwife of our neighbourhood—and heir to our ladyship's reputation—seemed finally at an end, fortune having swung determinedly in my favour. When the one whose presence for me dominated those years—queen-witch of the women by the Danube's coiling waters—began finally to tire, I was confident her prize would pass to me, and that it would then be my mischievous task to choose two assistants from a number of eager hopefuls, knowingly dooming them to many years of obscurity in the shadow of the fame that I would undoubtedly attract. Their increasingly

bitter rivalry it could fall only to me to preside over, I believed, for the rival of my own—the first and older assistant—had fallen pregnant by the charms of her black-haired boy, and been banished from her position forthwith, for it was known to be unfortunate to have one future mother in intimate contact with another: too much of likeness, said the midwife.

I trusted at the time that my former companion would never return. And my hopes of assuming the mantle I so coveted were raised still higher when, her baby pressing early into the world, the poor woman was forced to risk the terrors of the general hospital, and died there just as the moon was beginning to rise. It had been her double misfortune not only to pass through the gates of that place, but of the two wards in the Obstetrical Clinic to have been condemned to the one for the instruction of medical students, where the incidence of fever held lives in an even more terrible thrall. I can still remember the midwife, upon her frantic return from the countryside, screaming terrible murder, and promising revenge against those stupid men, and against all that they held dear under God. But I, I could already imagine myself lording it over whatever nervous girl—clumsy acolyte learning the price and pain of flesh—whom the midwife would choose to replace me, now her exalted, first assistant. Before I could exercise my newfound power at even one birth, however, the path of my ascending fortune was cruelly blocked. It was as if a downstream wind from off the river were pushing me irresistibly into another life, diverting the course of my career in the city.

In a little nook of giant Budapest, three phases of the moon before Ignaz's eighth birthday, the sudden madness of two horses taking fright in the narrow street left his mother dead, thick blood seeping into the oily earth. Hearing of how the horses had run for hours through the city, unstopped by

any man, some said that evil was abroad in Hungary. Yet I was too busy to share in their fears or prayers, for the responsibility for the young Semmelweis, with the support of the local welfare board, had become by deed of law mine, there being no others thought suitable. So it was that I was required to leave my former dwelling, and forced to abandon the midwife to the unenviable task of choosing two new assistants from amongst the many girls who would be attracted to her offer of meagre but glorious employment. What friends or enemies might such as they become!

My new lodgings consisted of the three rooms at the top of a building that threatened at every moment to topple into the washy Danube. One room for Nátzi, one for me, and another for sharing all that perforce in this life we share: things unspeakable between a boy and a woman. My shit coiled each morning in a bucket with his.

For many years we lived in happy company in those three rooms, chaste as clerics despite our circumstances, until the sort of talk arose that sets all the world against you. I saw my last hopes of achieving my life's one ambition finally dashed, as the men and the women of Budapest, in my very hearing, accused me of numerous grotesqueries, each of which came down to this: that I was a hideous half-mother half-lover, and an unfit holder of the sacred name of either. Such hypocrisy there is in the world, I think, for who ever heard of a virgin midwife?

My sole consolation in the period of which I now speak was that Ignaz's anguish was much less than my own, for he had suddenly launched himself onto a new path behind the gates of the Budapest General Hospital. The very same! It was medicine that captured his student's soul, after law had disappointed his heart and his mind.

In the evenings, to distract myself from my various sorrows, I used to ask him about his work at the hospital. Sometimes he would stumble, and sometimes he would swear, as he began to talk, and then sometimes there would be long silences that seemed to suck the sound of the river into them, magnifying it until the noise was almost unbearable, and then he would swear, stumble over his words, and go on. He told me of the two wards in the Obstetrical Clinic of the hospital; of the novice midwives, and of the medical students, in whose number he was himself included; of the stale air of the dissecting room; of the dying screams. He told me of the statistical diary he secretly kept of the rates of death in each of the wards. He told me that after all he had seen in the hospital he had no regard any more for his former companions of the Law School. I told him of the time when, a stillborn child in my hands, I had happened to glimpse a little funeral procession away across the sparkling Danube. He told me of how death can come to the strongest of mothers at any hour of the day or night. I told him all the tricks of my former trade.

> *There is a certain species of toad which takes a mate for life. The eggs of the young are kept safe on the male's hind legs until the toadlings emerge. He will die for them. Science knows nothing of such devotion. Zephyrs arise on the great plains of Hungary. Dear Semmelnazi. . . . My Semmelnazi. . . . We touch without touching.*

Time passed neither quickly nor slowly, until one day I was stopped in the street by a medical official from the hospital, who told me that my Ignaz (here a laugh, here a sneer) had taken it entirely upon himself to solve the ancient mystery of childbed fever. That night, Nátzi told me of his indignity at being forced to demonstrate some principles of preliminary obstetrics for

the junior midwives on a mere mannequin. There were forces of men arrayed against him, he said. Even the weakest of the other medical students had graduated to live women that day. He told me of how the tittering of the girls as he touched the private parts of the doll sounded over the groans of the expectant mothers. There was talk of madness in the hospital. The next morning, at my toilet, I felt a loss in my own womb—an uncanny wobble in the moon's course—but our love continued more steady than the path of the overarching sun.

It was the incident with the mannequin that gave Ignaz his final clue. Allowing the cleansing Danubian water to run over his hands for hours before he could bear to return to me after touching the despised doll—my dear boy! my own marvellous boy!—he made a trifling connection that, once made, obscured all else in the world for a long breath's space. The lower rate of death from fever amongst those mothers attended to by the midwives was immediately and perfectly explained. The midwives were forbidden entrance to the dissecting room, from which it was the medical students themselves who transmitted infection on their hands to the mothers they examined, in the more dreaded of the two wards. It was the men who carried death to the women. He told me all this, told me of his proposal for inspecting cadavers with fingers thick with oil, told me of his proposed soap and chlorine handwash, and I, I alone, understood and believed him. Alone of all others, I understood and believed him.

Today, I am a woman past every sign of beauty. Very far in the past are, my wanderings by the Black Sea, the birth of a queen, the birth in a stable, the many years in distant England, the man who looked like another. It is 1900, and I revel in the living proofs of Semmelweis' rightness, lingering not in my mind over the stupidity and the jealousy and the evil that kept his

discovery from good people for too many years after that blessed day on the Danube's shore. I regret only that he passed to the next world while still thought a fool in this one. He took to reading from the text of the midwives' oath wherever he went in the streets of Budapest, and died with its words on his lips.

> *Dear Semmelnazi. . . . My Semmelnazi. . . . There are some who speak of a wildness in your grave, but this evening everything is quiet hereabouts. The grass hardly wavers. Spread out below me is the city of Budapest, where on this first day of the new century there is talk of a miraculous birth by the river. A child has been born with the appearance of a gentleman dwarf, displaying a beard and a full set of teeth. I will go down soon to see what of this story is true, and how much is fiction only.*

The Bird-Watcher

There was very little light left to see by, and the single cloud on the horizon looked like the underside of a wing, when the main character of this story told his best friend that he no longer took any pleasure in thinking of himself as the man with the strangest hobby in the district. He knew there were many other bird-watchers here and there nearby, but none of them were like himself, for while there was no species of bird that the man I am writing about was not conceivably interested in, he took no delight in the birds of the air, but confined his observations to the birds of the ground. Despite knowing that every type of bird divides its life between the air and the ground, he talked like this—of 'the birds of the air' and 'the birds of the ground'—because he never doubted that a bird on the wing becomes a different bird entirely when it alights on the earth.

The same bird could be a different bird from time to time, he thought. Even those birds described in every field guide as ground-dwelling birds were, in his view, truly 'birds of the air' on those few occasions when they did more than merely flit or jump in the course of their creeping over the earth. Likewise, birds of those species of swallows and martins that do as much as mate and sleep in the air would, in his opinion, sometimes pause long enough on the ground to be momentarily a bird other than the one they usually were.

Water-birds the bird-watcher gave no thought to, because there was no lasting water in the district of Victoria where he lived.

The best friend of the main character of this story, whom I will sometimes call the bird-watcher and sometimes simply the man, was pleased to hear what his companion of that late afternoon had to tell him. While the bird-watcher's hobby was beautiful in a way, there was also the whiff about it, he thought, of something gone to seed. He hoped that, over time, the man would no longer direct his gaze immediately elsewhere at the chance sighting of a 'bird of the air,' nor feel his eyes widen, and himself begin to peer, when he was before a 'bird of the ground.' It was his earnest wish that such shows of aversion and watching would, in a while, be no more than memories for the main character of this story.

In the evening, when the sun had fully disappeared, the ground outside the bird-watcher's house seemed to become heavier upon the core of the earth, and the rainy air filled rapidly with night-winds.

The next day, his morning walk overshadowed by a sky of sieved light, the man no longer paid attention only to the birds of the ground, at the level roughly of his feet, or in contact with something that came out of the earth or was at rest upon it. His eyes easily drifted upwards to the birds of the air. The night-winds had calmed with the dawn, until they were no more than breezes and gusts, but when he happened to face into them the man had the impression that he was feeling on his skin 'the exciting winds of the future,' and although he knew that this was nothing but a phrase that could have come from any newspaper, still he began to compose a description of the landscape around him in which it was the most striking line. He felt as if this description were part of an imaginary letter that he was in the process of writing to a loved one thousands of miles away in a hot country.

The bird-watcher of this story had at no time given any thought to joining a club composed of people with interests similar to his own, but he had secretively submitted a number of brief articles on the birds of his native district to magazines with titles like *Country Life* and *The Natural World,* all of which were rejected by the editors of these publications, for reasons that they were always unwilling to share with a man whose writing they considered—fairly or unfairly—to be peculiar or slightly disturbed. So the bird-watcher's rejection slips inevitably consisted of words too few in number to ever be worth very much. When he received such notifications of his failure to be published, his immediate response was never one of disappointment or impatience; he always thought first of all of the readers of the magazine he had sent his article to, none of whom would now enjoy the experience—having allowed perchance the pages of their personal copy to fall open at random—of seeing the inner leaves containing his modest submission suddenly exposed to the light, and he thought of each one of them, with a sort of half-pleasure, as henceforward 'shadow-readers' of his words.

At the conclusion of his matutinal wanderings, with the appearance of the sky unchanged from before, the man turned in the doorway of his house and saw what he thought of as either an 'upwelling' or an 'upswelling' of birds, from the ground high into the air. Such was the impression this sight had upon him that as he entered fully into the house he nevertheless retained the image of the birds in his mind, like a sharp imprint upon a frame of film, as a distinct pattern of movement somewhere between an upwelling and an upswelling.

Knowing exactly what he wanted to do, and being careful not to disturb his wife as she continued to sleep, the man crossed the floor of their dining-

room in a direction that would have eventually taken a walker leaving from the back steps of the house, or from any point nearby, to an area of the surrounding district where once, on another morning, the main character of this story had seen birds in their millions. He stopped before a low cabinet placed against the wall that divided the bedroom from the dining-room. Deposited in the cabinet were both the numerous drafts of the articles that he had at one time or another sent away to magazines with titles which tried to suggest an affinity with the things of nature, and also the various rough notes that he had made from time to time during his solitary expeditions in search of the birds of the ground.

His plan was neither to destroy, nor to discard, these pieces of paper, but rather to transport them all—still gathered together as they were inside the low cabinet—to a position flush against the wall of the house that on its outside received the worst of the roughest weather that the district ever had to withstand, which was the south wall, the hard winds of every season coming always from that direction. And in the last moments before his wife awoke this was what he did. Greeting her, he felt that something was now clearer in himself; more precisely, as the two of them embraced—at what was still really the beginning of the day—he realized that a certain emotion blurred in his heart had been replaced by a well-defined image in his mind.

It was a Sunday: the last regular prayer-day of the nineteenth century.

At about the same time as the bird-watcher and his wife were embracing, in a modest building of wood nearby, a group of young adults was praying for the state of the Church in India. These men and women sometimes meditated in a religious way when they were by themselves, but they all believed that those prayers were most effective that were first of all revealed

before a small gathering of like-minded people. In a low voice, one man or woman would ask permission of the others to 'present a prayer'—this was the phrase they had come to use, almost without having to think about it—after which all the young adults assembled in the modest building of one room would, for a minute or several minutes, pray silently on the concerning subject their friend had introduced.

A week passed by, of days and skies.

On the following Sunday, which was both the first Sunday of the new century and the first day of another year, three of the young adults who liked to pray together, while sometimes having by force of circumstance to pray alone, were walking back to their homes—from the same modest building of white-painted wood—when they were trapped by a rushing train, tried to escape, panicked, and in a narrow gorge of the earth were lost to the world, under a sky of herring-bone cloud. On the morning of their death, they had spent several minutes praying, along with several others, for the people of Russia, where one-and-a-half winters before a terrible famine had begun, and where the air was so cold that sometimes birds from the shock dropped out of the sky. When they heard the news of what had befallen their prayer companions, the other young adults—as if their hungry minds were flocking together where seed had been scattered on snow—thought immediately of either three doves, or of three individuals of another species of holy bird, rising slowly into the air, each cruelly un-nested from the starving earth.

Happening to be one of the first on the scene, an old woman of the district had looked briefly to where there is no land, and muttered upwardly that the victims' experience of the new century was too brief, not yet aware that

in a way it was an experience even briefer than she thought it to be, for it was only later to become known generally that all three of the young adults had been in bed when midnight came (early as their prayer meeting was to be held in the morning) which meant that for a good part of their lives in the hitherto-unknown century they had been asleep, their lives closed off to everything but dreams. The parents and the friends of the deceased, passing feelings through thought, took some comfort from this idea, although a few others not as intimate entertained a more dire interpretation: sleep being so close to death anyway, these people said to each other, so little removed from it, the three young adults would henceforward be enduring something like 'shadow-lives', for the length of the natural course of a person's life, far into the twentieth century.

The bird-watching character of this story went to the site of the accident within minutes of hearing about it, from a man with a voice full of tears. He wanted to see what could have so distracted the driver of the train in the landscape that, as he had babbled in his grief, he did not even see the three people caught between the railway tracks, at an equal distance from each end of the gorge, until he was almost upon them. Until it was far too late to stop. On his way there, the bird-watcher was again much affected by the strange movements of the air, but on this occasion he thought of writing no letter to a loved one thousands of miles away in a hot country, but pretended instead that he was simply shouting a message to his wife—directly across the Victorian land of his district—through air thick with all manner of birds.

He spent several hours in the vicinity of the gorge, walking from one spot to another, taking notice of this and that, seeking to understand the deaths of three people whom he had not previously known. But when he finally had to leave, towards nightfall, he was no clearer about the circumstances of the

accident than before, and as he walked back to his house he felt that even the ground under his feet was suffering pain as he passed over it.

Many skies looked down on the passage of time.

A couple of days later, the Victorian bird-watcher read with mounting interest one of the few articles in the local newspaper that was about neither the official celebrations for the 'turn of the century,' nor the tragic death on New Year's Day of the three young adults described as active members of a local church group. The central figure in this article was a bird-watcher from the most populous city at the top of the east coast of India. The article included the text of a telegram that this bird-watcher had sent from the port city of Fremantle in Western Australia—where he had arrived on the morning of the first day of the twentieth century—to the president of a bird-watching society in the port city of Calcutta, from which he had departed over six weeks earlier, around the middle of November.

The bird-watcher had written in the telegram that when his ship was just out of sight of the bluish coast of India, a crow of the same type as those most common in his native district, a place far to the west of Calcutta, had quietly alighted on the rearmost deck. There to settle itself down. As the ship crept over oceanic lines of latitude and longitude, the bird-watcher had been able to watch this crow day after day: wondering almost until the very end when it was going to suddenly stretch its wings, and fly back over the water to India; wondering during which of his morning promenades he would notice it missing.

He admitted in the telegram that on several occasions he had found it hard to resist the temptation to encourage the bird, with scraps of food and a container of fresh water, to remain aboard the ship.

With less than an hour to go before he and his fellow passengers were due to disembark at the port city of Fremantle, the bird-watcher had watched the crow jump into the air, without any thought (what imaginings!) of India, wheel above the rearmost deck once or twice, and start to fly ahead of the steaming vessel, over the tip of what he referred to as its elegant prow. Thus, and here the telegram concluded with only the merest hint of triumph, the traveller from Calcutta was able to report the existence in Australia of a species of bird not previously recorded in that country: the Indian Crow ('Corvus splendens').

In its final paragraphs, the article went on to say that, despite their best efforts, none of the Fremantle bird-watchers had been able to identify the bird from across the ocean, probably because—as even the man recently arrived from India might have admitted—it was virtually indistinguishable in both its appearance and its behaviour from a very common species of Australian crow. Different birds must have been seen as the same bird, mused the main character of this story. But this thought did not haunt him. What the person that I have sometimes called the bird-watcher, and sometimes simply the man, pondered over long after he had finished reading the article in his local newspaper—what stayed fixed in his mind like a hovering bird trapped at the end of a cave—was the thought of the thrilling feelings that the bird-watcher from India must have experienced as he watched the Indian Crow, with strong and regular strokes of its black wings, fly across the narrow strip of salty water between ship and shore, until it was well and truly over ground that was Australian.

The beginning of the twentieth century coincided with the onset in Victoria of a stretch of unsettled weather the like of which the main character of this story had never experienced before. Storm after storm came from the direction of India, hung overhead for an hour, then disappeared into the east. The very air felt unsafe. The south wall of the bird-watcher's house was plastered one morning with sodden feathers of the Forty-Spotted Pardalote (usual range: Tasmania and King Island).

The main character of this story began to dream at night of the same Indian Crow that he had read about in the article in his local newspaper. Sometime during the hours before the bird-watcher woke, invariably he saw it, dropping through the base of one of the frequent summer storms, plummeting to pause on the land only for an instant, a thing momentarily still, which next went running through the rain until it reached the darkness at the edge of the bird-watcher's dream, where it disappeared, wings never more than half folded, leaving a trail of marks in the wet earth like those of a bird of the ground.

With the eventual return of calm weather, his dream of the Indian Crow began to come back to the bird-watcher more and more infrequently. When he was almost an old man, years and years later, he realized that it had finally left him forever, at about which point he decided that he would—until the day of his death—act just as a man should who had once secretly enjoyed having the strangest hobby in the Victorian district of his birth, and for the rest of his long life he paid no more attention to the birds of anywhere at all.

As Of Shadows

There is the country in which we are born, and there is the country in which we should have been born. Rarely are these two countries the same country. I am one of those few people born in the country in which I should have been born. And one of those fewer still who know it. For my far from finished life, the single greatest consequence of this has outweighed all the others combined.

I lived happily for years as a girl who was born in the country in which she should have been born. Nothing had the power to dampen my childhood joy. I joined in enthusiastically with those who rallied against the poor individuals of that group of people no member of which could possibly have been born in the country in which they should have been born, because no member of which could ever believe in the idea of countries being set apart from other countries. It was their lot and misfortune not to believe in any country at all. I could have trembled to the sound of loudspeakers all day and all night.

If I was truly a happy girl, then no less was I an unhappy daughter, for my parents were the source of my only enduring sorrow. I often wished they had been born in whichever country it is that lies at the ends of the earth, from which no man or woman is able to return to the greater world of people. And that I had been yet born where I was. Still my life went on, for the most part with good fortune and pleasure, until the country in which I was born as suddenly as officially became two countries. It was then that I

felt my existence had begun over again. All the parents in my street told their own sons and daughters what mine more than once had told me: I should be proud of what I had so suddenly become.

When I was enlisted as State employee no. 391939, border control officer, class number three, I was able to tell at a glance in which country it was that someone was born, and in which country it was that they should have been born. This was the only border—if by some stretch of the imagination that it can be called—I cared really to patrol. By this fact alone I secretly exceeded my work-peers. I completed my official duties as required, but the passports of many colours that I was handed every day—the slough and detritus of embassies and consulates—were in no way evidence to me of a person's real being. I flicked through them as so much trivia.

A group of twelve French citizens and residents, on holiday for the summer, might have been actually eleven people born in France who should instead have been born, seven in Australia, three in China, one in Peru, and a single person born in the country in which he or she was supposed to have been born, the country of France perhaps; although you may be assured that I place no value on any such coincidence of place of birth with place of living. A child born in the country in which it should have been born, even if it leaves that country within the hour never to return, will always enjoy a certain difference over others less fortunately delivered into the world. Rarely is the country of our birth the country in which we should have been born.

There are troubled countries, and there are untroubled countries. For each traveller whose documents I stamped day after day, many combinations of countries were possible. Few people gave me no cause to wonder what

mischief and grief they might loose in my country upon entering it. Even if they were entering it from within. But I worried most of all about those people who were both born in a troubled country, and should have been born in another troubled country. In most cases I had no means of restricting their passage, bound as I was by the strictures of my employment, and I could only wish upon such people some sudden and deadly accident that would forever curtail their potential for harm; I used to imagine their corpses ushered immediately across the border of my ancient country, of my ancient countries, by wakeful peasants—stealthy, midnight walkers. Yet when I was before even the worst of such people, if they were men, I still cared—like a girl or a flirt—about my personal appearance. How ghastly I am certain I looked in an electric-green light that made the air seem like poisonous gas. How off-putting to a man for a woman's flesh to be surrounded by stupid-faced soldiers, and by mile after mile of glittering barbed wire, the sharp points alone turning slowly to rust.

Can you come close to imagining how impossible a border it was that, when I was seated at my unfriendly desk, ran almost exactly between my young legs, freckled and shapely inside official, black trousers? I passed people over from one country to the same country. I divided the same from the same. Hopeless and thankless was my employment. Most of the time, if I was not frightened, I was in despair, if not in despair, then frightened; the rest was a bitter sort of humour.

Now and again, with a thinness in my smile, I used to tell the harmless tourists going from the East Sector to the West Sector, involved only with untroubled countries, that I had never been to the West Sector, but that I had been led to believe it was a beautiful place. Or, if the same sort of people were going in the opposite direction, people I could afford to play games

with, I once in a while told them that while I could travel to the East Sector whenever I pleased, I never had and never would, for I had heard it was the ugliest of places. They were all lesser people for believing my lies. What I told them queered every point of the compass. My falsehoods travelled east and west, then north and south, until a man who was born in America, but who should have been born in the country in which I myself had been born, answered one of my lies with another. And so it was that I entered into the third of my existences.

I could have written a thousand songs, in a thousand melodies strung across every most bitter and wonderful key, about my departure from the airport that glorious and sorrowful night. There were dogs prowling at the sides of the road, and landing-lights shining straight lines of whiteness into the sky. Theirs was a brave lightening of the night over my country. As well there were soldiers, and mile after mile of barbed wire; but, my womanly flesh was soon above all that, climbing higher and higher into the wind that would take me, in a silver airplane, all of the way to distant America. It would be untrue to say other than, that I wanted to leave, that I wanted not to leave. My parents did not know for days that I had been taken from their and my double-country. My stiff, official pants were not in fashion when I landed. When I landed, I had been wearing the same clothes for a week.

They gave me an apartment to myself, where I could walk around naked all night if I wanted to. They gave me new clothes. They told me they wanted to redirect my talents, and to put them to good use. They told me many things. They told me I was to be a counter of countries.

There is the country in which we will die, and there is the country in which we should die. Rarely will these two countries be the same country. I believe I should die in the country in which I was born.

I fear for my life in America. I fear for my death in America. I am made to feel welcome. I am not made to feel welcome. I have access to every molecule of knowledge in every military and intelligence facility in the wide land. I have sometimes a moving image on my computer screen of witches flying. When they fly, they do so endlessly from one side of the screen to the other—from west to east in the real world—on narrow broomsticks between their legs. Once, I turned my computer the other way around, but I could not long stand this sudden reversal of things. The next day, the witches were flying from west to east again.

The problem of how to count my own country is a constant hindrance, to my work, and to this, the third of my existences. Some days I do nothing but stare out the window. One splits into two; two folds into one. Witches begin flying on my neglected computer. Then there is the always escalating number of new countries to be thinking about, a figure at no moment absolutely certain, multiplying without restraint. They seem to come freshly into being at each tick of the clock, emerging constantly into the world from whatever more base material it is that such things as they are born of. I worry that I could never keep pace with them. I sustain my spirits by walking around naked alone in my apartment at night.

Over the last several weeks, I have been following the progress to the finals of an underdog baseball team in a minor South American league. Today, live on television, they lost in the championship match. There is a two-word sentence in my head, containing the words 'things' and 'change', but I

cannot get the order of it right. The simplest of sentences baffles me. A miniature lizard is crawling across my desk. I make a note to go searching in my files for evidence of a country where even the most grotesquely oversized individual of the largest species of indigenous lizard, would still be considered a miniature reptile. This is what things have come to. I tell my supervisor that there is a plague of countries in the world. He tells me to go back to my desk. His facial expression never changes when he speaks. I say to myself that there is no plague or profusion of countries. I learn to relent. I learn not to relent.

The people at my work watch me and whisper. They think I am homesick the way Americans get homesick. They tell me Berlin should already be as a dream to me. They tell me that my life there was only a life as of shadows. I tell them I am not from Berlin. I tell them that I do not dream. But in my dreams at night I am almost always flying back to Berlin, astride something between my legs that sustains me high in the air above the earth. I tell them again the next morning I am not from Berlin.

I try to please them. I try not to please them. I receive more new clothing. I find a message stuck to my computer screen. The message contains a statement of fact: 'the German cockroach can lay 20 000 eggs in a day.' There is no punctuation in the message. The witches fly around it. I learn a new word in English. It is the word for cruelty. I learn that there is a new word gaining popularity in the country in which I was born. The word is America. I estimate that 20 000 German mouths give birth to this word every day.

I get to know my surroundings; then my surroundings get into my dreams. I dream that I am restlessly flying from one of my frequent haunts to another, within the limits of the undivided city where I am employed. I settle just

long enough in each place to gain the awareness that, while I know where I am exactly, I am only able to say—in the way one speaks when in dreams—that I am in America. I am capable of no greater precision than that. I turn to a fellow reader in the Theodore Dreiser Memorial Library and say, I am in America. He mouths at me to be quiet. I raise my voice above the racket and din of a football game and scream, I am in America. No-one hears. I hang onto the lane-rope in the public swimming pool, trying to attract the attention of the attendant, to tell him once and for all, that I am in America. And then this last detail of my dream plucks me into itself, and I wake-up as I am about to drown in America.

I continue to count countries. I make sure I submit a new report every afternoon before leaving my desk. Now and again they respond. I feel I am being ignored. I submit three reports in a day: hear nothing for weeks. Now I am very angry. I submit a report on the true number of countries in the world every minute for an hour. They respond by taking the witches away from my computer screen. I stare at its blank square for ages. Nothing at all flies in any direction.

I start to keep a diary. But I come to understand over time that all I am doing in every one of my entries is making a meaningless comment, each one more pointless than the last, on the nature of an impossible world without countries. When my growing understanding of this fact causes in me an anxiety which I can connect only to the pain of one who has no country, of one never able to believe in the idea of countries being set apart from other countries, I stop keeping my diary for ever.

I ask the Americans to take seriously the plight of a country, newly emerged in central Africa, whose borders are precisely coextensive with the measure

of land given over to its dead. I tell them the children play in the evenings with the bones of the last man or woman to have died. I inform them that the whole country is a graveyard. I say that its people, of course, are not hungry for more land, for they do not wish to see the territory of those no longer alive stretching far into the distance. To see the territory of the living like this, they know, would be to see also the multitude of the dead. It is now a small country, this country, I tell the Americans, but there are rumours of fever, and already a darkness in the water. I have visions of an immense country of sadness. I have a double-image in my mind of a small, overcrowded land and a much larger, almost empty one. I see as if it were really happening before me a lone woman weeping on the highest point in a million miles of silent wilderness.

I hear nothing back from the Americans.

I become angry beyond all norms of restraint. I submit a brief report of a country so lacking even in brackish or muddied water that even the smallest drop of any relatively clear liquid is watched over night and day by soldiers with AK47s at the ready. I use their own jargon. I talk about trembling trigger fingers. I note that such a country would be unlikely to develop a blue-water navy. I hope that I understand the nature of American sarcasm. It turns out that I do. I am punished with the imposition of humiliating duties; my count of true countries is suspended at just under a million. Beginning on a Sunday morning, I take passport photographs of ordinary, unsmiling Americans; I glue coloured-paper cut-outs of what my fellow inferiors call possible countries onto huge sheets of white paper. Under close supervision, we construct very many possible worlds. I let the yellow glue we use make a mess of the edges of my paper countries. I know they cannot

do without me for long. On the following Sunday I am returned to my former duties.

I feel that my talents are being used well, and I am happy. I feel that my talents are being used badly, and I am happy. And I am sad always. I discover an island in the Pacific Ocean near Japan inhabited only by midwives. No man has ever landed there. The midwives practise their craft as best they can on the mannequins they make out of scented wood. They long for one of their number to fall pregnant. Tiny lizards curl within umbilicuses. I decide not to count this island as another country. I accrue its territory to Japan's.

This year, many men have made me propositions of love. They have all been insistent. I have told each and every one of them—handsome or ugly—that the thought of our happiness together only fills me with sadness. I think of them, with disgust, as people which countries are born in.

Violence breaks out along the border between the Soviet Union and China. Each country remembers its revolution. Another Russian mother is weeping every morning. Another Chinese sister is weeping every morning. The people I work with speak in hushed tones, speak hushedly, and I am jubilant alone of them all. I have identified my millionth country at last (granting merely that the place of my birth is counted as two countries). I am surprised that I did not find it before. The people of this country are all exiles from it. They ceaselessly circle its border, watching over the land that they have never once walked upon. One day a child is almost killed by his family when a stone, hurled across a dry river-bed, settles the length of a man's step into this untrodden country. None dare retrieve it. The event becomes political. The host country protests the loss of a stone to America. This is

how I first heard of what I have designated my millionth country. As I say, I am surprised.

There are countries you can love, love completely, and countries that you will never be able to love. This is one thing that America has taught me. I have heard that the country in which I was and should have been born may soon become as suddenly as officially one country again. But what can this mean to a woman now only a counter of countries? After so many years there are still new discoveries to make every day, new countries to fall in love with, and to not love. I am reconciled to my death in a country in which I should not die. I am resigned to being a woman of three existences only.

I walk around naked alone in my apartment, tonight like any other night. I shape my floor-strewn clothes to resemble thin and fat countries. I tear off a button for an island. The thread sticks to my fingers for an instant. Then it swims in the American air.

'Fell Away Towards the River. . . .'

By definition, the world is unlimited, endowed with innumerable properties; genre makes a selection among them, sets a model of the world, and breaks up the infinite series.

Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle
Tzvetan Todorov

For forty years, or near enough to, the man that I see in my mind only as if through glass, had been the more than competent manager of the Government Guesthouse, for forty years when it had still served a purpose, had still had a role to play. That was until his last day came, in the common way in which the future turns into the present, like pale light entering brightness, a day that was by no coincidence at all the final one of their operational life for the few remaining guesthouses of the same sort, of the same sort in the country that the man was satisfied he had served well, for every year of his working days. He felt it only an honour in the very lowest degree, however, that the officials who decide such things had waited until his retirement day in particular, to end the arrangement once and for all of providing convenient accommodation for those people forced to travel, on government business, to the less-populated areas of the land of Australia.

As the removalists passed by the man at the front of the Government Guesthouse, he began to feel sad, sadder than crows in a mass in the evening, on the spot where he was standing, on his retirement-day morning, on the first Friday of the summer.

A story halts, or only seems to.

The sentence before the previous sentence has a main part that could be discussed in the context of anything whatsoever: for example, one could talk about it with reference to both the guesthouse itself, and to the hard work of the removalists. You have the guesthouse, with no striking details on even a single of its million surfaces, and related to the guesthouse, while not really part of it, the million details of the concentrated business of moving nearly everything out of it. And in the midst of all this, an emotion, mentioned just now, also without striking details, and which a lesser man than the man that I see only as if through glass might have mistaken for a sort of neat substitution of the guesthouse, for that part of his self where emotions normally come from.

The manager of the Government Guesthouse, however, knew that he was—truth be told—simply sadder than crows sometimes are, and that the feeling within him, even though also without striking details completely, was only something like the guesthouse, without being it, and that in reality his sadness had much more in common, while not being them either, with the many details of the business of the removalists. Although he also knew that his sadness (for such it was beyond doubt) was not equally related to all of these details, and that it was most akin to one thing in particular that was, and not just because it was only one thing, not unlike the guesthouse itself: a clock with glass hands, which had not been disturbed once in the whole time that the man had been the manager of the Government Guesthouse.

Carefully, the removalists carried the clock with glass hands away, as if their very hands were made of glass.

In forty years, there had been some good times, and some bad times; not to mention many times when things were neither good nor bad: friends, a wife, a daughter once and once a son. Still, after all that time—forty years—it was surely right for the man to linger before leaving, simply to linger on that last morning. Many thoughts were coming to him, thoughts with feelings wrapped around them, or inside of them. Chief amongst these, the man was thinking that he had never once been put in the situation of having to describe the place that he had once in a while thought of as a child might have done, to anyone who had never been there. The visiting officials had always arrived in such a hurry, as if having dropped from the sky; only later, if at all, he supposed, did they merely describe the guesthouse to themselves. And if he had been asked, the man suspected that he would have been unable anyway to find the right words, to satisfy the inquiries of a stranger about even that feature of the Government Guesthouse for which, in the local area at least, it was justly famous. Furthermore, and later on, the man would have been reluctant to use the only words that he had liked to repeat in his head whenever, during the increasingly frequent silences in the guesthouse, he had felt warm towards the place that he would eventually have to leave for good. It 'fell away towards the river. . . .' Yes, that was how he thought of it from the very centre of himself: at the back, where the outbuildings were, the land of the Government Guesthouse 'fell away towards the river.'

The man loved the words 'fell away towards the river' because they appeared to him to be true of every part of the Government Guesthouse, even though they referred actually to only one part of it. They put him in mind of both the flat stones at the front entrance, and of the warm light that shone sometimes in the glass, on occasions towards dusk . . . each of these

particulars being only by way of example. Yet lately he had also liked to think of the outbuildings on the bank without words, and most of all of the low outbuilding where was kept, at separate ends, the black coal for the furnace, and the loose-bodied white ducks for the next day's market, and where sometimes a white feather floated through the black air of the outbuilding on to the coal, or a speck of invisible black would appear on a bird's limp wing.

Black was never so black, nor white so white, in the man's experience, anywhere else he had been, nor anywhere else that he had read, heard or thought about, as these colours were pure and real in the low outbuilding filled with coal and ducks, which the man had sometimes visited, and more often thought about, while nevertheless painstakingly avoiding any sort of intercourse with others in which he might—by sheer bad luck—have heard or read no matter how inconsequential a reference to the special outbuilding that was his favourite. For this reason, the man had tried to steer every conversation that he was part of towards what he thought of as 'non-earthly' topics, and he had only read books about non-Australian things (the outbuilding being, of course, a thing in Australia). This last strategy had made it almost impossible that he would accidentally read about his river-bank building; but, the man more often than not lived in dread of a local speaker let's say suddenly changing the hitherto innocent course of a conversation, about the condition of the dusty roads, say, and using what he or she would have thought of as the least significant of the outbuildings as a reference point for the location, across the river perhaps, of a dangerous tree or a swirl of water. "It's roughly opposite the low outbuilding," such a speaker might have said. The man had known that a comment like this one was most unlikely ever to be uttered, but he also knew that in the small

community of which he was a member this possibility was not so unlikely as to be nearly, or almost, impossible.

As for an odd remark by a government guest, or an official letter associated with the man's employment as the manager of the Government Guesthouse, he had always been confident that nothing of these, or any like instances of communication, would ever, in speech or writing, do more than bore him, with their stupidity, and with their irrelevance to the wider state of the world.

A story appears to return to a moment that it has never really left behind.

On his last morning as the manager of the Government Guesthouse, the man was to all eyes an old man. The laden removalists passing to either side of him as he stood in his old man's shoes on the sandy lawn certainly thought so, as did the few members of the house-staff and the garden-staff who had decided to stay to the very end, and were intently watching him, the busy removalists, and even each other, for tears. I am an "ager", a "man-ager", the manager used to say in the last years of his tenure, whenever another government guest arrived, who would always be young, and often not unhandsome. Some of the house-staff and garden-staff, sensing dissatisfaction and change, had cried even then, drawing the curtains of lonely rooms, retethering the goats that kept the grass in check, as the young man or young woman grew unsettled by the bigness or smallness of things, in a house where nothing a stranger felt could stay hidden or unrevealed for long. And the boy, who polished the glass, and was thought a little simple because he believed there were other worlds within it, the boy had from a great distance thrown stones into the well.

It was a little over a year before the manager's retirement day when the Government Guesthouse became so quiet that even an unhappy guest would have been welcome. And things had turned in on themselves a small fraction of a degree. After only a few days of near silence, the garden-staff got together with the house-staff, who will ever know exactly why? and the group decided to raise ducks in an enclosure by the river, with the intention of selling a few of them, each morning of a number of future days, at the market in town. Knowing a bit about this and that, the garden-staff had built the enclosure—with two sides in the water and three on the land—and had slaughtered the first ducks one evening in the summer, in the part of the day when the blood runs slowest, storing the bodies nearby out of the light rain, in the same space as was already occupied by a pile of black coal. The next morning, the house-staff had taken the ducks to the market, sold them all in an hour, and the enterprise was promptly judged a success, with the garden-staff, who would continue to do the bulk of the work, taking most of the profit. No-one had cried then, unless for joy.

It was at about the same time that the manager of the Government Guesthouse had fallen in love with the words 'fell away towards the river,' soon afterwards starting to think of the low outbuilding, where now both coal and ducks were kept, without the help of such ordinary things as words. And the glass-boy had every morning skipped one-hundred flat stones across the surface of the river. In a spray of sheer motion towards the opposite bank, they lodged themselves in the damp soil just above the water-line.

The responsible official in the city had taken a little while to find out what was going on, and, eliciting conclusions from facts, a little longer again to understand that the business with the ducks was the natural consequence of

all those empty rooms in the Government Guesthouse; this after finding out that no-one had been required to travel, on government business, to that or any other guesthouse in a remote area of Australia for—and this was how the responsible official had put it—"an unreasonable period of time." Under some pressure from those above, he decided not to close the Government Guesthouse until the manager's retirement day, on which date he would shutdown all of the few other such guesthouses not to have suffered that fate already, in the meantime requiring nothing of their no doubt bored staff, nor even of the, as he had assumed, enterprising manager, house- or garden-staff of the Government Guesthouse that had caused all this trouble, other than that they maintain at least the pretence of being open for business-as-usual. And keep those damn ducks out of the guests' areas, he had added as a joke to his secretary; and if anyone got any bright ideas to start raising cattle and kangaroos, he'd go out there personally, he added as a joke to himself.

The responsible official was the sort of authority figure who liked to laugh at his own jokes, although his staff thought of this man with no colour in his cheeks as himself a joke, and of themselves also as a joke, for having to work for him, which unsatisfactory arrangement was the basic matter of all the bad jokes that they told to each other, when their boss was out of sight but not out of mind.

The same day, the city official's efficient secretary had typed and mailed the letter dictated to her from a chair of pale leather. After two weeks it arrived at the offending Government Guesthouse, where its contents pleased no end the house- and garden-staff—who as it happens were just starting to think about cattle and kangaroos—and who went to town immediately to make new, more magnificent plans. The manager and the glass-boy,

unenthusiastic about both ducks and enterprises, were without a thought left behind, with their similar emotions, at the time, just before the evening really begins, when occasionally a warm light shone in the glass, the same light that the words 'fell away towards the river' always had the power to put the man in mind of, although the two things were not obviously connected, or joined together. Late on this particular afternoon, however, the warm light had been neither shining in the glass, nor present in the consciousness, as some call it, of the manager of the Government Guesthouse. As befitted his occupation, he prided himself on being able to keep in mind simultaneously two or more things, but the only image that he was seeing as if inside his head, as the local heron colony rose and wheeled in the darkening twilight, was a single moving-picture, identical in its shapes, colours and changes to the real appearance and motion of the glass-boy as he, at that precise moment—and as was his habit—began to practise his throwing: in rapid succession twelve stones landed in a new heron's nest on the far side of the swampy river-ground, crushing none of the speckled eggs, nor the solid dark cuckoo's.

When you live in a glass house. . . .

That was almost half a year before the last day came for the Government Guesthouse, in the common way in which the future turns into the present, like pale light entering brightness, and for all the time remaining afterwards the duck business continued to thrive, not least because the idea of breeding cattle and kangaroos was seen for what it really was: a passing fad, unsuited to either the local climate, or to the preferences of consumers. Meanwhile, the guesthouse itself, at least for those with eyes to see, resigned itself to almost pure emptiness, resolved its stairways, window seats and wall hangings into a state not far removed from nothingness. But there was

something that stirred and shifted in the inner spaces of the innermost rooms, the result not of soil, or water, or light. The peculiar seeds that the glass-boy gathered at night from the surface of the plant-full, frothy water near the base of the only tree by the river whose roots had become tangled in a whirlpool, and which a member of the local community might have said, had they any cause so to say, was roughly opposite the low outbuilding at the rear of the Government Guesthouse, these peculiar seeds, which the house-staff had been instructed to sprinkle onto the hundreds of white, guests' bedsheets for the sake of their lasting freshness in an indefinite period of storage, each one of these peculiar seeds, had on a certain day started to sprout, all at once, in the folds and layers of the rough cotton bedsheets they were enclosed in, although they were without soil, or water, or light. And no-one had witnessed anything of this, even when little fruit-laden branches closed around the threads of rough cotton produced years before, and hundreds of miles away, in an industrial town on the Australian coast.

Shortly afterwards, on the manager's retirement day, the Government Guesthouse was deserted by almost everyone well before the heat came into the morning. Most of the goods taken away by the removalists were sold later at a Government Auction House, while the rest found their way into various museums, both government-run and private.

All this took place many years ago. Even the outbuildings are in ruins today, falling away towards the river. And where the guesthouse itself once was there is now only an unusual stand of trees, good for nothing better than burning, because its white timber is full of broken glass. When he needs to warm himself in the winter, Joseph Paxton, the old man who still hangs around the place, sits close to the flames of his fire, thinking mainly of the time when his eye was good, and his aim was true.

The words that are true of everything to do with the Government Guesthouse, not excluding its destruction, 'fell away towards the river. . . .'

1938

Fifty years ago, early in a year twenty years before the year in which he was to meet the woman who was to become my mother, while the man who twenty years later was to become my father was taking a train to the largest city in the state in which he lived, which was the state of Victoria, he found himself alone in a carriage with a young woman whom he looked upon as a pattern for the sort of woman he wished to marry and the sort of woman he expected to discover many of in the city to which he was travelling which was the port city of Melbourne two hundred and forty-five miles from the place of his birth, and from the town from which he was travelling, which was the gold and tourist town of Pewsey where even as the man allowed the scent of these pleasant romantic thoughts to circulate in his mind the rain was hurrying into the main street and beginning its daily chase after the train to the place on the wide expanse that separates Pewsey and Melbourne where it always dried up in the summer air and left the train alone for the final part of its trip to Melbourne where it arrived an hour later always with only a few drops of water on its rearmost carriage and, on this particular day, a man in a second-class carriage with pale freckles on his long hands.

The man began to feel an empty space inside of him.

He was unsure of himself.

At about the same time as the morning train from northern Victoria was arriving in Melbourne on this particular day in the first week of March a

young woman was standing before a class of schoolchildren in a school in one of the suburbs of the city of Melbourne.

It was the first day of the school year.

The young woman was trying to ask her noisy class whether or not they wanted to go outside and sit down in one of the patches of shade that they might be able to find beneath one of the trees that grew in the narrow strip of ground that marked the southern boundary of the school and where they could sit together and have the first lesson of the day which was English and that if they wanted to stay cool that morning they would have to go outside straightaway before all the patches of shade disappeared and the ground warmed up so that even the children who didn't take their shoes and their socks off were no longer able to play at cricket or football or run from one corner of the school yard to the other which took more than fifty seconds although once a boy had done it in thirty-five seconds and he had gone on to run for his state a few years later and even for Australia, I think.

The children walked down the stairs into the sunlight and the young woman took her wide-brimmed hat to keep her hair away from her face and the sun out of her eyes.

It was 1938.

The first day of the school year passed hotly and slowly.

The young woman allowed the children in her class to spend the final part of the afternoon with their arms crossed forward over their desks and their heads cradled in their arms as she read to them from one of the books that

had remained in a teacher's locker over the long Christmas holidays unread and undisturbed by even the caretaker who walked through the empty corridors and classrooms once or twice each week to make sure that everything was all right.

Which it always was.

When the school bell went to signal to the teachers that it was time for classes to be dismissed for the day the young woman stopped reading and said to the children in front of her that if it turned out to be another hot day tomorrow as the weather bureau had forecast then they could spend the last hour of the following day, which would be Tuesday, finishing the story she had been reading aloud to them about two men struggling to protect their land and their families from a bushfire in Queensland and that all they had to do now before they went home to their mothers and fathers and older brothers and sisters was to shut all the windows and draw all the blinds and then they could walk home but not too quickly or else the heat would get you even at this hour of the day after school was dismissed and no there won't be any bushfires in Melbourne and the red haze in the air came from distant fires where the children couldn't even go to school sometimes for days and days, at least not today, which was Monday.

On that first Monday evening of the new school year the man who twenty years later was to become my father was starting to walk away from the hotel in which he had booked a room for himself and in the direction of the city building where he was to attend a meeting of trades union representatives drawn from all over the state of Victoria.

He noticed the coolness of the evening in his face and throat.

The warm currents of air that had been ascending during the day were now falling back to the earth as they lost their warmness, and the tall trees of the city, he was thinking, were like figures who had choked, struggled and drowned in the high and unaired places where their branches were hanging now stilly.

He had spent most of the day in gathering into himself the courage he thought he needed to enter a crowded room as it was becoming filled with men and women and to walk steadily to a seat he would see set apart from all the other seats already taken by other men and women and to keep what he considered a quiet and serious presence of mind as he too became a part of that filling.

The man had not been to the city of Melbourne before and he had only the most vague idea of how long it would take him to walk from his hotel on the corner of Elizabeth Street and Lonsdale Street to the building the address of which was written down in neat script on a page of the small notebook he had purchased in the town of Pewsey in the hour before he had caught a train for the city of Melbourne and which he carried in the inside pocket of his jacket along with the pen that had printed on its cap in solid black letters the words *F. P. Millingsworth and Co., Manufacturers of Fine Paper.*

He walked on through the darkening city.

A year before this year the father of the man who twenty years later was to become my father had died and had been buried in the cemetery in the gold and tourist town of Pewsey where his father before him had been buried and his father's father also although nobody thought very much about him any

more and his grave was not overgrown with weeds or long grasses so much as overlooked by the people who visited the cemetery if they ever visited at all and even if they made a special effort one day to search for a headstone that seemed remarkable in some way or another then they almost always ignored the grave of this man because there was nothing on it apart from his name, which was a common name, and the date of his birth and the date of his death neither of which coincided with any significant event in history and what is history anyway but that which has gone before and now goes for the first time into the giant mill of loneliness and forgetting from which it comes out in the barely recognizable shapes of our millions of livings?

And all of this, thought the man to himself.

Long before he came into sight of the precise location of the stairway that led into the building that contained the now crowding room set aside for the meeting planned for this first Monday evening of the new school year the man who twenty years later was to become my father was able to see large groups of men and women moving towards a place where others were already entering a stark white doorway over which was a sign reading *Trades Union Hall (Victoria)* and by the time the man who twenty years later was to become my father was able to read this sign he was himself a part of the growing crowd of delegates who by this time it being near to the time appointed for the special meeting to get under way were almost pushing and shoving at each other in their efforts to obtain a good seat or at the very least to get inside before anything happened and it was as this body of men and women reached its thickest point beneath the thick wooden lintel that stood over the white doorway and as the man who twenty years later was to become my father was himself directly beneath this beam that the young woman who had for the past fifteen minutes been walking home

from her empty schoolroom finally turned into her own street in another suburb of the city of Melbourne and began calling out to her sister that she was home now and she would not have to go to school again no not for many many hours and really the day was only just beginning to begin now and wasn't the world so very very beautiful on this day and at this time, which was the evening-time.

This is the moment that anyone sufficiently knowledgeable who had been in the city of Melbourne in early 1938 could have imagined as the moment in which the man who was to become my father and the woman who was to become my mother had first fallen in love and had set in motion the sort of love that would make its new appearance for the second and the first time after twenty more years had passed and gone.

The evenings of late summer in 1938 had an exceptional quality to them as if the passing of the season of that particular year would in turn lead to the passing for the last time of the season of late summer without any hope of appeal to a justice-seeking God able to return to the calendar that part of the year that would be remembered not so much by the adult people of the city of Melbourne or by their children but rather by the worn-out ache in the centre of the unstopping rotation of the earth as being the time that once came between the season of spring and the season of autumn and it was perhaps something of this sweet specialness that encouraged the sister of the young woman who twenty years later was to become my mother to write about the way in which her evenings became visible.

This evening on the first day of the new school year the two sisters watched as currents of air disturbed the frames of the trees they had watered with extra care that morning before the younger of the two left for her first day as

a junior schoolteacher in the school in the suburb which adjoined the suburb in which they lived and before the other sister started to write about the evenings that always seemed to appear more vividly to her as they were falling in other hemispheres.

The rented house in which they had lived for the past four months was one of only three on a short dirt street in a suburb that was just starting to attract the attention of men and women who wanted to live in the city of Melbourne but all the same in a house that they could build to contain their own secrets and happinesses without having to keep their voices down as was the case in apartment buildings and occasionally during the day the older sister overheard people talking about houses and gardens and neighbours in the paddocks that surrounded their place and where stunted apple trees grew and where they might be able to pick the fruit of those apple trees once again as they had done the day they had moved into their new house if the fruit was quicker than the sounds of houses growing.

The apples had been sweet and small.

The man who twenty years later was to become my father was feeling afraid that evening because he wanted to add his name to the list of those men and women who would go in turn to the raised platform at the end of the hall and speak about the present crisis and yet he knew he would not have the courage to do so and he was afraid because of how he might feel when he returned to his single room and understood the true extent of his cowardice.

He was dressed in the same finely patterned suit he had been wearing all that day since he had arrived that morning in the city of Melbourne and although it differed very little in appearance from the clothing worn by the

men and women sitting near him it nevertheless brought to his mind the fact that he had travelled all the way from the town of Pewsey to attend this meeting on the first evening of the first day of the new school year and it reminded him also that he would be wearing that same suit the next day when he went home on the train that stopped at the town of Pewsey for an hour before it left behind its dark-red earth and went on to other Victorian towns where the colour of the soil became less solid.

The man who twenty years later was to become my father became aware of a sadness in this changing quality of the colour of the soil and he further became aware that he could only relate this sadness to the knowledge he had that although he was sitting in the same room as hundreds of other men and women and listening to the same words being spoken as they were he would never himself speak with anyone present that evening.

Either then or at any time in the future.

The man who was to be my father packed his suitcase before he went to sleep that night because he knew that in the morning he had an early train to catch to the town of Pewsey where he would remain for the next twenty years without once having any desire to visit the city of Melbourne.

The World-Lovers

They were not gods, only lovers of the human kind, but like gods they gave each other worlds for their love. So strong was the life in them that, in the hour of their coming into the world, each must have been born several times over. One surprise for the midwife could hardly have been enough. The man was born at the start of the day at the end of which was born the woman whom he loved and who loved him. His name signified 'Rains of the Moon,' hers meant 'Clouds of the Sun.' Sometimes they felt that the sole purpose of their love was to bring the different moments of their multiple births together into an instant. Unwilling to reconcile themselves to time, there was a day in the past that they were always longing for, when electrical storms over the ocean had tingled the spines of the flying fish, when men and women had breathed only through their eyes.

The lovers first met in a plaza at the end of strange streets. A world had settled unexpectedly into an open pocket of the man's many-buttoned trousers. It was a world of lives lasting only three seconds: a world of continuous birthing and dying; no-one in it smiled more than once at the sun; brief was every love affair. A first gift of love, the man gave the world to the woman.

Oceans and clouds changed not one iota. The qualities of hair remained exactly the same. The world in which the lovers were living, a world that spread out from a plaza through strange streets, was as it had been precisely.

Waves broke as always onto sand or onto rock; clouds drifted as before over plains or between mountains; curls or lank locks covered necks, ears and foreheads unremarkably. Only the ink in the nib of the pen of an ageing novelist reacted to the influence of the man's gift of love. The black liquid suddenly rebelled against any contact with the page—ran clean out of the top of the barrel—as the writer was beginning to compose the final sentence of what would forever afterwards be known as his unfinished masterpiece. At first sight it was love in a moderate degree.

But a love of such weakness was not enough for the woman. Until the day when she saw the man again, a part of her was always, awake when her heart was asleep, asleep when her heart was awake, dreaming constantly of another love, which would cause oceans to swallow themselves in, or to drown each lonely square of space beneath the stars, multiplying themselves without ceasing by watery means; which would use every colour of the clouds to create, staring down onto the earth, a perfect representation of the land far below, frightening children and animals into underground refuges; which would fill the streets of a hundred cities with fabulous tresses of hair, spilling into dark harbours, or onto deserts, catching unbelievable things out of the water and the sands. All this the woman dreamt in the tips of her fingers: nimble, fickle dream-masters, those fingertips. But from the first meeting of the lovers to their second, the man dreamt in the tips of his toes only of a lesser love, which would cause no more than a ripple across the surface of a raindrop, falling towards a sea peppered with tiny splashes. Unfortunate, shy, blushing youth; forsaken by the tips of his toes.

The woman decided it was her turn to give a world to the man. No illusions had she about journeying to a summer resort where surfers paddled-out through miles of frothy cumulus to ride forever an endless line of cirrus

like another horizon, nor could she ever expect to rise in an aeroplane through an oceanic sky, dripping swimmers left behind at the concrete terminal (disappointed, ticket-less travellers). And the least dalliance in thought with a city built entirely of hair, bald men pressed against its walls, lingering in doorways—vain disguise!—put her out of her mind. But she wanted to be the cause in her world of something more than the merest ripple.

It always gave the man a thrill to hear his own name called out unexpectedly in a public place. In the plaza from which radiated eight strange streets, he instantly turned in the direction of the woman's voice. It was like a sudden cut to the skin before the rich blood appears. The man wondered why she kept shouting his name many times over, even as she was running directly towards him. Once again they had the plaza to themselves. The woman immediately gave a world to the man.

It was a world that she had kept safe at her breast ever since the moment the day before when, as if by some kind of magic of the airwaves, every radio station had simultaneously stopped playing songs about giving all of the world for the love of a man or a woman. Sometimes she had even cupped her hands around this world at her breast. It was a world of lives lasting only three days; a world of three chances to understand the afternoon and the morning. (O the wrinkled baby-skin of its people; the astronomers ever-watchful for new comets amidst the stars.)

As the man took the world from the woman there was a half-change all around them in the reality of things: a cumulus cloud fell towards the earth for the briefest of instants; a huge wave reared suddenly in the Pacific, only to die back into itself at once: perhaps a sandcastle hours later on the coast of

Australia fell to the force of a mere slushy wash; hair ungathered itself from a red ribbon in a windy suburb of Rome (an after-work drink, two lovers, near a river). The woman was again disappointed.

The world containing the plaza and strange streets had also contained within it more and more worlds day by day. It could have been a historical exhibition of worlds that surrounded the lovers. The plaza alone was brimming with an abundance of them greater than either the man or the woman, in the tips of his toes or in her fingertips, could even in dreams have invented, in the time when the only known world was their own. For a day or two after they had first appeared, the worlds were still considered rare enough to be traded for other things: a world for a hat; two for a table; or three, perhaps, for a dog. Or later, perhaps, four for a pin. But now they were all over the place, like the waste of a city or worse, of no value to anyone, their novelty gone.

Only the man and the woman were not afraid of the sudden appearance of this multitude of worlds. For novelists, surfers, and everybody else, they were regarded as the terrible harbingers of a coming misfortune. A world containing only a single drop of blood lay in a gutter. A world containing only a single drop of water blocked completely one of eight entrances to the strangest of plazas. A world of people whom you could take twenty years of sorrow to and come away whistling rolled backwards and forwards on the roof of a public building. Worlds of the most beautiful men and women, all beautifully dressed, lay scattered about.

The quietness was as of the morning of a long-awaited holiday when next the two lovers met, in the plaza from which radiated eight strange streets, each to a different river. They were not consciously taking it in turns to give

each other a world, nor did they try to remember what the gifts of the past were like, but after first the man, then the woman, it was now the man again who presented his lover with a world. He took it from his pocket; she took it straight to her breast.

It was a world accompanied by a message on a planet-shaped sheet of paper, the words around its edge: "love is a change in things, and the absence of change is the absence of love." The man's handwriting was as small as his childlike voice was quiet. He hoped that his gift (speaking close to her ear to make himself heard) was a world in which the light of the sun and the moon moved slowly through the treetops, took a whole day to travel from one fingertip to the next. The woman smiled. Or perhaps it was a world in which the actions of animals were as nimble as the movements of dreams, where the men and the women emerged every morning out of rivers or out of lakes. Or out of oceans? she asked, barely breathing; or out of oceans, he whispered into her ear.

Little did he know. What the man had given to the woman was actually a world in which only two people lived, each seven-hundred years into their loneliness. They greeted each other with gestures no more than once in a century—on the tedium of a plain, in the confusion of a forest—unable to die, all language forgotten, engulfed by the exquisite tortures of a life without end. Nothing changed at all in the world containing the plaza and strange streets. The lover of the man was once again disappointed, and this time there was also a fear in her body. Not even the natural heave and sigh of the earth was a comfort to her now.

When she was younger, when she was a girl, the woman had dreamed many times of a silent face at her window, hair almost too perfectly combed

behind its ears, looking at her the way the wide ocean looks at clouds. The sudden appearance of this face was like a bruise to the skin that marks it strangely forever. Sometimes she lay watching the apparition for most of the night, unable to move in her dream, her stillness a mirror of the face's own, and would wake deep into the morning staring straight at the sun, blinking her eyes against its brilliance, a line of tear-water running across her pupils like incoming or outgoing tides, tiny waves breaking over the teeth in her mouth. Worlds would tingle in her fingertips like undreamt dreams. For every sunny hour of the days that began like this her mouth remained unmoving. Her words would came unchanged from her lungs until the darkness of the evening.

A week after the man had by chance given her a world like the worst of all nightmares, the woman once again found herself in the plaza from which radiated eight strange streets, each leading to a different river. She had been directed there this time, against the more rational desires of her mind, by a wiser part of her own body, on a day when all of her unhappiness had come upon her at once. She studied the morning and the afternoon, saw how time passed, and in the evening she wished for the man, wished with the strength of forever.

The plaza from which radiated eight strange streets, each leading to a different river, was a veritable disaster of worlds by the time the man arrived there on this final occasion. But of the millions that surrounded them, there was only one more world that the woman wanted to give to the man, in the end, for their love. Hair pushed every moment through skin into air, oceans cupped fish and lively crabs in their hands (the hands of oceans), and clouds darted like mad kites in the booming sky.

Something in the woman wanted to escape, wanted to walk down a strange street to a river, to any river, hair dripping out of her eyes, curls of tears arranged delicately and deliberately on her forehead, many oceans in each cupped hand (the hands of a woman), dreams tingling beneath the skin of her fingertips. And one cloud the size of a raindrop precisely a thousand miles overhead.

But she forced herself to stay where she was, and before the moon rose—spreading its slow light—she had given all of the world that contained the plaza and strange streets, for their love, to the man. And afterwards all change and alteration—of hair, of cloud, of ocean, of sun—was theirs to the end of their days. And they were lovers to the end of their days.

Cruelty

I have always had a great capacity for cruelty.

It is a hot day. It is a windy day. It was a mistake to leave so early: the summer heat is already pushing thirty degrees, and the traffic is thickly spread. Next time I will know better. I am mixed among the other drivers on this Sydney Road morning. That is, Sydney Road is crowded this morning, and the hot, windy day is doing nothing to help. Brunswick is fighting and swearing all over. The lights are performing their ritual striptease, green/amber/red—and once again I am at a standstill. (Just a minute. Wait. I think. Yes. I think I have almost managed to do it.) I am a good driver, and as I stretch the car into second gear I click my tongue, lightly, deeply, far below, way back at the end of my throat.

Unless you have worked at a service station, and even then, you may not know the colour of petrol. It is a rich, red, silky colour—more beautiful in the sunlight. My car is the silky, red colour of naked, spilt petrol. It is an outward advertisement of all that goes on inside its pure, metal world. Not many cars are this honest. Petrol. Petrol. Petrol. My car is an honest car. Honestly, it is my car that revs and roars up sunny Sydney Road.

(There! I have done it. . . .)

This is Delia. Delia is driving her brother's car north along Sydney Road; she has just passed over the Albion Street intersection, and is about to heave the

lopsided old Holden backwards, southwards, into what is almost certainly an illegal parking space. Her cigarette habit resurrected, no doubt, by the thought of a long drive. I am close behind her, and I pump my horn in annoyance.

There is a purple and orange bruise, rimmed like a badly cooked egg, storming and spewing like a Japanese sun, on the very end of my finger.

Why?

I have pinned a man to the dashboard of my 1972 Holden Kingswood. Not a real man, of course: a man forged in hard, industrial rubber; but undoubtedly a man. A two-inch-20¢-in-the-slot-turn-the-handle-cup-your-hand tumble out of the machine into your palm, cheap, Supermarket man. A man held together by the holding-hands of hyphens and words. He is pierced through the stomach, a tight, arse-like hole cauterized by the dull gold, metal head of a slightly warm drawing pin. The pin captures my attention for a moment; it is indeed warm, heated by the sun and the squirmings of my left index finger. He has admitted defeat. I know. I studied anatomy at the University of Melbourne (a short walk from my North Melbourne flat). The organs of the body are not neatly arranged like the tiers of parliamentary government. In their skin-barrel, they cannot be seen, cannot be believed. Skewering the body, from any point of the compass, is very much a hit-and-miss affair. From this angle, I have not hit anything too important. The stomach is able to sustain quite serious injury without affecting the other organs. (And I have clearly missed the genitals.) I tear open my packet of mild cigarettes, and use a lighter in preference to the orange coil of my car's electric filament. My toy soldier's life is not in danger. Pain, of course, is another matter.

I pull out into the traffic again. There is a certain style to smoking and driving, and I affect it easily—gently nodding the wilting ash into the slipstream. Too late, I suddenly decide I am hungry. As a child, I maintained a rigid distinction between food and drink: the two orbited in my little universe, and always the same universe . . . but always with strange and unspeakable differences. Smoking a cigarette is a frantic and complete upsetting of those earlier boundaries. It inhabits a space somewhere between the solid and the liquid. An adult absurdity. What is the moment in which the flowing, liquid petrol turns into the screaming screech of my car's tyres on the tram tracks of Sydney Road? What is that moment? Where is that time?

(Before looking for a place to eat, I pull over at a service station and fill up with Super.)

Parking again (this time legally) I walk back some distance along the way I have come. Melbourne yields to my vision: it yields through all the heat and smoke and haze that can possibly be thrown-up on this weekday morning. My eyes shoot rays out and over the steaming traffic to the indigo shapes of the city. I see it. It does not see me. I am leaving it. You want to know what Melbourne looks like? Buy a postcard! Buy a postcard. Anywhere.

I buy a sandwich and walk back to my car.

It is time to get going. As Brunswick gives way to Coburg the scenery changes. It feels more comfortable. The heady chaos of the inner city is replaced by the domestic wilderness of the suburbs. And, still further, by the penitentiary-rows of warehouses, factories, dealerships, caryards, businesses.

The tiny links by which we are connected, in Australia, to the rich men upriver in Europe, Japan and America. (Enough of the political bullshit.) The really funny thing, what really gets me, is that the road, now a dual carriageway, also bears two names. All the maps have the Hume marked in brackets as Sydney Road, as if to prevent the former from forgetting its backside origins. Not that I am taking any maps with me.

Born in 1967, I am 22 years old. I remember it clearly. The last present I opened at my 21st birthday party. A new, paperback copy of *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. And, shaking itself free from the print-polluted pages, a tiny key, a mock gold and silver key, a gold and silver mockery. An introduction to the tricks of adult life. Happy Birthday, Delia! Last night, I stole my brother's car keys and took off. *On the Road*, unread, lies on the passenger seat beside me.

Reader, I am mocking you.

I have been driving now for two hours. I feel fine. My Christ figure, my homunculus, stares back at me. Occasionally, with the care of a gentle torturer, I reach out to touch his little face . . . arms . . . legs . . . head. . . . He is slightly damp in the forward heat of the car. I flash my eyes open and shut, quickly, rapidly, trying to make him move, trying to hallucinate. What have I done? This is a new ritual, a new ecstasy. I press harder on the pedal, the engine feels my pumping foot . . . and accepts it. It is roaring and churning, quicker and quicker, yet held together, controlled, tamed, furious yet docile: a tightly clasped box of tumbling energy. A joined circle of hyphens. This is cruelty. This torturing foot, this groaning car . . . Delia, 15 minutes outside Violet Town.

(This is Ray. Ray is 15 minutes outside Violet Town. Ray knows Delia's name. Ray is driving from Melbourne to Sydney. Why? "On business." Ray has a pornographic magazine tucked neatly into a crevice between the clean shirt and the toiletry set in his overnight bag. Ray. Ray. What have you done?)

I decide to stop in Violet Town. The highway's stranded appendix. The road keeps going. I turn off.

I have never been here before. I walk around. Collect all the sights that I am interested in. The rest I leave alone. I leave things behind.

The newsagency is right in the centre of Violet Town. It hugs itself. I walk in and flick through some magazines. They are arranged separately, but can easily be seen as a whole. Sport. Financial advice. Sex. The colourful baubles of the girlie magazines look like caged birds on their shelves. Female. A businessman/Windsor knot tie, walks shyly towards me, and I move away. It isn't really me he is after.

I buy a daily newspaper. Instead of using the five dollar bill I have folded away in my purse (a small piece of paper which is not for writing on) I laboriously count out tiny scraps of loose change. Although I am the only customer, it is enough to shatter the delicate casualness of the moment. The fixed smile; the small kindling fires of polite intercourse. This only: Delia is buying a newspaper from a shopkeeper in Violet Town . . . hardly worth the bother. (What do they do with old newspapers?) I am clumsy with my numbers, and I walk away slowly, anxious not to appear dishonest. But it's OK, and I close the door with a sharp click, carefully, precisely.

Why?

I open the paper up wide in the street. The naked people are there alright, right down in the bottom, left-hand corner of page eight. This is a polite centrefold, not for sex. A picture of misery. Get my drift? Two black children—look closely: a boy and a girl—swimming out of the heart of darkness. Clinging, one each, to their mother's second-hand, Third-World breasts. Remember Ray? The images here are the same. Are the images here the same? There is more than one way to skin a cat. There is more than one way to be dead. There is more than one way to feel pain.

I have five dollars left.

I walk into the clean, linoleum surroundings of the nearest place to eat. I notice that it has one of those machines that spew out plastic parachutes, green marbles, and toy men. Placed within low reach of the easy hands of children. It is empty.

On the outside surface of the window, a large scrawl of Christmas-white spray painting says, '25 Years of Good Service . . . Thank-You Violet Town.' I wait to give my order. I read the writing in reverse.

How do you know a parachute is going to open?

I sit down to a coke, a cheese hamburger, a fresh packet of cigarettes. (I take an ashtray from a neighbouring table.) From here I can see my car. It leans spastically on the high, bluestone-rubbled kerb. With my good eyesight the man on the dashboard is clearly visible; although he can't see me. He is facing me, but he is blind. He is an accident in a huge mistake of life and

death. He is made of cruel, industrial plastic. I smile at the owner. He is shorter than me but made of the same stuff. His clean apron (not many people visit Violet Town on a weekday) speaks with the witty sexuality of coffee cups. Just below the equator of his waist a red sign charges 'Prohibited Area'. I have to laugh. He laughs back. I go.

You don't.

Ray is outside. He is sitting on a park bench purchased as a result of the kind generosity of the estate of Edward Holmes. It is too sunny and too windy, yet Ray is obviously enjoying his hamburger-with-the-lot.

The bench is damaged. One of its three supporting planks is missing. Ray's backside bulges monstrously towards the ground.

What happens when you eat? The bright and sexy food on your plate doesn't disappear straightaway. It sticks around. It takes time for the magical, chemical changes of the stomach to do their stuff. Until then, your body is an absurd little warehouse of all that you have eaten that day. A market, a pantry, a fridge, a shopping list. Ray is eating quickly, snapping at the mess of paper, juices and bread that he holds in his hands.

It is time to get going.

It is now two days since I left Violet Town. My little man is wilting in the glassy heat of my car. He is dying of starvation. I bypassed Sydney and am still heading north.

I have murdered Ray.

Just outside Violet Town, I picked up a hitchhiker. She is pleasant enough. No trouble. She studies marine biology in Cairns, and wants to be there by the end of the week. I can take her most of the way.

The sun this far north is always beautiful.

Sue is telling me about her most recent field trip. Getting her hands dirty, she calls it. If you take the time to saw a limpet in half you can generally tell how old it is. (I have this image of innumerable, countless, tiny topless volcanos stranded on washing rocks.) Of course, you take them back to the lab first. That is, if the shell is not too brittle, if the animal is healthy.

Isn't that cruel?

No.

(I have heard of the same thing being done with trees. Like the jaws of fish, they can't feel pain.)

We are silent now. Two women in this petrol-coloured car. Two women in northern N.S.W. I don't regret picking her up. I put on a tape. The sound flies wildly from channel to channel and I adjust the set with one easy finger.

The scenery changes. . . .

The recording is halfway through its first side and I know every word by heart. Sue has her eyes closed. The view is only for the driver.

I slow down to take a curve.

The scenery is halfway through its first side.

And finally, it's up to me. Not Delia. Not Ray. Not even Susan. The me that has been here since the very beginning. The lazy writer backstage. Like a good artist, but a bad parent. Enough to keep my hand in.

What else is there to say?

Reader, dear reader, you with the sweaty palms and the fever as time runs out, "it's all up to you, Baby Blue," (as the song goes, or could go).

Delia and Sue drove north for another three days, sleeping head-to-toe in roadside motels. One night they slept by a fire tangled with flames like knotted hair. In the morning, they kicked out the murmuring ashes, pushed their arms through the sky, and pulled the skin of the waking day down over their heads. And were off.

A few hours outside Cairns, Delia stopped the old Kingswood and let Sue out. Lifts are plentiful around there. She turned the big car around and drove back to Melbourne. Almost without taking a break.

Ray lay in the frozen motions of digestion in the thick scrub just north of Violet Town. 45 years old. In the sky, his mother, also recently dead, was circling with the planets. 45 degrees above the horizon.

Delia had always had a great capacity for cruelty.

In a few days, back at her North Melbourne flat, she is turning off the hotplate she left on a week before.

Now Delia is back in her anatomy class at the University of Melbourne. Delia has given up smoking again. Delia is lying down with her dark-skinned boyfriend on the south lawn as he talks about William Blake.

Delia is kneeling down in the watered grass with the insects and the humming sunlight.

Shame

Inside the Freedom Train / You'll Find a Precious Freight
Those Words of Liberty / The Documents that Made Us Great

'The Freedom Train'
Irving Berlin

And all the while China hanging over us like Fate itself.

Tropic of Cancer
Henry Miller

My name is Miyume. The first time that I travelled to America, I rose no further into the sky than the long-stemmed flowers favoured amongst lovers when the spring comes to the parks of Tokyo. It was a Sunday. I was only seven years old, and short for my age; unlike my brother, who at barely eleven was almost as tall as a man. In the last hour of the night, our mother had dressed us in the same bright-red outfit—with clever pockets and zips designed for unisex travelling convenience. Downstairs in the darkness, in a chilly wind, our father had waited for the taxi. Another thing I remember is the glowing television, tuned to an early morning broadcast of 'My Favorite Martian,' the volume control down low, the white subtitles now and again disappearing into the monochrome images. My brother and I had sat huddled before the screen. Around us, our mother walked through each half-empty room several times, nervously transferring the keys to our apartment from one hand to the other. Inevitably, she had dropped them. A

moment later, our father arrived at the top of the stairs to announce that the taxi-driver was anxious to leave. In a single swift movement, like a soccer star playing a trick with the ball, he picked up the keys with the tip of his shoe. One-hundred blinks of the eye later, as Tokyoites say, we had squeezed into the taxi. On the balcony of our apartment, a space no bigger than a cat's forehead, my mother had left behind a packet of cigarettes, and a bottle of fine wine, as an inducement to fate for our safe return.

The taxi-driver took us first to the university, where my father had to collect a carton of books from his laboratory, then to the other side of the city—through the waking suburbs of Tokyo—to Narita Airport. We pushed our trollies into the terminal building just after daybreak. Many non-Japanese people waited with us in the departure lounge. It was exciting. I can remember thinking of the aeroplane we were about to walk into as like a cave for birds to live in, with treasure at the tips of its wings. I believed that when we landed in America everything would be different; even the sun would move like a stranger through an unfamiliar sky, full of clouds as pale as jellyfish. After the take-off, my brother and I sat two to a seat, our noses to the window. Across the aisle, our parents talked quietly, refusing all offers from the air hostesses of reading matter in Japanese or English. Somewhere over the Hawaiian Islands, I must have fallen into a deep sleep, lying across my brother's bright-red body, for when we were woken a much bigger land than Japan was already peeping over the horizon, its lights signs of life on the edge of the ocean's darkness.

It would later become a family joke that my brother turned green at his first sight of America. He vomited into the airsickness bag with the Kodak advertisement on it at the exact moment the aeroplane touched down on the runway. My mother apologized in Japanese to everyone seated around

us. We were the last to leave; even the air hostesses at the exit doors were starting to look impatient.

My father became our navigator in a country of strange words. The baggage carousel was a revolving figure-of-eight. A group of men at the Customs desk stared at us indifferently. The Immigration Officer asked two fast-spoken questions of my father, muttered something quietly, then brought his official stamp down hard on our passports. At last, we emerged into the warmer, night air of Los Angeles. The taxi-driver was a woman with a cigarette in her left hand. She talked to my father in English as we drove down a white-lined, straight freeway. The hotel had a line of autographed baseball bats all along one wall of the foyer. We went to sleep thankfully that night, safely in America, the country to be our home for the next five years. My bed was taller than I was.

An academic post had been established for my father by a private sponsor of the University of California. A respected expert in the neuropsychology of animals, as the author's note in one of his books said, many learned journals had published articles by my father on the relationship between brain patterns and behavioural traits in monkeys and small apes. My mother used to say that science was his passion of passions. Perhaps what was to happen on our first morning in Los Angeles was inevitable.

Our hotel was only a short drive from the university, and an official UCLA car had collected us and our luggage just before 10.00 am. At 11.15 am, we were still blocked in our progress at the main gates. Word had got out. The protesters surrounded our car completely. Their shouting seemed to come as much from above and below us, as through the tinted glass of our closed windows. They were our 'inhospitable hosts'. From the middle of the back

seat, I could not see all that was happening; but, I glimpsed flashing pictures of sad-looking animals: their pale underbellies, their four limbs pinned to racks as if crucified; also a sign held still long enough for me to see the mistake in the Japanese character for 'criminal'. A few minutes later, men with 'UCLA Security' printed in blue letters on their breast-pockets had arrived. The character for 'criminal' had been written in blood-red strokes.

If my family's early days in America were as much full of trouble as happiness, still I was never myself a witness to the lecture-theatre occupations, or to the spontaneous office sit-ins. I heard about these things only afterwards. My brother and I grew to love the American school that we attended. Dogs roamed freely in the huge backyards of our friends' houses.

When we returned to Japan after five years, I was able to speak English, if I had a mind to, with barely a fault. One day, at my Tokyo high school, I gave a prepared speech in language class entitled 'The Fabulous Prairie Country.' Sitting down again at my desk, I knew that I had spoken it like a true Californian. But my triumph was to be short-lived. At school the next day, no-one would return my smile. For a long time afterwards, to my father's great dismay, I forced myself to imitate the accent of my classmates in every English conversation that I had.

A decade went by, ten of the seasons when the parks of the Japanese capital come alive again after the winter freeze. I was almost 23 when I won a scholarship to read for a Ph.D degree in the Department of Pacific Studies at UCLA. I dressed in the darkness of another Sunday morning, to catch my early flight to Los Angeles. The aeroplane reached its cruising altitude as the air hostesses began to hand out small cups of orange juice. I saw the

Hawaiian Islands emerge slowly from under the edge of the gleaming wing of our silver jet.

The UCLA campus was largely as I had remembered it, and I was able to wander, at ease and anonymously, through its white buildings, and across its rich-green lawns, no longer merely the daughter of the 'Japanese Vivisectionist' and his shy wife. Still, there were reminders. . . . Posters condemning the radical views of an Australian philosopher about to begin an American lecture tour were pasted onto every bollard; Peter Singer's name obscured advertisements for the forthcoming tour by 'The Rolling Stones.' I wondered if somewhere, buried deep within the accumulated layers of mouldy paper and crusts of glue, there was still—hidden from sight—a poster with a crude version of the Japanese character for 'criminal', in blood-red strokes. I thought for a moment of those students blocking our car years before. It is the Chinese, not the Japanese, who find red writing offensive. The streets of Tokyo are full of red.

Early in the last month of the summer of that first year by myself in America, I attended the student-union commemoration for Hiroshima Day. August 6 and August 9 should be dedicated to 'Protests of Memory,' said a black woman from the steps of the Humanities Building. She concluded her speech with a call for two-minutes' silence. As we stood there, I could hear people coughing, clearing their throats, and murmuring to their neighbours. If this was a protest, I thought, how different it was from the shouting and general clamour that combined to form my strongest, childhood impression of the University of California. My grandfather once told me that when the fires stopped burning, and the buildings stopped collapsing, after the first Atomic Bomb was dropped on Japan, there was a silence that not even the birds dared to break.

In the afternoon, my anti-nuclear badge still pinned to my shirt, I went to the Administration Building to submit my official thesis proposal. It had to be in the form of a brief statement, twenty-five words maximum, which began with a sentence fragment supplied in advance by the university, typed across the page in bold letters: 'I intend to research. . . .' The woman behind the counter read over what I gave to her, moving her lips slightly, before handing me my pink receipt: "I intend to research . . . the Japanese social movements opposed to the presence of US military bases in Okinawa and on the Mainland." Back in my single room in the student accommodation building, near the main gates of UCLA, I stabbed the receipt onto my paper-spike for safe keeping.

By the time of my second trip to America, my brother, who was engaged to be married, had already established himself as a doctor, in Sapporo, a pleasant city in the northern prefecture of Hokkaido. At an early age, he had made the decision to follow my father down the alluring path of science. I used to wonder, in whose footsteps was I—as a young, single woman—seeking to tread in Los Angeles? In the city, as they say, of many paths. One year in Tokyo, my brother and I each took home an envelope, addressed in strict confidence to our parents, from the office of the principal of our local high school. Inside was a form of report-card, soliciting a parental comment on the most 'favourable or positive qualities' of the student named in blue ink at the top of the ruled page. I found out later, from a teacher either malicious or foolish, that the comment on me comprised only a single word: 'obedient'. The whole rest of the page was left blank.

For two years, my Ph.D studies progressed smoothly, talking to my supervisor once a week, reading or writing in the library every day, seeking

out obscure Japanese texts in that section of the miles of shelving where you have to activate the lights yourself by tugging on long strings. I did not always miss my family. Nevertheless, I found myself crying for them the day I heard the news that a missile, unobserved by any Japanese tracking station, had passed over the northern tip of Japan, near Sapporo, the city home to the niece whom I had only ever seen in my brother's photographs. Launched from North Korea, the missile eventually exploded harmlessly in the Pacific hundreds of miles east. Japan knew nothing of any of this until Washington informed the prime minister.

I would have preferred to keep beavering away at my dissertation, in the quiet bowels of the UCLA library, until it was neatly bound and finished, producing paragraph after paragraph of well-crafted English in my favourite carrel. There was no desire in me to return to Japan. I was into the third year of my Ph.D candidature before my supervisor told me that a fieldwork trip to Okinawa was essential for my research. I needed to sift the words of my professors through something nearer to reality. Okinawa is home to the largest of the US military bases in Japan, and the most distant of Tokyo's prefectures—closer to Taiwan and to China than to southernmost Nagasaki . . . halfway to Australia. A Mexico in the Yellow Sea, few mainlanders ever go there by choice. I resolved to travel to Okinawa in the last month of the spring, in the season of flowers.

When Japan's 'providential enemies' arrived, in the middle of this century, the Emperor abandoned his antipodal people. The invaders are said to have brought peace and security to the South-East Asian region, and economic prosperity to their island base. There were both kind and cruel kings in Okinawa in the past. The young women are famed in distant Sapporo and Hiroshima for the clarity of their skin. Pictures sometimes appear in

mainland newspapers. The absence of acne amongst the people is regarded as a sign of the Okinawans' good morals.

I left Los Angeles on a Friday. My domestic flight to Okinawa would depart from Narita Airport five hours after my arrival in Tokyo. I spent most of the intervening time wandering slowly around the shops and expensive restaurants, occasionally reviewing my notes on the cluster of islands that was my destination, thinking about the polluted coastline, the lead-ridden soil, and the gradual disappearance of the dugongs in the north. I planned to interview representatives of the many environmentalist, land-owners' and women's groups. Knowing that I would be unlikely to find any postcards on sale in Okinawa, the last thing that I did before boarding the small jet was to purchase a bundle of them. I chose scenes mainly of Tokyo in the spring.

There was a line of autographed baseball bats going all the way around the walls of the foyer of my hotel in Okinawa City. Every day, for three months, I would see them as I came and went: neat as toothpicks. The Japanese proprietor told me that the bats had been left behind by returning American servicemen, and that the signatures on them were almost certainly forgeries. He indicated the names of some players from the major American league that even I had heard of. The American barracks was right across the road from my hotel. Looking through the high, electrified fence was like looking into a miniature version of America: spying on a scene from Florida, perhaps, or from California. Things were organized and clean. The streets and squares were spacious. But no Okinawan was allowed to cross into that world; thus, only Americans could emerge from it, teenage soldiers for the most part, the majority of whom had never left America before, emerging in wild groups—lords from across the Pacific—after amusement and distraction.

I knew that the soldiers came from the poor backblocks, or lonely towns, of the United States; but, they strutted around like Southern plantation-owners of the slavery years, or like Republican country-club members, out for eighteen holes of golf on a Sunday. They deigned to know nothing of my native world. Both the Japanese of my parents, and the crisper sounds of the local dialect—unaltered, say the linguists, for centuries—remained altogether a mystery to them. In the hundreds of bars clustered near the barracks, the gangs of pimply recruits knew the price of only three things: beers, taxis, and the girls-for-sale. They made deals with men who leaned over the handlebars of 1970's motor bikes. "Can I use that?" I heard one soldier say, gesturing with his thumb at a girl in a white swimsuit. It took me a while to understand what they meant when they called the girls 'three-holers'. Perhaps they thought I spoke no English. Perhaps they didn't care.

On separate occasions, I saw an almost identical scene: a soldier sitting outside a bar, complexion burning in the sunlight, beer in one hand, cigarette in the other, unremarkable except for a girl with her face buried in his untrousered lap, hiding her features as best she could beneath a square of cloth. Twice this took place in full view near my hotel. Later, I noticed that all the girls carried on their person either a square of cloth or a large handkerchief. When I spoke to them in what I could manage of the Okinawan dialect, a few told me that they can be fined by the bar owners for vomiting.

My interviews with activists from the many social movements were not always fruitful. It was easier to find out how the American military protects its own, than to discover the truth behind vague stories of fields poisoned for centuries to come, or of burnt female bodies found at dawn near the gates

of the barracks. The US Forces Radio Station in Asia warns its listeners to always travel in pairs for their own safety. Endless electromagnetic homilies came through the air from Guam: "Brad and Dan are proud to be Americans; but, they also know the importance of adapting to a new culture, and how to look after themselves overseas. . . ."

When they telephoned, I discouraged my parents—mainlanders—from visiting me in Okinawa. During the 'Ninety-Nine Days Rice Emergency,' all the Japanese rice that my mother could buy was reserved exclusively for my father. The rest of us ate only the coarser variety imported from China.

On my weekends in Okinawa, when I wasn't writing letters to my friends back in California, I liked to swim at one of the few beaches on the main island still unpolluted and welcoming. Most nights, I sought the sanctuary of my room, to relax for an hour or two with a paperback novel, before going to sleep. One evening, however, I found myself invited downstairs to the guests' common-room, where action pictures of baseball players lined the walls. It was there that I met Martin. He had been studying the captions of the oldest of the photographs.

Martin was an American Ph.D candidate, studying at a prestigious East Coast university. For his dissertation, so he told me in a few words, he wanted to research the questions of international law which have arisen out of the recent rapid increase in American military and economic development on Japanese soil. We chatted for a while about life on the different coasts of the United States. Then we started talking about why we were in Okinawa. Without hesitation, he told me at great length about the American heliport development proposed for the northernmost tip of the main island. Towards the end of his exposition, with a flicker of a smile at the corner of

his mouth, he mentioned the recent extinction of the dugong population that used to inhabit the area.

It seemed almost rude for me to dwell on this detail. Clearly, Martin expected only the sort of feedback, as vague as approving, that comprises the usual Pavlovian fodder exchanged, I have discovered, between Ph.D students in such circumstances. Yet that very morning, a representative of an environmentalist group had told me of reports that three dugongs were, only a few days ago, observed swimming close to the shore. Some locals interpreted their reappearance as a miraculous sign that the campaign against the heliport construction would be successful. There is an ancient Okinawan myth that, in times of trouble, the ocean sends forth strange animals to help the people; werewolves, were-dogs, were-pigs, snarl out of oily Okinawan woodcuts. I told Martin all of my thoughts. In a more serious tone than I had actually intended, I told him that I did not consider the fate of the dugongs anything to laugh about.

Immediately I had finished speaking, Martin leant forward in his chair, to tell me another thing: an answer of sorts. There is a kind of rare, indigenous Okinawan tree, he began, that would have become extinct, soon after the war, had not a few specimens been preserved within an American airbase built in the locality where it had previously flourished. A small stand of trees, he told me, exists there to this day in its virgin state. As he finished this second, much shorter speech, I realized that we were now alone in the common-room. Then I began my own no doubt far from satisfactory reply. I told Martin that this type of tree was now as good as extinct for the Japanese, because it was no longer a reality for the Okinawan people; they could neither see nor touch it. It put down its roots only behind an American fence.

That night, I dreamed that the whole of Okinawa was inside the American barracks opposite my hotel. I dreamed also of bushy trees heavy with the snow that hadn't fallen on the island for fifty years. . . . After the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, green weeds were the first sign of new life. They appeared even before the birdsong returned. In the archives section of the UCLA library, there is a b. & w. photograph of an American soldier being nailed to a leafless tree. He appears to be already dead. You must sign your name in a book before being able to look at this photograph.

If my Ph.D supervisor is to be believed, there are even today influential people in the United States who propagate the ancient story—revived in the popular press more than once during WWII—that the Japanese race is the product of mating between apes and the worst of China's criminals. Sometimes the cold touch of an American soldier, as I turned into my hotel, was like brushing against the moon. I wondered about Martin's parents, and about his parents' parents. I wonder what the wives of those airmen sent to drop the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki thought, when they saw their husbands again.

Several times before I flew back to Los Angeles, Martin and I drove to an uncrowded beach, where we had swimming races parallel to the shore. He always began the furthest out in the ocean. He almost always won. The Pacific must bear the sorrow of all the nightmares that have come to Japan, in this century, over the water from America. Why did I so often have this thought? On my last day, Martin and I exchanged addresses at the airport, as one does. I am sure that I can't remember whether I kissed him goodbye or not.

That was all more than two years ago now. I have been struggling for months to submit my Ph.D dissertation. Today, I felt that I might soon lose all patience with myself. The Rodney King trial—as it has come to be known—was into its final days when, about three weeks ago, Martin turned up without warning at UCLA. He had been offered a short-term contract as a junior lecturer. We have seen each other several times since. On our first date, we went to a huge movie complex, in the car that he had travelled west in. Sitting together in the darkness of the cinema—together in America—we watched a beautiful film set in China in the late 1950s. The actors moved slowly through the story. Martin had chosen it specially. Outside in the night, riotous LA burned. I don't think that we will become lovers, but he is not unattractive to me—my favourite Martin, as I call him for a joke—and for the moment I am happy just to be around him once in a while.

My name is Miyume. This Japanese name can be translated to mean either three dreams, or dream number three. Today, the sky in Los Angeles is undecidedly overcast, with just a suggestion in the air of the sort of rain that falls only from the edges of clouds.

And Thus, The Night. . . .

There is nothing more beautiful than meaningless cruelty. The only true cruelty is absolute opposition to life. Most meaningless and beautiful, the only true cruelty is the least understood in the world of common men and women, who for this reason know not enough about beauty to love it. Enter, however, the President, a lover of things beautiful, but also a lover of his people, who in the end had no choice but to turn to the animals of his country.

He began by hanging a mouse with one of the last hairs from his own balding head. There was no scaffold for this creature, no hushed crowd. The mouse died watched only by the one who had suspended it, delicately, from a spar of the smallest of the fleet of miniature ships that moved, with the slightest wind or current, across the ornamental lake in the grounds of the President's palace. Pushed by human hand away from the shore, the toy vessel shuddered three times on the water; three moments later righting itself, it scooted away with the breeze. Death gave back to the ship its delicate trim. It began to pilot a chance course between swans and exotic ducks. Incurious and at ease, they sensed not their own possible fate.

Back in his palace, pacing and retracing his steps through corridors of pictures he no longer cared for, sometimes entering huge spaces the fulfilled dreams of architects past, the President began to compose a list of all the different animals that he wished to have delivered into his command. A mouse was not enough. He was still desirous. The list the President

composed contained finally all of the animals in his country. This sudden cruelty towards the dumb species was only for beauty. In the time of the evening, a letter went out from the palace to the rest of the land. "In the morning," said the Presidentess, "tell me your dreams." And thus, the night.

. . .

"I dreamed I was the President," said the President, "of a country whose earth resounded every hour to the near and distant stamp of the elephant. I dreamed of skeins of perfectly stitched silk flying through the forest at midnight, signalling the heedless run of the elephant. I saw patient beasts used in the construction of buildings, living flesh in the walls and arches. I saw the worship of elephants. . . . I dreamed that I determined to hang an elephant, one of those captured deep within the forest, to test my people's love for me. Many men died building a stone scaffold that reached far into the heavens. Using the thick hairs of their men-folk, a thousand women wove a rope strong enough to hold the weight of an elephant, strong enough to hold it in its drop. The trapdoor was of Indian gold. On the morning of the execution—I dreamed—I pardoned the chosen beast. I told my people it was sinless. As they turned on me, preparing for murder with their hands, children enticed the elephant away with nuts and berries. I, however, was taken to the glittering ocean. With long whips my people drove elephant after elephant into the surf. The animals herded together in the churning water, misunderstood the break of the waves, drowned noisily. A whole species perished. This was the first of my dreams for the night."

"Was it a beautiful dream?" asked the Presidentess. But before the President could answer, came a tap on the door. The animals had arrived.

The President considered that every living thing that moved freely across the earth, and was not a man or a woman, was an animal of one sort or another. He had consulted with many scientists and workers of magic on this matter. The only exception to their President's rule, they all agreed, was the glittering ocean, which certainly ranged freely over almost all of the earth, and by its sheer massiveness, and myriad variety, could hardly be said to be unliving, but which, while not a man or a woman, nor an animal was. The President knew also that, with all of his powers, he had no means by which to put the ocean to death: it resisted fire, was impervious to iron or steel, and what even most stupendous of rivers—flooding off mountains and plains—could drown it? When he had four of his servants fling open the curtains of the bedchamber he shared with the Presidentess—to let all of the brightness of the morning into the room in an instant—he saw, amongst many other animals, every type of common and rare, bird and fish and insect and reptile, of his country, all of which, he knew, had been speeded to the palace grounds in the night, and all of which he knew, unlike the ocean, could suffer death.

"Yes, it was a beautiful dream; the first of many that I dreamed in the night," said the President to the Presidentess. Then he turned back to the window, saw again the view which he had seen through it one time already, and released the human scream of his anger at last and finally into the unaware world. The four servants, heads bowed, withdrew to their distant villages.

What the President saw in the brightness of the morning light, was only in slight measure what he had hoped to see at the end of all of his dreams of the night before, was only the merest prelude to the true scope and reach of his beautiful cruelty. Certainly the animals were arranged on the endless miles of velvet lawn as he had ordered they be, in strict rank and file: those

small insects almost invisible to aged eyes were at the very front, proffered on low pedestals, each creature confined by means of a drop of sugar-water to the bottom of the shallowest of saucers; far away in the last row were the horses and other weighty animals, for the most part patient. Nor had the President's requirements been neglected in the least degree with respect to the manner and the dress of the attendants who stood by each individual species, keeping in check the occasional darts and flurries produced by the spirits of primitive things: a giant of a man now and again flicked back to their designated place a type of small flightless bird, a wisp of a girl had control over the horses, a blind widow over the sightless fish in their goblet of glass. The whole spectacle was as of an ocean: glittering, tremendous, myriad, alive. Nothing of any of this could possibly have been the cause of the President's anger. Stripped of all other bridles, harnesses or accoutrements, every animal—even those struggling slightly in a drop of sugar-water—had also a noose of one sort of rope or another passed around its neck, or around whatever part of it was most like or near to a neck. The tied ends of all of these ropes were even now being lain before the President, twitching a little as if they themselves were alive. All this he had expected would be done. The Presidentess was in shock. "My President," she whispered, "my President," again and again.

Truth be told, what had angered the President so, was his own fault, was his doing entirely, was that he had not specified in his instructions that detail which he had assumed would be taken for granted by even the simpletons and the children amongst his people. His anger, it was at himself. ("My President," whispered the Presidentess. "My President. . . .") Before him, in the brightness of the morning light, he could see merely two individuals of each animal species; perhaps in each case a male and a female, he thought, but from where he was standing he could not be sure; nor did he care. For it

was above all, above everything else, a rope of one sort or another around the neck, or around what passed for the neck, of every single animal in the country that the President wanted to have twitching a little in the palm of his left hand. He called for his letter back, the one of the evening before, added several words to its text. In a day and a night he wanted it done. The grounds of his palace were the largest in the world; the water of its ornamental lake, the most pure.

The President went back to his bed. A different four servants closed the curtains across the view of the animals. The Presidentess was beautiful, the President said to himself, no attendant of lizards or water-beetles she. "Tell me your dreams," he said, "of the night that has passed." Her eyes had been open, but they closed when she let the words come out of her mouth.

"My dreams," said the Presidentess, "they were of fire and animals."

And thus, the next morning. . . . "In the night that has just gone for ever," said the President to the Presidentess, "I dreamed that I was the President of a country of rope-makers. I ruled happily and successfully, assisted ably by my ministers, until the day came when there was no longer any demand for rope, in my country of rope-makers. All that had to be trussed in my dreamed-of land, was trussed; all that required to be tied, was tied; all that needed to be hanged, hanged. Seven ropes plunged down every well. There was a tug of war on every corner. Even in my palace I tripped over, and was confounded by, coils and coils of intricately woven rope. I started to wake, from my dream of the night that has just gone for ever, when each useless rope in my dreamed-of country suddenly turned—the strands rapidly unravelling—into a different species of fish, every creature gasping and thrashing as if just plucked out of the deep waters of the ocean. They died

around me in countless numbers, species after species. All of the air was their hanging." No questions did the Presidentess have about this dream of the President's. There was the sense in their bedchamber of some greater gathering behind the curtains than had ever been witnessed in the history of the world. Two servants stood at each end of the perfectly stitched material.

A moment later, the President returned to the bed that he had shared with the Presidentess every night for fifty years. He had seen the view behind the curtains of perfectly stitched material. Now they were closed again; the servants back in their place.

"Imagine," the President said to the Presidentess, "that every drop of the glittering ocean, was another glittering ocean; that every feather, on every bird, of every species of bird, was another species of bird, with many birds to its name, all with many feathers; imagine that one grain of sand, was a desert without end."

The grounds of his palace were the largest in the world; the water of its ornamental lake, the most pure. "The attendants," said the President to the Presidentess, "are cramped for room: they can move neither left nor right, forwards nor backwards." He wanted to have twitching a little in the palm of his left hand, a rope of one sort or another ending in nooses around the neck, or around what passed for the neck, of every single animal in the country. "Three men long of limb," the President said to the Presidentess, "are encompassing with their bodies the ropes that end on the balcony outside our bedchamber."

In the rest of the country of the President and the Presidentess, the only things alive that moved were men and women and children and

simpletons. Nets on long poles, for the birds of the air, lay abandoned on roof-tops; dropped in haste by crevices and burrows, small shovels, for the insects of the earth. Seven fishing-lines hung into every pond, left where they had been cast in the last frantic minutes of the night. Stables were empty. . . . A curious quietness stretched all across the animal-less land, from border to border across the country of the President and the Presidentess.

What the President had seen for an instant in the brightness of the morning light, was more than a mere prelude to, it was rather the true beginning of, the scope and the reach of his beautiful cruelty. No-one in the country of the President and the Presidentess was permitted to touch the least brick or fitting of the palace without the consent of its exalted inhabitants. Every naked toe of the front rank of animal attendants was less than a hair's breadth away from the bottom step of the wide, palace stairway: a gap for a flea to step over. An emptiness in one place was an immensity and a crowd in another.

Now the President could prepare for the many hangings to come. ("My President," whispered the Presidentess. "My President. . . .")

Only the horses escaped. But in line before them, closest to the palace, were the small insects almost invisible to aged eyes. Swaying and drifting in the slightest breeze, each one at the end of a fine hair of a girl or a woman, they all hung for hours from their built-to-scale scaffolds, still alive. Frustrated almost beyond bearing, the President suddenly ordered the release of a species of bird known to be partial to the taste of sugared water. The small insects were captured and eaten by the hungry birds, swooping from a great height, with their keen and hungry eyesight. They ate even the human hair, but for the insects it was still a hanging of sorts. And all of the birds were

recaptured with ease from the sky. The miniature scaffolds were carelessly crushed underfoot in the rush to begin the next round of preparations. Even the dirt, thought the President, was beautiful now. The goats seemed to cry when they saw what was in store for them. The exotic ducks and swans were more stupid, stretching out their necks towards the hands of their executioners, for the slugs and the worms that were not to be found there.

Only the horses escaped. For day after day, week after week, and month after month, scaffolds of various sizes and designs, ropes of different lengths and thicknesses, trapdoors of base metal and gold, were created, used for their one purpose, and without tears or laughter abandoned. A steady stream of attendants took their leave from the velvet lawn, taking a day or a week or a month to return, on foot, to their natal villages and towns and cities, where only people ruled and lived now, where a child might call out the name of a pet in the night, once, twice, three times, then whimperingly return to sleep. The President tugged on every rope, pulled all the strings. No anatomist or surgeon he, he did not know well the snap and rip of bodies, but in the end the ocean is the only living thing exempt from that fate which alone is unending. Eventually everything died. The velvet lawn grew red. The Presidentess dreamed of fire at night, watched the death of animals by day. ("My President," she whispered. "My President. . . .") Each of them became more and more beautiful to the other as time passed by. Soon only the horses remained. And thus, the evening. . . .

Only the horses escaped. "In the night that is yet to come, but that in the morning will be gone for ever," said the President to the Presidentess, "I want to dream the same dream seven times over." The eyes of the Presidentess closed, then opened again. "I want to dream a dream," the President went on, "of a murderous people, rebelling against my

presidential rule on the same day that I decide to spare the life of a sinless elephant. I want to be taken in ropes to the glittering ocean, so alive that it almost calls my name when I appear before it. I want to be made to watch terror-stricken horses, thin streaks of blood on their flanks, small spots of blood on their manes, trying to outrun in desperation the waves, being driven back from the shore with long whips, fleeing from each other in the churning water, drowning noisily. I want this to be my last view of the world—in my dream—from a scaffold constructed in the misty shallows of the glittering ocean. I want to dream my own death seven times over, my body rising slowly through the water with every onrush of the waves, then crashing down fearfully again, almost to where the shell-dwellers crawl, the rope now like a twisting eel, now like a string plucked to cause pleasant sounds. At the end of the night, I want to wake suddenly—real to myself again—eager for the beautiful hanging of horses." And thus, the next morning. . . .

Only the horses escaped. Over days and weeks and months, incurious and at ease, they had sensed not their own possible fate. Now they were the last species of animal in a country of people. But the horses escaped. And of course, after days of mis-hangings, of the breaking of ropes, of trapdoors failing to open, of patient animals led seven times to a scaffold and seven times away, of the sudden death of attendants, of the rage of a President, of a Presidentess hungry for sleep, of course, after all of this, to the glittering ocean the horses one morning escaped. Past the skeleton of a mouse drifting silently over water, through a country of curious quietness, they finally escaped to the glittering ocean. By nightfall, and for days to come, they were swimming. The Presidentess closed her eyes when she spoke. The President dreamed only of animals and beauty. The grounds of his palace were the largest in the world; the water of its ornamental lake, the most pure.

Pale Winds

In the morning, sitting on the edge of her land, the last woman of her tribe ate her meal—in the circumstances—with a strange leisure. In the path of what was already descending over the top of the beach, something she knew no opposing power from the natural world would ever be able to stop, she felt nevertheless neither fear nor excitement. Around her lay discarded bits of cooked bush-fruit. In the sky was the sun. There was the noise of the waves.

It took mere hours for the great fire to reach the highest tendrils of the tide. Without any haste or fumbling, the last woman of her tribe made her final adjustments to a half-completed but serviceable raft—unhurried in her terminal moments on the shore—and started to push it through the water, eventually swimming and pushing, until finally, just beyond the whirling turbulence of the surf, she was able to kneel carefully on its bark deck. It was from this position that she watched the burning she had left behind. Her first thought in casting her eyes over the land was that she was in the presence of a creature that could sustain itself forever.

Wave after wave crashed into the fire-filled air. All around her the back of the ocean arched and heaved, as if suffering from a fever of the water. The spray was like droplets of rain rising straight to the sun, each the home of a tiny thunderstorm, while the flames hung low and flat over the woman and her raft, like a new sky full of every disaster. Consumed at its foot by the surges of the tide, but always recovering without loss (sufficient unto itself

forever) the fire bedevilled the edge of the land. The blackened grains of sand turned to glass; everything was dissolved into clearness. An invisible beach the product of fire.

All the important events in the life of the tribe had taken place as near to the flames as could be endured, by flesh of man, by flesh of woman. First union of boy and girl, deaths after sickness and births after rainfall, were celebrated—where winter grass turned brown and black—by the telling of a story with the simplicity of myth, with the simplicity of fire. The last woman of her tribe knew the story well. And always the fire itself advancing, burning the land away almost to nothing, without imperfection or fault, consuming the country of both storyteller and listeners. Everyday joys and duties fanned out before the flames.

It had been the custom to measure the lifetimes of members of the tribe by the distance between the sites of their birth and their death, which made for a certain modesty among their number. In the entire existence of a tribal elder, the great fire might have moved, although such a calculation would only ever be approximate, no more than a few hundred paces nearer the ocean. A man or a woman could never, of course, traverse the flames, counting out their footsteps as they went, and actually stand at the blackened place of their birth. As a girl walking and running on ground already tinctured with the colour of sand, she who was to become the last woman of her tribe had known only that sometime before her own death, between the great fire and the tremendous ocean, there would no longer be any land for her to go forth upon. And that then nothing would remain unchanged.

Later, kneeling on a half-completed raft, it was for an instant with the mind again of a girl that the by then last woman of her tribe saw the first of what she would forever afterwards think of as the 'white winds'.

The white sails of the seven ships the last woman of her tribe saw the first of with the mind of her younger self, could have been mistaken for seven winds even by one familiar with the way unfurling canvas can sometimes unsettle, like a change in the weather, the same wind that makes smooth and settles its own creases and folds. Strangely as well did these seven sails, like 'white winds', come in from the horizon towards her, as if the ships themselves had brought with them this very division of ocean and sky, all the way to the edge of a great southern land, only now leaving it (the misty horizon) where it would be for them, for the duration of their stay, a permanent remembrance of England.

Once many, the woman's tribe now numbered only one, but when it was many—when the gap between great ocean and great fire was more than enough for a people to live on—the individual members of the tribe, positioned at even intervals around the earth, and looking upon it together, would have made of all of the world a horizon—a horizon of all of the world—the limits of their sight being blurred in the same measure as the distance between each one of them, for from the ground, at least, the horizon is never just a distinct line, but rather the presentation to the eye of many miles of uncertain and clouded territory. And the tribe had always considered itself a people of the ground.

The last woman of her tribe did nothing but watch as the 'white winds', as she thought of them, came towards her half-completed raft from the unclear horizon. The seven apparitions made speed in her direction, while the land

burned itself away, its ashes rising to drift back into the dark and uninhabited country behind the unspent fire, or to form strange stains out on the ocean, dissolving in the green water that surrounded the raft. The power of the view confounded the last woman's awareness of the passing of time. She hardly knew when she first came to the understanding that she was about to encounter, not winds of any colour at all, but real men, and a few real women, on actual ships, made of a hard substance almost the antithesis of pale air (although to the last the sails themselves remained as strange to the only survivor of her tribe as the vague and clouded horizon makes the whole world strange).

When it had started to burn, the country that emerged out of the water at the edge of the ocean as a low rise of almost transparent sand, had been laid to waste from its centre in an expanding and blackened circle, by flames that moved evenly towards the coast, closing at a rare slowness on the distant beaches in every direction. The land left in its wake had eventually turned into a desert of subsidence and depressions, the earth collapsing and turning in on itself, here and there at random, a victim of the injury caused by nothing but fire. The raft of the last woman of her tribe, however, had only begun to burn a little at its edges when the first of the 'white winds' arrived—rising and falling on the same swell of the ocean—and even then it was more just salt burning than any destruction of wood or rope or bark.

The particular way this tall ship came across the surface of the ocean had reminded the last woman of her tribe of how, in recent years, the light and delicate vessels of her own people had furrowed the shallow waters near the shore of the ever-burning country, after the nearness of the fire to the ocean had not only made necessary the invention of water-craft, but had seemed furthermore to determine in advance both, the design of the boats, and the

precise method of their construction. This fact about the tall ship had led her to believe that she might feel something in common with the men and women active beneath the seven sails, despite the fact that until the moment of their coming together—on the entire scale of space and time—the curve of the world had lain always between them.

The last woman of her tribe had not judged the future well.

When she was aboard the largest of the seven ships, and it was setting sail for England, in a confusion of smoke and spray, only the differences between herself and her captors—for such, of course, they were—seemed true to her, and it was these differences that took her back to thoughts of the only time in her previous life that she could still remember clearly: the period spent, moments before, on a half-completed raft, waiting for the arrival of what she would always think of as the 'white winds'. And the raft that she had been taken from became as much her idea of her true home as was once the country she had now almost completely forgotten.

The captain of the main ship watched closely as the woman was helped onto his vessel's deck, uncertainly being wrapped in dry clothing—a sea rescue of sorts—and beneath sails rapidly furled or unfurled for a course to safe water, he decided that upon his return to England he would be able to say that he had treated more than fairly the sole representative of a country the last fragments of which even now seemed to be disappearing before his eyes. Then he spotted the drifting, smouldering raft; gave an order. It would be a wonderful reward, the captain thought, an ersatz of the land in some ways more valuable than the short-haired woman, but the only half-completed construction eluded the excited hands of a tow-headed sailor, who as a young boy had thought that he would never leave London, and, in the heat,

and amidst the noise of the surf, the raft drifted back towards the flames on the wash of the ship, before upturning suddenly on the white crest of a breaker, and going forever into the smoke.

With glinting mirrors, messages were flashed from wind-driven vessel to wind-driven vessel.

The sun travelled another hour's course in the sky. Then suddenly the water itself turned horrible, as indistinguishable masses of burnt things, making imagination sick, started to come after the seven ships, submerging and reappearing in their combined wake, which made a wide band of paleness on the surface of the ocean. None of these things could the officers dare give the command to recover. When black night fell, and all around them became unknown, the ordinary men and women from England were relieved, and began to speak again to each other, of this or that small matter.

En route to a colder country, the last woman of her tribe was transferred, every day at dawn, from one ship to the next, following an order determined very early on, with just one exception, by lot. At first she was received as a sort of prize—a human trophy with hair that grew fast—but later her fate was to be accepted by the next 'white wind' only with the greatest reluctance, at times with almost mutinous hands: an unfortunate duty to be performed for one day and one night of the week. Every Sunday, for the betterment of her mind and her soul, she was a mute and immovable witness to the religious service conducted on the main ship, and attended by all the officers of the other vessels. This was the exception that could not be left to chance.

The last woman of her tribe did not make a single sound for the six months of her ocean passage. However, when the noise of the human voices around

her became, as it seemed to fascinated witnesses, too loud, varied and confused, she sometimes raised her hands to her ears, and protested, with her body, in other ways as well. In fear of such reactions on God's day, the captain required that she be strapped to the central mast of the main ship for the three hours of each weekly service. Afterwards, the former trunk of an English oak would be stained with yellow water.

Thus the captive made her way to the north—day by day, mile by mile, ship by ship—as the sailors, now unsure what they had seen, what done, and what thought, by that terrible southern shore, undertook to look after their ships and themselves with more than usual carefulness, as if each rope left uncoiled, or stray and flapping strip of canvas, threatened the safety of their passage as a storm or pirate attack would in mid-ocean, or, still more than this, presaged their inevitable destruction, perhaps even as England's shores appeared on the horizon. But they remained secure and well. Neither death nor injury struck amongst them.

The ocean bore all seven ships on its back, and every soul was at last received into his or her native harbour, although with uneasy cheer, almost silently, on a night when the water shone black to a black sky, making of a once familiar world a double darkness, an old destination not so much returned to, the sailors felt, as arrived at for the first time, recognizable only as if through smoke, or through spray the colour of dirt. They had all been born in London.

It was thought only right and proper that the last woman of her tribe be delivered into England on the leading vessel, and so she had been prematurely transferred to the main ship for the last tack to shore; prematurely, and out of order, for it was a Friday, and no religious service

would be taking place. Nevertheless, she had been bound to the central mast of the only vessel that had almost bumped against her half-finished raft, as she was every Sunday, so that the occasion of the arrival of the seven ships in England would not be tainted by her peculiar writhings, when she was confronted—as had been thought inevitable—by the strange combinations of noises of those who would be gathered in tight groups on the dockside, anxious for pale faces to become clearer in the blackness.

How often the fears of men and women are not to be believed. Such was the silence of the expedition's final minutes that the last woman of her tribe stood perfectly composed, at rest in her bonds, and the sailors strained their ears almost beyond bearing to hear even a single word uttered in a familiar way, or in a homely tone of voice. Afterwards, some of them were sufficiently distressed to say that, while it was by custom and regulation only proper for their rescued woman to make her landfall in England from the main ship, or, rather, because of this, the expedition had by God's reckoning actually arrived home two days early, and all seven ships should have circled just beyond the horizon, so as not to alarm the watchful audience of the shore with their delay, duly transferring the last woman of her tribe, first to the Saturday ship, and then by turn to the Sunday ship—the main ship—for a glorious return to England at the conclusion of the religious service in the late morning of the first day of the week.

These sailors had thought that the silence upon their return was the silence of God's displeasure. There were rumours in dockside taverns of a cathedral blowing with the winds across the brackish plains of the north.

In the days and weeks that followed, many plans were put forward for dealing with the long-haired woman, called 'the last woman of her tribe' by

all who came to hear of her. Some were trivial, some misguided, some impossible to explain to any sort of person. But one at last was adopted. And in the solution, as is sometimes the case, was discovered the crux of the problem: how to house the woman to best ensure her survival in a new and frightening world. The man once the captain of the main ship had had an idea. As nothing certain was known of the fauna or flora of the original land of the last woman of her tribe, it was agreed that no attempt should be made to replicate the sort of natural surroundings that might once have been familiar to her.

The wheels of government turned. Architects were consulted, builders sought and found, and a huge enclosure was constructed on a patch of wasteland on the outskirts of London. Its most prominent feature? Massive sheets of glass angled to most effectively trap the heat of the sun. Once it was completed, the poor moorland contained in this world open to every eye was then set alight, and encouraged to burn right to its very edges. With only one entrance for succouring air, the fire burned slowly over several days, but many were those who stayed until all was blackened, fascinated by this new irruption on their landscape, huddling up to it for warmth.

The people of England judged themselves proud of the tremendous dwelling that they had built for the last woman of her tribe: a kind parody, it was generally agreed, of her native country, as it had been all too briefly witnessed, and a place where she could be conveniently provided with all of the necessities of life. She entered it like neither a witch nor a queen. And in it she died, after barely a month in her glass world, her body being found at its very centre on the same morning, coincidently, that news arrived of the discovery of the land that would afterwards become known to the world as Australia. Crowded around their winter fires, the ordinary sailors who had

once seen, in about the same region of the planet, a land of smoke and flames, wondered what such a country might look like that, as they understood from the accounts being given of it, was distinguished by nothing more nor less than the complete absence of all signs of fire.

Thousands of miles away, a hole in the ocean hid from the million eyes of the horizon.

U

You drive hundreds of miles. There is a moment when it seems that the land will go on forever. Then it comes to an end and the ocean is there. Nothing could have prepared you for this. All is changed in the instant when you see the breaking waves. You leave the car and walk on the beach. An hour passes. There are people near and far away. You see them or you don't see them, as the case may be. Water floods across the sand towards you. The world is as it is.

There is a moment when it seems that the land will go on forever. Then it comes to an end and the ocean is there. Nothing could have prepared you for this. All is changed in the instant when you see the breaking waves. You leave the car and walk on the beach. An hour passes. There are people near and far away. You see them or you don't see them, as the case may be. Water floods across the sand towards you. The world is as it is.

Behind the beach there are houses.

Then it comes to an end and the ocean is there. Nothing could have prepared you for this. All is changed in the instant when you see the breaking waves. You leave the car and walk on the beach. An hour passes. There are people near and far away. You see them or you don't see them, as the case may be. Water floods across the sand towards you. The world is as it is.

Behind the beach there are houses. You no more than sleep in one for a week.

Nothing could have prepared you for this. All is changed in the instant when you see the breaking waves. You leave the car and walk on the beach. An hour passes. There are people near and far away. You see them or you don't see them, as the case may be. Water floods across the sand towards you. The world is as it is.

Behind the beach there are houses. You no more than sleep in one for a week. You think in the days by the water.

All is changed in the instant when you see the breaking waves. You leave the car and walk on the beach. An hour passes. There are people near and far away. You see them or you don't see them, as the case may be. Water floods across the sand towards you. The world is as it is.

Behind the beach there are houses. You no more than sleep in one for a week. You think in the days by the water. You imagine things happened differently.

You leave the car and walk on the beach. An hour passes. There are people near and far away. You see them or you don't see them, as the case may be. Water floods across the sand towards you. The world is as it is.

Behind the beach there are houses. You no more than sleep in one for a week. You think in the days by the water. You imagine things happened differently. Feelings flood across your mind as if leaving you forever.

An hour passes. There are people near and far away. You see them or you don't see them, as the case may be. Water floods across the sand towards you. The world is as it is.

Behind the beach there are houses. You no more than sleep in one for a week. You think in the days by the water. You imagine things happened differently. Feelings flood across your mind as if leaving you forever. In the world things are steady.

There are people, near and far away. You see them or you don't see them, as the case may be. Water floods across the sand towards you. The world is as it is.

Behind the beach there are houses. You no more than sleep in one for a week. You think in the days by the water. You imagine things happened differently. Feelings flood across your mind as if leaving you forever. In the world things are steady. You want to go back precisely the way you came.

You see them or you don't see them, as the case may be. Water floods across the sand towards you. The world is as it is.

Behind the beach there are houses. You no more than sleep in one for a week. You think in the days by the water. You imagine things happened differently. Feelings flood across your mind as if leaving you forever. In the world things are steady. You want to go back precisely the way you came. You think you can remember every detail of the journey.

Water floods across the sand towards you. The world is as it is.

Behind the beach there are houses. You no more than sleep in one for a week. You think in the days by the water. You imagine things happened differently. Feelings flood across your mind as if leaving you forever. In the world things are steady. You want to go back precisely the way you came. You think you can remember every detail of the journey. One day you leave.

The world is as it is.

Behind the beach there are houses. You no more than sleep in one for a week. You think in the days by the water. You imagine things happened differently. Feelings flood across your mind as if leaving you forever. In the world things are steady. You want to go back precisely the way you came. You think you can remember every detail of the journey. One day you leave. You drive hundreds of miles.

Behind the beach there are houses. You no more than sleep in one for a week. You think in the days by the water. You imagine things happened differently. Feelings flood across your mind as if leaving you forever. In the world things are steady. You want to go back precisely the way you came. You think you can remember every detail of the journey. One day you leave. You drive hundreds of miles. The dry land dances about you.

Natural History (World-Swimming)

A dream, of a salt-born octopus, grazing through the shallows of an inland sea, barely tidal, completely limpid, from which no rivers run anymore to the ocean, flesh turning pale for a century or more, knowing its own death by water every hour; a dream, of a man who has trained his body over a lifetime for the continuous production of urine, a great variety of jugs around him, like a magician, a pool of liquid growing at his feet by the second, almost clear, its vastness awakening to the moon; a dream, of a single swimmer, some way off the coast of Australia, knowing he has no wish to return, still uncertain yet when he will strike out for Africa, treading water, wanting to swim for a century or more; a dream, of which all together of the dreams that I have described would be the combination to unlock and reveal it, has captured me.

For some species of octopus there is can live for several centuries or more; some species of man there is can pass out any fluid of the body at will, through any orifice or pore of the flesh, and into himself return it the same way; some species of swimmer there is that has wondered not at all about land or endless sky. And some species of dream there is would be the origin of the dream that has captured me: a roundness of perfect water—of dimensions hideous to the mind—drifting through unknown distances of dry space, waiting dead-like through eternity for its one grain of sand to come by chance to the surface from the swirling of its depths, a single cell of life in a pocket of air at the lightless centre of the grain, waiting too through eternity for that same moment of beginning, the hollow impurity in the

water keeping to itself the knowledge of when, one day, it will travel to the edge of its wet world.

There are seasons of the ocean, as there are seasons of the land, and the seasons of the ocean do not match with the seasons of the land. As much as this is said, and perhaps the saying makes it so. As much as this is dreamt, and perhaps the dreaming makes it so. Now is the season the first sign of which is the silent death of an octopus, salt-born—as if by some type of natural torture—in the shallows of an inland sea a great distance from the ocean, out of which no rivers run anymore, to anywhere at all on the earth. From the shore, or from the edge of the shallows where the water becomes deeper and colder, I can see this death without noise in a sea barely tidal.

It is an ocean death of an ocean season. After a century or more, the pale body suddenly tears open at those points where its surface is weakest, spilling its salty insides into the freshness of an inland sea. A cloud of matter instantly forms, and almost before forming begins to disperse almost as quickly. Soon there is no body at all anymore. The shallows run clear again. After a century. A rag of flesh is all that connects the eight limbs, which now—when everything might seem to be over—in a last impulse of life mount one final frenzy, in the shallows of an inland sea far from the ocean. But the animal spirit of the octopus expires in the end, in the same silence as before—the first sign of an ocean season—and even the original cell of its birth must now be drifting into the deep, connected to no heart, out of sight in the coldness. Like unto a beast sated with murder I turn away. There is a species of man likes to watch such death throes. He takes them as a convincement that something evil is dying. I am such a man or I am not such a man.

In the middle year of a century in China in which the ban on all forms of swimming or water-play had once more been lifted, a peasant kneeled with bowed head in the middle of a paddy-field, to know for the first time around his humped body its slush and splash. After a little while other men came and settled themselves alongside him, their backsides all turned to the sun, experiencing each in their own way the touch of water almost unflowing. The peasant who had started this communal event, far from the shore of any ocean or sea, hardly to be called a revolution, was one of those rare men able to pass his semen at will even from out of a wholly limp penis. Hours after he had walked back to his village, long after the dropping of darkness, many men were still in the paddy-field of shallow channels and low ridges, experiencing each in their own way the feel of immature, green rice seeds floating between their lips and through the gaps in their teeth.

A year later, in Peking, the ageing and weakening Emperor, having just partaken of a lavish meal of a single grain of rice from every paddy-field in China, suddenly became tired of lackeyism and wearisome power. Frightening away the many servants nervously tarrying over the various waters that flowed through his palace grounds, he entered the one stream—barely a trickle over grass—that he alone knew would without doubt take him into a river which ran to the ocean. For days the Emperor floated along, the peasants fleeing up the banks before him at his imperial approach, until he reached the ocean wherein he wished finally to die.

It is time for me to leave this inland sea, following the remains of a river to the ocean.

And now I am there. I knew before I departed that, as trips go, my journey would be eventful. But as I linger awhile on the edge of a world where

swimming is continually free, I have no desire to speak of yellow-skinned peasants—faces the colours of a sun almost colourless—practising on damp land the feeblest of water movements, nor of birds flying low and fast between the banks of a river dry for a century or more, wings liquid on the up-stroke, fire on the down. There is only one incident that I would like to relate, even if it should prove to be the merest of them all, two drops of water turning into three on my forehead, boring into skin stretched hard over bone. The scene of the crime leaves the criminal. The works are thrown into a spanner.

From where an octopus had died, to where an emperor, it was hard to travel. I searched for days for the beginnings of previous rivers, along the shore of an inland sea far from the ocean, becoming increasingly worried about which watercourse I should eventually place my feet upon.

There is a popular television game show in which the lucky contestant who makes it through to the last round is given the opportunity to win what is known as the showcase: an array of consumer goods, on a revolving stage, surrounding the main prize, which is always a new car. To do so, he or she has to successfully rank all the items in order of their monetary value, with the car always already being designated the most expensive. The television cameras love the moment when the remaining contestant, in the dying minutes of the show before the news begins, often urged on to a choice by the host—in a TV *sotto voce*—turns to the studio audience, for the sort of advice that should hold true for a lifetime, for sickly confirmation of a choice already regretted forever, or sometimes, just sometimes, for the love that can pass for the most common of words, so unremarkable it is in this remarkable world. The hand-movements of the audience members are gestures to be interpreted carefully. Once a choice is made it is said to be

'locked away', and cannot be changed. The lucky contestant hardly ever, but every now and again, wins the lot.

Once I was confident that I had identified all the beginnings of previous rivers on the south side of an inland sea that could possibly, by any imaginable fluke of geography, run to the ocean, I soon started to think of the seven of them in terms of the principles of the game show that I have just described, and my anxiety over my choice suddenly eased. It seemed to me that I now knew automatically which previous river would certainly take me to the ocean if I followed it. This was the car, as it were. I determined nevertheless to engage in the conceit of ranking the other six previous rivers, in relative order of the likelihood with which they would take me to the ocean, all the same.

Turning my back on the pale bushland, with an animal of the shoreline regarding me indifferently from a few feet away, I took the low waves and ripples of an inland sea far from the ocean as my audience. I was sure that it would be an audience full of advice. Blocking out all nearby sounds, I listened hard for the noises coming to me from the surface of the shallows nearest the most distant shore of an inland sea, and I interpreted these as the cries of far-off cheering and shouting. In a few minutes, as if before the news, I had all seven previous rivers ranked and 'locked away'. There was only one seeming anomaly, a hiccup in things. My audience had gone suddenly quiet at a point in my thinking when, as if kidnapped by a flurry of the brain, I had thought fleetingly to swap the previous river I had at every previous moment considered would certainly take me to the ocean, with that one that I had, over the same period, come to believe was the least likely of the seven so to do. It was as if a cheap vacuum cleaner were being accorded greater value than a luxury car. But I respected the wisdom of my audience, and I

took its silence as a suggestion both unambiguous and correct. My anxiety then completely eased, of the seven, I gladly took this previous river all the way to the ocean.

In the last minutes of the eighteenth century, on a part of the border between Germany and France undisputed in the course of his lifetime, a young man realized that he had become an official of the State with not a single duty to perform. Immediately, by candlelight, he began to set down on paper the reasons why he would continue to live. As much as this is said, and perhaps the saying makes it so. As much as this is dreamt, and perhaps the dreaming makes it so. I am about to enter an ocean every shore of which, in every direction, lies a great distance from any inland sea. It favours with its torrents no fertile hinterland within which might be found a pool of water too great for a man to swim across. Millions of eyes blink at once in China; for the briefest of moments an empire is watched over by no-one; anything could happen, anything could have happened, but all that really happens is that I slip into the water of an ocean, and am surprised by its warmth as of blood. I start to swim while still in the shallows. Already, I feel that I am beginning to drown; I who was afraid even walking along the bed of a previous river, head many fathoms beneath the surface of water long past.

On a radio station phone-in program in the Midwest of America, just before dawn, a woman is unable to finish reading out the prepared comment she wanted to make on a subject closely related to the death of her husband, a year ago to the very hour. Before the program host can finish telling her, transmitting on a twelve-second delay, that no-one could blame her in the circumstances for being reduced to tears, she puts the telephone receiver down next to its cradle, and walks outside into the yard, her last words

moving through the cold air of the state on a twelve-second delay. In a country of the future, a century or more from now, the first of its inhabitants ever to cry is immediately accorded all the privileges of an emperor. She surveys her people through watery eyes. It is said that she has been elevated to tears. At the back of the crowd, unnoticed by the multitude, a man moves his arms as never before, and dreams of being able to swim.

Now is the season the first sign of which is the migration of every species of octopus known in the world, along the floor of the ocean from Australian to African waters. On the surface, I keep pace with their silent progression. I am glad to be a part of an ocean season. At one stage they seem to be making for India or even Japan, but later they turn once more for Africa. Could this be indecision? What might lie on the floor of an ocean that even an octopus refuses to pass over? I know at least that at their depth they must be moving as if on the land, their bodies pressed close to the bottom. I know at least that they must be moving through perfect blackness.

After several days, my mouth is more than half-filled with a quantity of water that I can neither spit out nor properly swallow. I know my own death by drowning every hour. In order to keep swimming, I make a final compromise with myself and with the ocean.

I begin to drown various parts of my body in turn, draining away the water that continues to gather in my mouth, while allowing limb after limb to fall down waterlogged to where the octopuses are. I lose first those parts of me that play no role at all in my forward motion, then those the loss of which means only that I must struggle a little to maintain my constant speed. Nothing of me is favoured without cause. Nothing is lost without a reason. I have always been a strange swimmer. I disable myself by degrees with

neither frustration nor hope. The ocean simply takes my body to pieces without indifference or malice. When finally the last part of what I am falls onto the back of the animal force below me, I still have blood and semen and tears. I am accepted without fuss as if into a funeral cortège. And as the octopuses mass in the shallows of the African coast, a miracle for men and for women to see, the last thing I know is the first sign of a new season of the land.

The World-Swimmers

Tell me where you're travelling to on the disenchanted ground

'Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho'
(trad.)

For days now you have been driving across unbroken grassland, which you know you'll never be able to leave behind forever, no matter how fast you might go, nor however deep into the night you continue to drive without stopping. The northern coast of your country is far in the distance, yet nothing is clearer to you than the knowledge that the plain you once in a while spit into will surely not disappear when it gets to the water. You have faith it will move without interruption through the breakers, even picking up speed across the ocean, until there is no more ocean—and with all the more reality if it takes on a form you could not even begin to comprehend. After so much confusion—the wrack of entire cities on sickening flats of sand—this alone seems certain.

As you fly across the land, constantly accelerating over slicks of water, you are granted once a momentary vision of a greenness of the least degree of intensity, which before it disappears resolves itself into a pale and flowing plain. You see no people on this plain, in the instant before it evaporates, but you can picture yourself there—a vision within a vision—in the easeful company of the men and women you call the world-swimmers. There have been no other cars in either direction for ages. You have nothing left to do

but continue. Even the radio falls dead eventually, and in the morning of your last day in Australia an ungodly silence fills your mind.

You are about to come to the end of the beginning of your journey. As its final hours pass by, you wonder even now—the sole occupant of your car—how you could ever describe, to a friend or a stranger, the momentous things that you have already been witness to, along a stretch of road that has never been anything but perfectly flat. Could even a habitual reader of fiction, you ask yourself, attach any credence to your description of certain grassy land-formations, which you recognized as nothing less than likenesses of all the people that you have ever been, or have ever wanted to be? Visages of dirt. . . .

You regather your thoughts, ask a new question of yourself. How would the same sort of reader, with an imagination used to forgiving creative excesses, deal with an only modestly worded report of whole new oceans welling up in the most delicate furrows, and between the ridges, of grassland, simultaneously appearing and disappearing, their waves breaking in and out of being, as fragile as the high clouds of a coastal region? Would such sympathy as he or she must initially extend to any author really fall to pieces under the impact of page after page of such outrageous writing? The question strikes you finally as an undecidable one, a crossing of two lines in your mind, each possible answer neither truer nor less true than the other; the perfect balance of two things precisely the same: memory and the past, history and recollection, water running into water.

Who are you? to think thus. . . .

Once, when you were many years younger than you now are, you were sitting in a classroom of sunlit air as your geography teacher described the strangeness a plain of grass uninterrupted by roads or cities would have if it stretched all the way from the boundary of your suburban school—in deepest Australia—to the furthermost place on the earth's surface. How might one species of grass give way, under the influence of new weathers, as the miles thundered by, to another, and then to another; but, think of this, said your teacher with a smile, think of this, would it not be possible that by a million freaks and faults of nature perhaps a single blade of grass of the original variety flourishing between the roads that you, girls and boys, will this afternoon travel home by, that such a blade could somehow make it all the way—passing through countless species of grass—to where the inhabitants of the most distant region of the world might laze and sleep, even in the middle of the day, on soft and nearly pure lawns of velvet?

My driver, you have always associated yourself with that single blade of grass, a foreign flag of green, born out of your teacher's late-afternoon imagination. But you have nothing of any of this in mind now, as the edge of Australia comes ever closer. Instead, you are suffering from an almost overwhelming desire to urinate, yet you dare not stop the car, and cannot bring yourself to pass water directly into your clothing. It must wait, you think, until you can clearly hear the sounds of the beach and the ocean.

With your yellow sea of urine swelling within you, the coast comes into view eventually, its sounds rise over the sounds of driving, and you are able to empty your bladder at last. The liquid disappears quickly into the earth, and you gather from this circumstance that, for all of the hundreds of miles of your journey, the land has been gradually tapering towards the point where air and land and water meet, and where the bottom of the land—for

such there must be—comes to an end. Indeed, you tell yourself you can now remember a firm feel to the ground in the area where you began your trip, an absolute sense of foundation entirely absent in this place, where even skipping lightly on the spot threatens your old confidence in the security of your footing. What matter lies below this inner- or under-land, perhaps only inches away from where your car tyres have settled, you do not even begin to think about, least of all when—as happens the first time you move away from the unmarked point where you relieved yourself—you have the urge to name the ordinary sand-dunes you are on (as if you had just discovered them) the Shallows of the Land.

A child might say that you have arrived in a never-never world, but you feel you are merely crossing-over from one reality into another. You haven't quite left behind the place many Australians used to think of as the nearest thing to an earthly paradise, but already the domain of the world-swimmers impresses you with its closeness.

There is no hurry yet to go on. As the strained and pressured parts of your stationary car continue to cool and cool, and the remaining drops of petrol in its tank fly apart like quicksilver, you prepare a bed for yourself, and lie down to begin the most blissful sleep of your life, resting your head on a pillow of weeds. For two days and two nights, you dream of leaves of grass, circulating slowly through the caves and caverns of the most unknown depths of any of the world's oceans; intermittently urinating without waking—like a baby or a young child—emptying your body of old water. On the morning of the third day, you wake to discover that your car has disappeared, along with all of your clothes and other belongings. Now it's only you.

As you rub the sleep out of your eyes, with hands made green by the touching of weeds, your first waking thought is of the division of the suburbs in the capital city of the particular state of Australia where you began your journey, on a day a full measure out of the ordinary, a week or two ago in the fading past. You contemplate in your mind the streets and groves that, whatever they once meant as fleeting worlds of passage and movement, also formed previously the boundaries between different suburbs of the one city, allowing those who lived beside them to forever look over another suburb, while remaining forever in their own. More specifically, you think of a man, or a group of men, watching a woman, or a group of women, across just such a street or grove. Nevertheless, you are unable to connect any part of this thought with anything presently around you, nor with anything you foresee occurring in the future.

Leaving behind the sandy zone you christened the Shallows of the Land in the last moments before you fell asleep, finally satisfying your urge to name it, you make for the breakers, where somehow—without you having realized it—things in the long silences of the nights have turned completely around on themselves. Suddenly you find yourself wading through shallower and shallower wavelets, rather than through water deeper and deeper, and the breakers themselves have become still, as if they were the foothills of the solid sea—holding back the tidal mass of the country—protecting the ocean's hinterland from death by drowning. Calmly enough you accept all that has changed, and in another moment or two you are swimming easily through rolling waves of grassland. There are fish in motion around you. Sometimes you see one jump out of the dirt, to hang suspended for a moment over the pale tips of the grass.

With the coast of Australia not yet out of sight above the turbulence in the turf that forms your wake, you don't have the boldness to call the plain you are swimming through the Grasslands of the Moon, much as it seems inadequate to think of it as no more than a special region of the ordinary liquid and solid planet where you have always lived. You hear a shout once from the shore—a matter of your car, perhaps—but only this and nothing else, and the silence soon enters into the paleness of the place, and overwhelms you. You swim automatically, the Australian crawl, almost as if you have forgotten that you are a man. Crabs scurry through the dirt; your naked body doesn't react at their touch. If you decided to dive under the earth you would find the roots of the grass swirling and billowing in the currents of the soil. You only continue to swim in a straight line across the surface, however, breathing regularly, with nothing of the land of Australia left about you.

The steady rhythm in which you exercise your muscles goes on without interruption or alteration for many hours, until suddenly you enter into a channel of water that baffles every movement, resisting you rather than, as was previously the case, embracing and comforting—like an extra skin—every hard and soft part of your body. The swells of the land give way to wavelets of surface rock, which hurt you in many places, and throw sand and grit into your eyes. This is 'thick water', you think. Then somehow you pass through it all, and, as if for you it were a second awakening of the day, you start to think, and feel, and act, like a man again.

First, you muse over a sea shining with every colour of the world except green; then, you reflect on an image of the water that collects beneath cathedrals and graveyards, lying still in the earth over centuries, it's said: a solace for water-ghosts. Finally, you spit a mouthful of dirt high into the air,

as you change your stroke to the butterfly pull and kick. The pattern of the wake behind you changes too—it's wider and deeper now—and you can't help but smile and shout and laugh. You are active and free again, in a world that (let it be said) is becoming more and more active by the second. Seagulls are crying overhead—their tears like grains of water—but they are alive, at least, and you are joyful for it; every part of you quickens into greater being, as the water in your body—pooling in your abdomen, flowing through your heart—sustains and nourishes the flesh and tissue that it irrigates. Young blade that has made it this far—rake, lad, new seed—your body beats the water like a hunter flushing game-birds out of grassland.

There are people, the world-swimmers to be sure, not so far off in the distance. The nearest of them, you can see, are surfing on tumbling waves of soil, grass and stones, their tanned faces breaking into white smiles as they surface through the foaming dirt, their boards wedging into the earth, dripping with sand. For your part, you don't stop stroking a path through the water, and your view of these fabulous athletes becomes better and better with every rotation of your untiring arms, and with each new pulse and push of your legs.

There is no shore to govern the way the waves form and fall, but something there is that causes them to crest and collapse in the same place every time. Behind this stretch of whiteness, the groups of waiting surfers undulate on what looks to you—as each new wave is born—like a line of hedgerow, or like a rise or mound of thick and knotted grass. Your thoughts rip, then smoothly curl over on themselves—a breaking wave, then a still lagoon—and you look closely at just one of the surfers with a changed but settled mind: you see now that he is wearing a wetsuit of ocean-mud, with scalloped segments resembling the scales of a fish.

A moment passes away, dies. While still unnoticed, you plunge under, and begin swimming through the petrified remains of ancient city-races—the Melburnians, the Sydneysiders, and deepest of all (of course) the Darwinians—letting balls of water escape from your mouth, and from the pores of your skin, watching sometimes the surfers above you, their legs dangling into the roots of grassland. The sun's illumination only reaches you like the light from a star on the edge of death and blackness; millions of coming Australian years have blindly passed by already, down where you are. Somehow all the speed that your vehicle flung out into the plain during your car journey—land kissing water—finds its true counterpart here. You go very much deeper than you expected you would, but within a few minutes you come to the surface of the dry ocean well behind the surfers, finding yourself amongst the main mass of the world-swimmers, although, by chance, a little away from the nearest of them: thus, you remain the unobserved observer, the observer unobserved and secret; a subtle mystery even to yourself; a stain of skin on the green water.

You understand that one of the world-swimmers will have to see you before the night comes, and you picture yourself swimming towards them—sometime in the future—clumsily imitating their native stroke. The whole plain seems to be under the influence of a single current now. Beneath a darkening sky, while everything is moving, everything remains relatively as it was. Breasting tiny sets of streaming earth, now and again gently urinating into the grassy water and soil, you give yourself up to the drift of the land.

Time passes; slivers of grass through an hourglass. Then the falling sun casts a greenness of the least degree of intensity over the pale and flowing plain,

and you notice for the first time a woman looking in your direction, squinting a little, as if adjusting her eyes to a sight never seen before. Without any hesitation you start to move towards her, drinking from the sap of the grass that parts before you, hungry for the world, no more to be a lonely swimmer on the enchanted ocean; the woman is smiling at you, she is smiling and calling to you amongst the weeds of the water, and you believe that you can see all the way into your future, to the time when you will be known to her many companions as the Last of the Australians, and frequently called upon to talk about the absurd and quaint lives of the people of Adelaide and Brisbane and Perth, whenever comparisons are made between the failed societies of the past, and the magnificent civilization of the world-swimmers. And now you are almost into her arms, as stroke for stroke she begins to come towards you as you go on towards her, and her eyes are glowing like oceans of snow, like grasslands of the moon.

'Framing Fictions & Fictional Friendships'

1. ( ):

Many of the short stories in this collection were written during the year that my partner and I spent teaching English Language and Literature at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in Guangzhou (formerly Canton), People's Republic of China.* It was 1997: the year of the hand over of Hong Kong back to Chinese rule, and the year that the Beijing press gave the last British governor of the territory, Christopher Patten, the epithet—loosely translated—the 'Villain of a Hundred Years.' As our loved ones and acquaintances back in Australia kept telling us, we were in an interesting place, at an interesting time.

I wonder now if we were not in fact living out their desires for us to be witnesses of 'history in the making,' when we decided to travel the two hours down the Pearl River delta to experience the hand over, or what those who were no friends of China called 'the takeover', as if for ourselves. Nevertheless, in the end for whatever combination of motivations, we resolved to go. Travel plans were made many weeks in advance, teaching duties rescheduled, bus tickets purchased, and most of the foreign experts and teachers travelled to Hong Kong together—with the happiness peculiar

*All page references to stories in *The World-Swimmers* will be provided in-text.

to workmates on holiday—in the early afternoon of the last day of June of the year before last.

Only one forgotten passport had to be inconveniently returned for; only one of our number caused any upset within the group. There was an almost imperceptible flaring of tempers down the aisle of the bus. A part of the day passed by at the vehicle's top speed. Then, after a short delay at the border, where cars full of military VIPs were waved through before us, we had left China behind; only temporarily, however, for now it would be catching up with us, as it were, through all of the hours and minutes and seconds remaining until the stroke of midnight. Some of us perhaps a little subdued by this thought, we travelled on, through the damp New Territories, the name of which, along with the weather, created for me that day a linguistic and climatic intimation of the film *Blade Runner.*

Once into Hong Kong itself, we soon started wandering through the streets, divided by this time into three or four groups, each one consisting of three or four people. The problem of where to sleep for the night was deferred with only a little nervousness. I heard that Bob Hawke, one of the many whom over the years have been granted the epithet 'Friend of China' by the powers that be, was somewhere in the city, in a rain-less television studio. The fireworks exploded, and died, in the wet sky; the neon advertisements glowed with a constant, if misty, brightness. Nokia. Sanyo. General Electric. GE. Some watches, no doubt, were a little fast; others, a little slow. The police changed their badges in the early hours of the next morning. A non-Chinese woman I saw was wearing, at dusk, a T-shirt bearing the slogan 'Free Tibet' in red letters. All the young residents of Hong Kong carried mobile phones. And wore black stylishly. Postcards were sent across the world for the date alone. And posted into mail-boxes with damp fingers.

My experiences of the hand over could reasonably be expected to have provided inspiration for the sort of fiction contained in *The World-Swimmers*. The place where 'East meets West,' in the idiom of tourism, Hong Kong is nothing so much as a 'doubled city' (an Asian Berlin of former times) and my short stories likewise are frequently the *mise en scène* of narratives of doubleness, as well as of this concept's correlatives: suturing and splitting. And if, at the middle midnight of 1997, as a result of Hong Kong's tremulousness, a slight global quivering of things seen and unseen was effected, then an additional similarity between this city and *The World-Swimmers* comes into existence: how local place relates to international space is another of my fiction's preoccupations. But a reader of my collection will find no stories that, in any conventional way, are 'about' the city of Hong Kong.

To this extent, the raw fictional matter that I have introduced in the first few paragraphs of this exegesis participates in the framing of my collection only vaguely and loosely, providing only an airy contextualization for the individual stories. It is perhaps the case that no more than this can be expected of any frame for a creative enterprise. Still, nothing stops me from imagining, at least, that the other possible frames for *The World-Swimmers* that I want to propose now—as if my collection were something to hang on the wall of a picture gallery—have tighter joints, the joins perhaps almost invisible, and a better-fitting construction in general, than the framing device that I have been tarrying over thus far.

During the few days that most of the foreign experts and teachers were in Hong Kong, some of those who had stayed behind in Guangzhou—to either watch events on television, or perhaps only to go to bed early—had no

doubt enjoyed a swim, and probably more than once; June and July, from my experience, are the months in southern China when the summer heat is greatest, and the humidity most thick. There were two aquatic options: on campus, a murky, uninviting, twenty-five metre pool, where a female student had drowned the year before, invisible and lost for too many minutes on the bottom, and, quite a bit further away, a reservoir, cupped within the mountain range the lowest rises of which began just behind our living quarters. This was the natural feature of our immediate surroundings most like an ocean, and more often than not where we chose to cool off, gingerly stepping across the sticky mud of the shoreline, before plunging into the cloudy water.

The reservoir was of such a size and shape that to swim, without stopping, all the way across and back, from any spot on the shore to the opposite point, was always an effort, for swimmers of our ordinary talent, yet something that never threatened to take us beyond our physical limitations. Drowning never seemed a possibility. Such 'there and back' swims presented, therefore, a challenge without any real threat attached, a challenge of the common sort.

Soon after my partner and I returned from Hong Kong, we discovered another bathetic challenge: getting from our living quarters to the reservoir had become more difficult. Whereas previously we had been able to walk to our favourite swimming place directly, the construction of a wall that emerged out of the steep slope of a mountain foothill, and intersected with an existing barrier at its other end, meant that now, along with the students, and what was left of a peasant community in the area, we had to make a long detour to travel between the campus and the reservoir. Scrambling over was both clothes-destroying and potentially injurious. I can remember

thinking at the time that almost certainly never before had there been a wall in precisely that location on the surface of the earth. (Now this seems far less certain to me; if every wall ever built in China were eternal, today there might very well be almost nothing but walls on its land.) What age-old, criss-crossing tracks were rendered unusable for the local farming people—perhaps even meaningless—by this rough, brick construction? There were rumours, soon afterwards confirmed, that an enclosed golf course was to be sculpted out of the parcel of university-owned land that extended to the reservoir. We Chinese love to build walls, joked one of my more confident students.

Still, despite the inconvenience, we did not forfeit the special pleasures of swimming, and we also continued, either before or after we swam, to go on long walks around the reservoir: a relaxing activity that often took us high above the water. From various vantage-points along the way, we could watch the tiny Chinese figures occupying themselves below. Men and women washed their black hair along the shoreline, making soapsuds in the shallows. The swimmers pushed and pulled themselves through the water, singly or in groups, frog-style. Others, perhaps resting from their exertions, reclined in the rubber annulus of a truck-tyre's inner tube. (These could be hired from a man with a bicycle and the eye for an opportunity.)

This spectacle, which was centred on the reservoir and its immediate surrounds, but took in much else besides, was what led me, I believe, to first construct in my mind the word-picture 'the world-swimmers'. The connotation of the global in this phrase conceivably resulted from an addition made to the view, perhaps long afterwards, by and in my free-wheeling mind. However, I would like to think that it was the product of an instantaneousness visual linkage, between two of the various, constituent

elements of what I used to see, during my walks before or after swimming, when I was able to observe the reservoir from above (as if I were in an Italian plaza, looking at mosaic work inlaid beneath my feet).

Let me support this thesis with all of the details and extrapolations that often suggest the truth of something. The division of the land, and its clearing by Caterpillar machines of industrial yellow, had somehow merged with the sight of the swimmers in the reservoir. Added to this image, on the spot, was an understanding of the future golf course as the setting—as so often it is around the world—for the business deals that take place along the 'Coca-Cola trade routes.' That is, it became for me a sign of the international sphere, with all of the latter's inequalities and violences intact. And also added at the same time, as if with my signature only faintly appended, was a sense, despite their proximity to the destroying work of the bulldozers, of the relative, watery freedom of the swimmers in the reservoir.

As soon as I returned to Perth and to my Australian life, I wrote 'The World-Swimmers', which subsequently became the title story of my collection. However, if the spectacle that I have just described and analyzed is somehow in orbit around my fiction like a planet (to generate a metaphor change) what also orbits it, if only like moons or junked spacecraft, are two weaker images, which have a less obtrusive existence in my mind. In the first of these, the reservoir is drained almost but not quite completely, with just a residue of water left at the bottom. In the second image, most but not all of those swimming in the reservoir have clearly arrived there, from the richer parts of Guangzhou, in expensive, air-conditioned cars, with tinted windows.

What is really true? What really false? What is really repressed? What really remembered? What figure of speech (from talk of paintings, from astronomical description) is most true to the notion of framing?

One frame for my collection consists therefore of what might be called the historical image-narrative of the reservoir swimmers. Composed of several layers, this frame has a metaphorical equivalent in the rings of Saturn. But this metaphor is not without rivals; the narrativization of an idea frames my stories as well. The whole arrangement of *The World-Swimmers* and its frames thus starts to resemble a pre-Copernican armillary sphere, with the orbits of the stars and the planets surrounding the earth in three dimensions, each frame occupying a different plane, the world only glimpsed through the rotating circles surrounding it. Or perhaps I am really thinking of one of those fun machines, a favourite at suburban fairs: basically a series of metal frames, in which people are strapped and swung around. In which astronauts are said to train.

Since leaving China, I have become fascinated by the fact that by far the greater part of the world consists of the uninhabited ocean: uninhabited by humans, that is. We can cross the Pacific or the Atlantic in ships, or even live for a while, in the one location, on a platform built rising out of the salt water, often for the purposes of gathering a natural element, such as oil or gas. Yet a permanent life on the ocean is almost unknown to our species.

What might this lacuna in the conditions of human existence lead to in respect of our actions and our philosophies? Perhaps many things. With regard to my collection of stories, however, what I want to emphasize is only the possibility of thinking about the ocean as a sort of 'inspired space'—remote from, yet influencing, the human domain—about which much

might be said using the 'foolish and wise voices' of fiction writing. This notion of the presence of an immensity of water lapping against the edges of our terrestrial world, of our terrestrial lives, constitutes therefore another possible frame for *The World-Swimmers*. While no doubt related to the historical image-narrative of the reservoir swimmers, this frame, I would suggest, is rather more a discrete production of the mind than anything like an immediate derivative of history.

It would be untrue to say that by this point I have exhausted all the possibilities of framing that might be applicable to my collection. Having drawn attention to several possible frames, however, and as certain theoretical questions about framing have perhaps for too long been left on the margins, now is an appropriate moment at which to turn to one of the critical frames that—from the beginning, as it were—has been framing my discussion of whatever it is that exists at the various horizons of my fiction. This frame is Jacques Derrida's theory of framing, which is expounded mainly in the section of *The Truth in Painting* entitled 'Parergon'.[1]

"Just try to frame a perfume," Derrida volunteers somewhere in this essay, thereby capturing through his example—even if this requires the reversal of frame and framed—the difficulty of capturing directly the constitution of the frame.[2] (The frame might be as intangible and fleeting as a perfume or scent. . . .) The work (the *ergon*) tends to drift into the frame, and the frame (the

---

[1]See Jacques Derrida, "Parergon," *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987) trans. of *La vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978) 15-147.

[2]See Derrida, "Parergon" 82. In the same chapter, Derrida comments on argumentation by example. "The *reflective* judgment (*reflectirend*) has only the particular at its disposal and must climb back up to, return toward generality: the example . . . is here given prior to the law and, in its very uniqueness as example, allows one to discover that law." For Derrida, at least in his reading of Kant, this is what occurs "in art and in life," the opposite taking place in "common scientific or logical discourse." See Derrida, "Parergon" 51.

parergon, meaning 'additional' or 'supplementary' work) to drift into what it is that it frames. "A parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work done [*fait*], the fact [*le fait*], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside."[3]

The World-Swimmers and its various frames (Hong Kong, the historical image-narrative of the reservoir swimmers, an idea about the ocean, and so on) are therefore in a relationship characterized by the border-play of 'insideness and outsideness.' But it is not anything like a natural richness or fecundity of these parergons that accounts for this activity. What queers the framing of *The World-Swimmers* fundamentally, is rather a constitutive lack within the text:

> The *parergon* inscribes something which comes as an extra, *exterior* to the proper field . . . but whose transcendent exteriority comes to play, abut onto, brush against, rub, press against the limit itself and intervene in the inside only to the extent that the inside is lacking. It is lacking *in* something and it is lacking *from itself*.[4]

"Edge [arête]/lack" as Derrida puts it elsewhere.[5] What might explain this equation between the parergon's mercuriality and lack?

The (western) tradition of metaphysical thought is founded on such concepts as presence, origin, completeness and, what might also be included in the present context, the determinacy of the frame.[6] Discourses produced

---

[3]See Derrida, "Parergon" 54.
[4]See Derrida, "Parergon" 56.
[5]See Derrida, "Parergon" 43.
[6]The writing of this paragraph was assisted by reading a summary of Derrida's philosophy by Kevin Hart. See Kevin Hart, "Jacques Derrida: 'The Most Improbable Signature,'" *The*

within this tradition, Derrida argues, hanker after these concepts. But what his hermeneutics of suspicion reveals, is that no text can ever be complete, a total expression of presence, because what lies at its centre (if it could even be said to have one) is not an origin, but rather an endless play of differences and deferrals: the elusion/delusion of presence. Furthermore, no compensation for the lack within a text can ever be adequate. Quite to the contrary: every new addition, far from becoming a proper *complement*, which might make the text complete, turns out only to be a *supplement* that perpetuates and exacerbates the anterior absence. What the text 'calls out for' is exactly what produces the inadequacy that drives its desire for presence. "It needs the supplementary work. This additive, to be sure, is threatening," writes Derrida.[7]

To this extent, the parergon is where the text's unremitting hankering—outward towards the world—after presence/completeness, 'crosses over' the inward flow of supplementarity, creating in the process a 'thick frontier', which extends simultaneously very far into, and very far away from, the text, or work, itself. "The logic of the *parergon* is," according to Jonathan Culler "quite similar to the logic of the supplement, in which the marginal becomes central by virtue of its very marginality."[8] And it is lack, the never satiated fomenter of supplementarity, that gives to the frame its peculiar expansiveness: a broad space for edge-play. Culler again: "An external frame may function as the most intrinsic element of a work, folding itself in; conversely, what seems the most inner or central aspect of a work will

---

Judgment of Paris: Recent French Theory in a Local Context, ed. Kevin D. S. Murray (Sydney: Allen, 1992) 3-21.

[7]See Derrida, "Parergon" 56.

[8]See Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge, 1983) 195-96.

acquire this role through qualities that fold it back outside of and against the work."[9]

As a *collection of stories* that can easily be considered as discrete pieces of writing, *The World-Swimmers* further problematizes the concept of framing. What relationship do the frames of the whole text have to those that might border its parts? How might one story be a frame for others? or others for one? Et cetera. And how might these questions be complicated over again by the fact that the story '"Fell Away Towards the River. . . ."' appears to function—somewhere towards the 'centre' of the collection—as a sort of internal frame, or a hinge, active because of some lack, busily transferring parts of itself, if not all that it is, to another place? Consider the final sentence of this story: "The words that are true of everything to do with the Government Guesthouse, not excluding its destruction, 'fell away towards the river . . .'" {95}. Where might this falling end? To what edge is it headed? What 'truth' of the story, what lack, is 'exposing' itself here? What strange mode of framing is active at this point in my collection?

"I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a work," writes Derrida.

> And above all I do not know what this thing is, that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper, and that Kant calls *parergon*, for example the frame. Where does the frame take place. Does it take place. Where does it begin. Where does it end. What is its internal limit. Its external limit. And its surface between the two limits [sic].[10]

---

[9]See Culler 198.
[10]See Derrida, "Parergon" 63.

2. Ideas & 'The Bird-Watcher':

If the operations of the frame make it no less internal than external to the work, then it can be established that the various parts which together constitute the w/hole of a work, of a text, must have a similarly near-Heisenbergian existence, must be always elsewhere than where they are. The relationship—across their borders—that my stories have, to their themes, to their literary genres, and to the fiction of another writer, can be considered under the sign of friendship. This proposition will be the focus of the next section of my essay. The fact that a text is not a 'solid-state' thing, however, that it only appears to be self-contained, makes attention to what passes for (or through) its interior no less important. I want to conduct in what follows an extended reading of one story from *The World-Swimmers*, 'poking around inside it,' in order to demonstrate the significance of the theme of ideas in my fiction. The metaphor for this approach might be the dip in the sine wave before, over and over again, the critic is necessarily transported to the 'outside' of the text.

In an interview published in a 1977 issue of 'Red Letters: Communist Party Literature Journal,' Pierre Macherey is asked to comment on "the metaphor of base and superstructure [as used] to describe the levels of the social structure."[11] What follows constitutes the main part of his response:

> In drawing a distinction between the political and economic situated in the infrastructure or base, and ideology in the superstructure, the metaphor reproduces the traditional division between reality, down here, and ideas, up above. This perpetuates the

[11]See Pierre Macherey, interview and article, "An Interview with Pierre Macherey," trans. and ed. Colin Mercer and Jean Radford, *Red Letters: Communist Party Literature Journal* 5 (Summer 1977): 4.

> separation between ideology and material reality. This representation is very, very old. It's the same one that one finds at the beginning of the Bible itself! The Spirit breathes over the waters: the waters below, the Spirit above; material reality below, in the 'base' and then *the ideas above and hence elsewhere.* So, from this point of view, *the metaphor is very awkward.*
>
> If Marx, in his work after the 1850s, contributed anything to the question of ideology, it was precisely in so far as he queried ideology as something outside or above material reality, rather than something within and a part of reality. From this perspective ideology isn't the superstructure which is above the infrastructure, but is situated at its own level. So in order to use the metaphor in the contemporary situation, it must be transformed, rescued from its traditional usage, so that there isn't an 'above' or a 'below' as such [italics mine].[12]

'The Bird-Watcher' might be read as a fictional commentary on Macherey's gloss on a theoretical problem in marxism. As with many of my stories, the first paragraph of 'The Bird-Watcher' introduces the main idea of the text, as well as some of the complexities clustered around this idea: in the present case, a quasi-axiomatic distinction between "'the birds of the air' and 'the birds of the ground'" {67}. Much of the opening stanza of the story concerns the principle of selection that is the motor of this distinction. Individual birds are not categorized, by the bird-watcher, on the basis of their species or type. Rather, it is the behaviour of a bird—what it is actually doing from one moment to the next—that is regarded as relevant by the eponym of the story's title, not some pre-existing nature or essence. In *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* Gilles Deleuze stimulates an exciting encounter with Spinoza's understanding of bodies.[13] Of the two propositions Deleuze invokes with respect to this topic, it is the second that interests me most on this occasion:

---

[12]See Macherey 4-5.

[13]See Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* trans. Robert Hurley, first ed. in English (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988) trans. of *Spinoza: Philosophie pratique* ([Paris?]: Universitaires de France, 1970) *passim.*

"a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality."[14] What is the meaning of this?

> Concretely, if you define bodies and thoughts as capacities for affecting and being affected, many things change. You will define an animal, or a human being, not by its form, its organs, and its functions, and not as a subject either; you will define it by the affects of which it is capable. Affective capacity, with a maximum threshold and a minimum threshold, is a constant notion in Spinoza. Take any animal and make a list of affects, in any order. Children know how to do this: Little Hans, in the case reported by Freud, makes a list of affects of a draft horse pulling a cart in a city (to be proud, to have blinders, to go fast, to pull a heavy load, to collapse, to be whipped, to kick up a racket, etc.). For example: there are greater differences between a plow horse or draft horse and a racehorse than between an ox and a plow horse. This is because the racehorse and the plow horse do not have the same affects nor the same capacity for being affected; the plow horse has affects in common rather with the ox.[15]

I want to suggest that 'The Bird-Watcher' draws upon this Spinozist idea in order to imaginatively reconfigure "the metaphor of base and superstructure."[16] In this enterprise, however, my story does not follow Pierre Macherey's suggestion for the mere transformation, within marxism, of the metaphor of 'above' and 'below'.

The almost-parenthetical introduction, in the third paragraph, of the case of water-birds, which are unconsidered by the bird-watcher "because there was no lasting water in the district of Victoria where he lived," is perhaps the first indication of the greater complexity of my story vis-à-vis what emerges

---

[14]See Deleuze 123.
[15]See Deleuze 124.
[16]See Macherey 4.

from Macherey's comments {67}. A (simpler) opposition becomes triangulated, and is thereby both intensified and complicated. (A parergonal comment: the phrase "the ideas above and hence elsewhere," which is denigrated by Macherey as "awkward", strikes me as actually a quite fascinating one, because it implies a beautiful complication of the life of ideas, as if a flock of birds were parting in the heavens.[17])

More generally, from first word to last, 'The Bird-Watcher' provides the reader with many variations on both conventional and less conventional understandings of, in effect, any binary opposition at all. Where Macherey seeks merely to collapse ideology into what he refers to more than once as "material reality", this is only one version of the many possible relations between any two polarities that my story tarries over.[18]

The fourth-last paragraph of 'The Bird-Watcher', which deals in its beginning primarily with questions of the scientific identification of a certain species of crow, in a very non-Spinozist way, also contains, in what might be seen as a consequence of this normative approach, the suggestion of a quite bland *reconciliation of oppositions*: "Different birds must have been seen as the same bird, mused the main character of this story" {74}. (Compare this passage with the fourth sentence of 'The Bird-Watcher': "The same bird could be a different bird from time to time, he thought" {67}.) However, one image in the fourth-last paragraph (that of "a hovering bird trapped at the end of a cave" {74}) might be interpreted as an introduction to the dream that is described in the penultimate paragraph of 'The Bird-Watcher', which suggests, as a possible mode of the relationship between

[17]See Macherey 4.
[18]See Macherey 4.

any two polarities, nothing less than a sort of 'ground dancing', a merging of air and earth, of the one and the other, of 'above' and 'below':

> Sometime during the hours before the bird-watcher woke, invariably he saw it, dropping through the base of one of the frequent summer storms, plummeting to pause on the land only for an instant, a thing momentarily still, which next went running through the rain until it reached the darkness at the edge of the bird-watcher's dream, where it disappeared, wings never more than half folded, leaving a trail of marks in the wet earth like those of a bird of the ground {75}.

'The Bird-Watcher' invites interpretation as a narrative that links various understandings of different types of binary relations to the multitudinous existences—both 'shadowy' and 'sharply defined'—of human beings. There are the birds themselves, of course, creatures busying themselves, one might say, at the place where the signifier is stitched to the signified. But besides them, the explicit references to discrete linguistic objects, such as prayers, mutterings and babblings, and the titles of magazines, make very interesting reading in the context of Macherey's comments on a metaphor notorious in marxist theory. Which of these linguistic objects comes nearest to earthing itself in our day-to-day existence? How does human language in general relate to material life?

The final lines of 'The Bird-Watcher' provide what is its most far-reaching interrogation of binary relations, perhaps to the point of deconstructing them entirely. The phrase "he paid no more attention to the birds of anywhere at all" keeps the idea of birds, and all that they can mean, before the reader to the very end of the story, but it is a controversial rejoinder to much of what has preceded it: do these words signify a utopian space beyond

any binary oppositions? a much less attractive form of quietism? or something else entirely {75}?

A flock of ideas settles, fidgets, takes off again, disperses (in the air? underground?).

While there are many reasons to call it an adventure of thought, 'The Bird-Watcher' can also be read as a commentary on friendship.

3. Friendship:

There are several obvious examples of friendship in 'The Bird-Watcher', which are presented for the reader alongside many that can only be discerned where they peep over the edge of the reading consciousness. Two of these obvious examples, characteristic in general of the others of their ilk, are to be found in the first half of the story. The "best friend of the main character," who is introduced in the opening paragraphs, has basically normative hopes and anxieties with respect to the one who is known to him, more or less conventionally, by his speech and his physical presence {68}. Five or six paragraphs further into the story, a sort of church group is brought to the reader's attention, the members of which have adopted the practice of individually 'presenting prayers' as a preliminary to the other young adults beginning to "pray silently on the concerning subject their friend had introduced" {71}. This practice has its roots in the group's belief "that those prayers were most effective that were first of all revealed before a

small gathering of *like-minded people*" [italics mine] {70-71}. Here, sameness prevails as the keynote of friendship.

In both of these cases, I would suggest, the species of amity presented is not particularly unusual or interesting. Even if the second example that I have drawn attention to nestles more restlessly within a conventional understanding of friendship than the first, neither really unsettles the everyday societal meaning of this mode of human relationship, which holds that friends are people who cultivate an intimacy short of love, are not resistant to meeting in person, know each other personally, have similar (or at least non-antagonistic) persuasions, and so on and so forth. Certainly the less explicit examples of friendship that can be discerned in 'The Bird-Watcher' are generally the more provocative ones. I will discuss some of these shortly. But before doing so, what meaning of friendship am I anticipating here? Take this 'animal' friendship: what are its (Spinozist) affects?

Many sorts of contemporary relations between people, both direct (as through personal contact) and indirect (as through reading and/or writing), might qualify as instances of friendship, so long as one is receptive even to only a few of the numerous and varied definitions of this term that philosophers and others have put forward over the centuries. In an essay that reviews publications on friendship by Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, Kevin Hart observes, for example, that

> the English word 'friendship' . . . has a more narrow range than the ancient Greek word it translates. Depending on the context, *philia* was used to indicate personal friends, family members or a larger social world. All members of the Pythagorean brotherhood

> were assumed to be friends, regardless of whether they knew each other.[19]

With the imprimatur commentaries such as this one provide, it becomes possible to harvest from 'The Bird-Watcher' many examples of friendship that were perhaps not obvious at first sight. Consider the following gatherings from the text, the second a little more complicated than the first.

First: the bird-watching main character of the story "knew there were many other bird-watchers here and there nearby, but none of them were like himself" {67}. Having "the strangest hobby in the district" alienates the main character from those to whom he is nevertheless connected, which generates a distinctively asymmetrical mode of amity {67}. Here, friendship twists around a Möbius strip.

Second: the bird-watcher's relationship with the magazines in which the articles he submits never appear is founded on a variety of rejection that is only *almost* absolute. The 'slips of rejection' that he receives from the editors of these publications are a relevant consideration in this respect, but more interesting to think about is the fact that those who buy the magazines become for the main character of the story "'shadow-readers' of his words," an occurrence that he contemplates "with a sort of half-pleasure" {69}. Something strange makes its way through. What is encountered here is another torsion of friendship. The force of the negative, of nothingness (none of the bird-watcher's articles are ever published) is metamorphosized into something more like *negativity*, which might be defined (to use psychoanalytic language for a moment) as a 'positive' form of negation,

---

[19]See Kevin Hart, "Shared Silence," rev. of *Friendship*, by Maurice Blanchot, *Pour l'amitie*, by Maurice Blanchot, and *Politics of Friendship*, by Jacques Derrida, *The Australian's Review of Books* Mar. 1998: 8.

sharing some of the meaning of heterogeneity. For John Lechte, "negativity is . . . not pure nothingness, the other side of a symmetrical, logical opposition," but rather "a positive force or an expenditure."[20] It is "not a constant or even static force, but is rather the movement of excitation and discharge."[21]

In these two versions of friendship, as in others unmentioned but similar, and in contrast to what I have referred to as the obvious examples of this category of experience, friendship is something that operates on the side, above all, of (productive) absence. Here is Hart once more, commenting on Derrida's interest in something Aristotle is reported famously to have said: "O my friends, there is no friend:"

> What fascinates Derrida in Aristotle's paradoxical remark is that its speaker removes friendship from the theatre of presence. On the one hand, he says, it is directed to an absolute past: its speaker assumes a minimal friendship with those who are addressed, a preliminary consent to hear him before deciding to agree or disagree. On the other hand, the exclamation is directed to a time always ahead: no one can claim to be a true friend now (isn't there more that I should do?) but one may promise and desire to be a friend.[22]

It is this understanding of friendship, which I have also identified, in various places, in 'The Bird-Watcher', that I want to deploy as a model for the relationship that my fiction has—no doubt at least a little differently in each case—to its thematic concerns (whatever they might be), to certain literary genres, and to the fiction of another writer. Imbricated in it, besides a sense of absence, are traits such as excess, difference and abjection. According

---

[20]See John Lechte, *Julia Kristeva*, Critics of the Twentieth Century (London: Routledge, 1990) 137.
[21]See Lechte 137-38.
[22]See Hart, "Shared Silence" 9.

to Julia Kristeva, abjection is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[23]

In the article 'The Politics of Friendship,' Derrida argues that we are always already "caught up in a kind of asymmetrical and heteronomical curvature of the social space, more precisely, in the relation to the Other prior to any organized *socius*, to any determined 'government,' to any 'law.'"[24] And out of this comes "a friendship prior to friendships, an ineffaceable, fundamental, and bottomless friendship, the one that draws its breath in the sharing of a language (past or to come) and in the being-together that any allocution supposes, including a declaration of war."[25] On the same wavelength as Derrida, Hart observes that, in this mode of amity, "symmetry gives way to asymmetry, sameness yields to otherness and immanence accedes to transcendence."[26] "There are no friends, that we know," writes Derrida, "but I beg you, make it so that there will be friends from now on."[27]

In his review-essay 'Shared Silence', Hart attributes to Blanchot the idea—perhaps the mainstay of the most radical model of friendship possible—that "in reading or writing . . . we are brought into a relation with others that is anonymous, multiple and fluid."[28] "*Words from one shore to the other shore,*" writes Blanchot in a chapter entitled 'Friendship' of his book of the

---

[23]See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) trans. of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* ([Paris]: Seuil, 1980) 4.
[24]See Jacques Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship," *The Journal of Philosophy* 85.11 (Nov. 1988) 633-34.
[25]See Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship" 636.
[26]See Hart, "Shared Silence" 8.
[27]See Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship" 635.
[28]See Hart, "Shared Silence" 9.

same name, *"speech responding to someone who speaks from the other shore and where, even in our life, the measurelessness of the movement of dying would like to complete itself."*[29] To this extent, *The World-Swimmers,* more or less like any other creative text, is always already intimate with the category of friendship. But perhaps Blanchot's model is too general. I like the idea that there are passages in 'The Bird-Watcher' (passages not necessarily identical with its most 'writerly' or 'textual' moments) that can be read—in their particularity—as dramatic instances of the species of friendship that I am championing here.

Deploying friendship as a model for the relationships that my collection of short stories has to several classes of things, has the valuable effect of constantly energizing these relationships, of opening them up to strangeness, and to difference. In *What is Philosophy?* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari ask "Does not the friend reintroduce into thought a vital relationship with the Other that was supposed to have been excluded from pure thought?"[30] This rhetorical question suggests that the model of relationship instantiated in friendship is particularly appropriate to writing connected to the theme of ideas. However, in what follows I hope to demonstrate that my fiction engages no less actively with other categories of discourse and life, than it does with the highways and back lanes of thought.

---

[29]See Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship,* trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997) trans. of *L'Amitié* ([Paris?]: Editions Gallimard, 1971) 292.

[30]See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) trans. of *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* ([Paris?]: Les Editions de Minuit, 1991) 4.

4. Themes, Genres & Another Writer:

History is certainly a significant theme in my collection. Because of its title, 'Natural History (World-Swimming)' might come immediately to mind here, but 'House-Moving' is perhaps the most interesting of several possible examples.

In an essay that appears in *Bringing Down the Great Wall: Writings on Science, Culture, and Democracy in China,* Fang Lizhi observes that

> speculation that water is the fundamental constituent of all things is typical of cosmological speculation among philosophers in China's classical period, who sought to reduce the diversity of natural phenomena to a few basic elements—such as earth, water, fire, metal, and wood—paralleling similar thought in the classical Greek world.[31]

'House-Moving' makes use of this journey of thought, (un)suitably modified, to introduce a concern with the concept of nature as the main dynamo of historical development into its story-line. The first sentence begins: "The way things are between the ocean and the land is not understood" {9}. What becomes apparent subsequently, is that the narrator, the resident historian of the beach, is living out the consequences—in the form particularly of an at least incipient madness—of his contradictory allegiance to both, a notion of history as something governed by a grand law of the ocean and the land, and a more conventional understanding of his chosen *métier.* Either one might 'bring the past to life,' but only the former

---

[31]See Fang Lizhi, "From 'Water Is the Origin of All Things' to 'Space-time Is the Form of the Existence of Matter,'" *Bringing Down the Great Wall: Writings on Science, Culture, and Democracy in China,* by Lizhi, ed. and princ. trans. James H. Williams (New York: Knopf, 1991) 15-16 n. *.

could, in the narrator's eyes, do so literally, through what in the end would amount to nothing less than a sort of (oceanic) time-travelling. Questions of history are here always to the fore.

However, if it is any one thing thematically, my fiction is a fiction of ideas, and in particular a fiction of the relationship between ideas (in their infinite variety) and daily life (in its infinite variety).[32] 'The Bird-Watcher' advantages the proposition that mercurial friendship provides an apt model for my collection's 'external relations' by enfolding such a notion of amity within its own narrative structure; at the same time, this story can be interpreted with little difficulty as a sustained engagement with one of the most fundamental of philosophical problems. 'The Bird-Watcher' does not 'release an idea into the world,' as a caged animal might be given its freedom in the forest, so much as become a fiction the parameters of which are coextensive with the idea that it explores, for that is, precisely, the idea of the relationship between ideas (or ideology) and daily life (or reality).

'And Thus, The Night. . . .' does not go quite this far, but from its opening paragraph, which resembles a deductive philosophical, or quasi- or pseudo-philosophical, statement, this story continually establishes itself as a fiction of ideas. Another story, 'Jar', can be read as a series of 'thoughts on the eyeball,' because it deals to a large extent with ideas about roundness, appearance, and sight, while also considering questions of marginality/centrality, borders, space, and number. In addition, 'Jar' makes reference, near its end, to the philosophical paradoxes of Zeno, which a

[32] A 1998 exchange between John Docker and Kerryn Goldsworthy in the pages of *Australian Book Review* deals with, *inter alia*, the presence or otherwise of a deep interest in ideas in Australian literary culture. See John Docker, "How Close Should Writers and Critics Be?" *Australian Book Review* July 1998: 24-28 and, in response, Kerryn Goldsworthy, "Free-Associating: Docker, ASAL and the Old Chestnut," *Australian Book Review* Aug. 1998: 24-27.

certain writer born in 1899 in Buenos Aires also liked to do, from time to time, in his short stories.

And thus (but how really?) the connection to another writer is made.

The best 'writer-friend' of my fiction is Jorge Luis Borges. The best 'genre-friend' of my fiction is magical realism (and its 'closest acquaintance', postmodernism). Let me expand on the second of these statements first.

The term magical realism describes a mode of fiction in which is combined, according to Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, "the disparate worlds of what we might call the historical and the imaginary."[33] Other more or less consistent characteristics of magical realism include: the solicitation of excess and hyperbole; centrifugal rather than centripetal writing, which, for Zamora and Faris, "creates space for interactions of diversity;" the abjection of boundaries and borders of all types; an exaggerated interest in details and minutiae; an emphasis on contradiction, and the intermingling of traditional opposites; and, finally, a sort of po-faced absurdity or outrageousness.[34]

This description of magical realism also constitutes at least a 'good enough' listing of the generic characteristics of *The World-Swimmers*, which is more than sufficient reason to call it a magical-realist collection of short stories. This is because no text is ever a 'complete and consistent' example of its genre: other literary modes always intrude; creative contaminants come as if out of nowhere. The fictional work gets caught in a crowd.

---

[33]See Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, "Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s," *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 1.
[34]See Zamora and Faris, "Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s" 3.

Stories like 'Natural History (World-Swimming),' 'Pale Winds' and '"Fell Away Towards the River. . . ."' are all more or less securely anchored in the magical-realist genre. 'Natural History (World-Swimming),' for example, proposes an imaginative, natural as in 'free and easy,' history, through which a travelogue of hyperbolical absurdity and instability makes its way, at continual risk of ambush by snippets—at times soberly ridiculous—of half-formed narratives. However, while *The World-Swimmers* always meets up again eventually with its best genre-friend, it sometimes loses contact with magical realism temporarily.

In place of this mode of fiction, the neologism 'realist magicality' might denote one deviation that *The World-Swimmers* makes from its primary generic path. 'House-Moving' constitutes just one link of another writing-chain that runs through the length of my collection. In this as it were minor genre of my fiction, the *combination* of categories peculiar to magical realism is transversed by a *hierarchy,* in which realist narrative is privileged over magical writing; it is this fictional strain that I am defining as realist magicality. 'House-Moving' and some other stories, it seems to me, have only a slight infusion of magic, or weirdness, playing around their edges. They lack the true combination of a magical element and a realist imperative that is indicative of a properly magical-realist text.

Yet again, in respect of so-called generic deviations, a small number of my stories are less examples of magical realism, than representatives of a type of fiction almost entirely unhinged from traditional realist preoccupations. The fantastical 'The World-Lovers', like the politically allegorical 'And Thus, The Night. . . .," which also contains certain elements of fantasy literature, express very little of the magical-realist tension between imagined

worlds, and this one we live in. In a similar connection, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris cite Henry James who, they write, "warns against 'the peril of the unmeasured strange,' stating that to make his stories of the supernatural work, he needed to juxtapose them to another history, to 'the indispensable history of somebody's *normal* relation to something.'"[35]

Many parts of *The World-Swimmers* can also easily be read as excursions into the terrain of postmodernism. Throughout my collection, although most notably perhaps in 'Cruelty', 'As Of Shadows,' and '"Fell Away Towards the River. . . .,"' one finds many of the literary hallmarks of this movement. These include: multiplicity; self-reflexiveness; schizophrenic collage; inter- or hyper-textuality; pastiche rather than parody; what Theo L. D'haen calls "the destabilization of the reader;"[36] and what Fredric Jameson, possibly the foremost theorist of postmodernism, calls "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense."[37] Even a story like 'Inexactitude', at first blush hardly a postmodern text, contains a section in which the reader is diverted from the main narrative through several removes of story-telling, an example of self-reflexiveness, hyper-textuality, and even of something bordering on schizophrenic collage: "Stories lead to other stories . . ." {22}.

I am calling postmodernism only the 'closest acquaintance' of *The World-Swimmers*, however, for two related reasons. Firstly, as a label postmodernism simply lacks the specificity of magical realism. D'haen argues that "in international critical parlance a consensus is emerging in

---

[35]See Zamora and Faris, "Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s" 6-7.
[36]See Theo L. D'haen, "Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers," Zamora and Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* 192-93.
[37]See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-Aug. 1984): 60.

which a hierarchical relation is established between postmodernism and magic [sic] realism, whereby the latter comes to denote a particular strain of the contemporary movement covered by the former."[38] Secondly, and perhaps more compellingly, I accept Jameson's thesis that postmodernism is not "one cultural style or movement among others,"[39] but rather "the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses . . . must make their way."[40] Jameson's argument makes it difficult to maintain a sense of postmodernism as a discrete genre of any sort, let alone a specifically literary one. As what I am conducting at this point is fundamentally a generic analysis of my fiction, I therefore want to push postmodernism a little into the background, while nevertheless acknowledging that many of the characteristics of my writing are indeed postmodern *à la lettre.*

The best writer-friend of my fiction is Jorge Luis Borges. In so far as he is a magical realist, which is considerably the case, the relationship between Borges' fiction and my own can be considered already elaborated in my previous discussion (with reference to *The World-Swimmers*) of the genre of magical realism. Another affinity between Borges' texts and my own writing consists of a shared interest in the fictional exploration of ideas: Beatriz Sarlo argues that, in a typical Borges' story, "ideas are the very stuff of the plot, and they shape it from the inside;" for my part with respect to this kinship, I have already noted the presence of the same theme in *The World-Swimmers.*[41] To this extent, my fiction and Borges' have in common at least one 'trajectory of departure' from the genre of mainstream magical realism.

---

[38]See D'haen 194.
[39]See Jameson 55.
[40]See Jameson 57.
[41]See Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge,* ed. John King, Critical Studies in Latin American Culture (London: Verso-New Left, 1993) 54.

As I will demonstrate in a moment, however, the friendship between the two entities is also one of 'abject similarity', of a 'closeness that keeps its distance.' Specifically, my writing effects subtle variations on two of the key elements of Borges' short stories: in the first place, at the level of the production of a certain type of characterization; in the second, with respect to what can be glossed as the problem of 'coincidence or otherwise with the complete text' of a particular set of narrative features. In the former case, the same effect is nevertheless brought about differently; in the latter, not dissimilar techniques are used to produce the same effect, but in a different ratio with respect to the size of the text. Let me expand on each of these examples of 'abject similarity' in turn.

In *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges,* John Sturrock argues that his subject's narratives are "all plot and no psychology."[42] According to Sturrock, Borges believes, like Aristotle, that the writer "should bring in character for the sake of the action, rather than the other way round."[43] There is clearly a resemblance here with my fiction, in which, albeit with a few exceptions, the characters are as shallow as puddles . . . not as deep as oceans.

However, one of the factors that contributes to the production of this textual characteristic in *The World-Swimmers* is generally absent from Borges' fiction. My tendency to provide the characters in my stories with unconventional names that suggest an action, a happening, or a (hidden) line of plot development, encourages the reader, I want to suggest, to think of them not so much as psychological entities, but rather as symbols or

---

[42]See John Sturrock, *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 3.
[43]See Sturrock 3.

ciphers of all of the action—emotional and otherwise—contained in the narrative (the way the shallow end of an outdoor body of water often better reflects the clouds). After a certain fashion, therefore, mine is a 'chameleon fiction'. Consider, for example, the following names, for such they become, I would contend, through repetition, and, with the exception of the last case, by filling what would otherwise be an appellative vacuum: from '1938', "the man who twenty years later was to become my father" {96-103, *passim*}, and also its subtle variant in the last sentence of the story, "the man who was to be my father" {103}; from 'Pale Winds', "the last woman of her tribe" {143-52, *passim*}; and even, perhaps, from 'Dear Semmelnazi', "*Dear Semmelnazi. . . . My Semmelnazi . . .*" {57-66, *passim*}.

This brings me to my second example of 'abject similarity'. Borges' short stories are nearly always self-contained, meaning, with certain Gödelean (not to mention parergonal) qualifications duly noted, 'completely and consistently' realized.[44] Beatriz Sarlo finds in them "the pleasure of formal perfection with little interference from the lived world."[45] John Sturrock, meanwhile, observes that the Latin American's texts "are formal to a degree that no writer of fiction, surely, has ever surpassed."[46] There is certainly very little that is leftover or incidental/accidental in his writing. By extension, the boundary of his achievement in this respect, the scope of his

---

[44]The allusion here is to Kurt Gödel's 'incompleteness theorem' of 1930, in which he demonstrates that no arithmetical system can be both complete and consistent: one quality, usually completeness, must always be sacrificed for the sake of the other. See Kurt Gödel, "Discussion on Providing a Foundation for Mathematics," *Collected Works*, ed. Solomon Feferman, John W. Dawson JR, Stephen C. Kleene, Gregory H. Moore, Robert M. Solovay and Jean van Heijenoort, vol. 1 (1931; New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 201-05. Gödel's discovery has been enormously influential even in the humanities. Jacques Derrida argues in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* that "one suspects an incompletion" and, more specifically, that "there is something like an axiom of incompletion in the structure of the scene of writing." See Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987) trans. of *La carte postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980) 313.

[45]See Sarlo 52.

[46]See Sturrock 4.

self-contained perfection, if you like, never contains less space than does the boundary of the text itself. It is always precisely coextensive with it.

By contrast, the discrete texts that together form *The World-Swimmers* do not have this particular quality. However, in a sort of trickster's imitation of Borges, there are a number of what might be called complete and consistent micro-worlds embedded *within* the narrative flow of various of my short stories. Three examples come easily to mind. The caravan in which the eccentric historian of 'House-Moving' sleeps is very much an 'exclusive and precise' world. The "prospect of palest olive" described in 'Little Desert', almost a vegetative quicksand, forces the walkers to detour around its peculiar, even off-putting, presence {37}. Last of all, in 'Jar', the "windowless room" at the centre of the house, or even the jar at its centre, or even the air at the centre of the jar, might also be listed in this series of examples, albeit more problematically, for these micro-worlds are none of them, I think, really self-contained {47-56, *passim*}.

While they help establish the comparison with the best writer-friend of my fiction, these examples also—like '"Fell Away Towards the River. . . .,"' with its 'hinge effect'—point to a concern with framing, in the mode here of nests of Chinese boxes, at the level of the various narratives that constitute my collection.

5. A Few Last Things:

My fiction has friends (and enemies?). At the same time, it is encircled by frames. What is the connection between friendship and framing? What exchanges take place between the friend and the frame in the surrounding and the inhabitation of a text. Is the text itself the answer to this question? Surely friendship and framing do not constitute entirely separate discursive economies.

Even if its content cannot be definitively specified, the *sense* of a connection here is enough, perhaps, to allow a related question to be both formulated and—through a final consideration of Aristotle's exclamation—tentatively answered. *How many* friends/frames does *The World-Swimmers* have?

"O my friends, there is no friend" (the plural right alongside the singular) is also a strange commentary on what Derrida calls alternately "autonomy and heteronomy,"[47] / "singularity/universality",[48] but which could also be called the *problem of counting*. Throughout *Politics of Friendship*, the various nuances of number contained in Aristotle's saying are given free expression. "How many [gathered friends] are there?"[49] Answer: "Small numbers, but what is a small number? Where does it begin and end? At one? At one plus one? One plus one man? One plus one woman? Or none whatsoever?"[50] Extrapolating from these passages, I want to suggest that the combined sum of the friends and the frames of my collection of stories,

---

[47]See Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship" 634.
[48]See Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship" 641.
[49]See Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins, Phronesis (London: Verso-New Left, 1997) trans. of *Politiques de l'amitié* ([Paris?]: Editions Galilée, 1994) 1.
[50]See Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* x.

might be a small number that is nevertheless uncountable. This answer, however, only generates more questions.

Is *The World-Swimmers* itself one thing? or many things? Or does it exist somewhere between the one and the many? The short-story collection as a (perhaps unsolvable) problem of counting; arithmetic now returns me to the question of artistic genre.

In a 1983 piece, Frank Moorhouse comments of short-story writers that "many move on to the novel or the film."[51] No doubt there are economic reasons behind this, and perhaps it is these that are responsible for the fact that, in connections linking some stories to others, an impulse towards the novel, or the feature-length film script, is at least discernible in *The World-Swimmers.*

However, speculation about what I might write in the future is less important than a consideration of what I have already written, which on a preponderance of the evidence is a collection of short stories. And if I am any sort of reader of myself, I think I know why I wrote what I did. Borges (who, incidentally, wrote shorter and shorter pieces, retreating further and further from the novel, as he neared death and his eyesight failed) again enables a useful comparison. I believe that I have a similar 'ethics of writing' to his. André Maurois links Borges' choice of genre to "lofty laziness and [a] concern for perfection,"[52] observing also that "his erudition is not profound . . . he asks of it only flashes of lightning and ideas,"[53] a comment that

---

[51]See Frank Moorhouse, introduction, "The State of the Art of Living in Australia," *The State of the Art: The Mood of Contemporary Australia in Short Stories,* ed. Moorhouse (Melbourne: Penguin, 1983) 4.
[52]See André Maurois, preface, trans. Sherry Mangan, Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* 10.
[53]See Maurois 9.

reminds me of another writer who inspires me, Elias Canetti, whose writing in his notebooks, according to Susan Sontag, "makes of thinking something light."[54] While Canetti was no stranger to the novel genre, he shares with Borges an understanding of writing and ideas that can be best expressed in the 'quickness' of the short-story form. And in their mind-set, I find echoes of my own.

It is less strange than it might appear, at the conclusion of this essay, to talk about the story that begins on page one of *The World-Swimmers*. 'Fence Scapes' can be read as providing an implicit commentary on the very idea of a collection. The 'hero' of the story, Daniel, plans the removal of the fences in his street—a trifle perversely, it might be said—in an order contrary to the movement of the sun across the sky (another framing?): west to east, that is, not east to west. Contained also in 'Fence Scapes' is the problem of selection, and to an extreme degree: the category of fences is privileged over all else. Ordering and selection are, of course, the key issues for a writer to consider when producing a short-story collection *qua* collection.

But these are also matters in which the reader has a significant capacity for choice. *The World-Swimmers* can be read conventionally and intuitively, from first story to last as they come one after another in the order of the pages, with the sun, as it were. Or in many other ways, in many other orders; with the moon, as it were. In addition, individual stories can be passed over with less prejudice to the whole than is the case, say, with the chapters of a novel. Or read over two times, or more than twice. And of course all such decisions always already have many contexts.

---

[54]See Susan Sontag, "Mind as Passion," *Under the Sign of Saturn* (1980; London: Vintage-Random, 1996) 191.

The act of reading any text, is just one more framing, and one more friendship, among a countless number, among a number that cannot be counted.

And so is the act of writing about it.

Bibliography

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* 5th ed. Fort Worth: Holt, 1981.

Bennett, David. "Periodizing the Postmodern / Spatializing the Posthistorical." *Rhetorics of History: Modernity and Postmodernity.* Ed. Roger Benjamin and David Bennett. Papers of the Art Association of Australia 2. Melbourne: Art Association of Australia, 1990. 40-55.

Blanchot, Maurice. *Friendship.* Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. Trans. of *L'Amitié.* [Paris?]: Editions Gallimard, 1971.

Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal." Trans. Anthony Kerrigan. Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* 224-27.

——. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings.* Ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: King-Penguin, 1981.

Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism.* London: Routledge, 1983.

D'haen, Theo L. "Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers." Zamora and Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* 191-208.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy.* Trans. Robert Hurley. First ed. in English. San Francisco: City Lights, 1988. Trans. of *Spinoza: Philosophie pratique.* [Paris?]: Universitaires de France, 1970.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. European Perspectives. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Trans. of *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* [Paris?]: Les Editions de Minuit, 1991.

Derrida, Jacques. "Parergon." *The Truth in Painting.* Trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. Trans. of *La vérité en peinture.* Paris: Flammarion, 1978. 15-147.

——. *Politics of Friendship.* Trans. George Collins. Phronesis. London: Verso-New Left, 1997. Trans. of *Politiques de l'amitié.* [Paris?]: Editions Galilée, 1994.

——. "The Politics of Friendship." *The Journal of Philosophy* 85.11 (Nov. 1988): 632-48.

——. *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond.* Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. Trans. of *La carte postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà.* Paris: Flammarion, 1980.

Docker, John. "How Close Should Writers and Critics Be?" *Australian Book Review* July 1998: 24-28.

During, Simon, ed. *The Cultural Studies Reader.* London: Routledge, 1993.

Eagleton, Terry. "Histories." *The Illusions of Postmodernism.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. 45-68.

Fleischer, Manfred P. , ed. *The Decline of the West?* European Problem Studies. New York: Holt, 1970.

Foucault, Michel. Interview with Paul Rabinow. "Space, Power and Knowledge." During 161-69.

——. Preface. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* Trans. from the French. World of Man: A Library of Theory and Research in the Human Sciences. London: Routledge, 1989. Trans. of *Les Mots et les choses.* [Paris?]: Editions Gallimard, 1966. xv-xxiv.

Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History?" *National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3-21.

——. *The End of History and the Last Man.* New York: Avon, 1993.

Gödel, Kurt. "Discussion on Providing a Foundation for Mathematics." *Collected Works.* Ed. Solomon Feferman, John W. Dawson JR, Stephen C. Kleene, Gregory H. Moore, Robert M. Solovay and Jean van Heijenoort. Vol. 1. 1931; New York: Oxford UP, 1986. 201-05.

Goldsworthy, Kerryn. "Free-Associating: Docker, ASAL and the Old Chestnut." *Australian Book Review* Aug. 1998: 24-27.

Hart, Kevin. "Jacques Derrida: 'The Most Improbable Signature.'" *The Judgment of Paris: Recent French Theory in a Local Context.* Ed. Kevin D. S. Murray. Sydney: Allen, 1992. 3-21.

——. "Shared Silence." Rev. of *Friendship,* by Maurice Blanchot, *Pour l'amitie,* by Maurice Blanchot, and *Politics of Friendship,* by Jacques Derrida. *The Australian's Review of Books* Mar. 1998: 8-9.

Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 146 (July-Aug. 1984): 53-92.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. European Perspectives. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Trans. of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur.* [Paris]: Seuil, 1980.

Lechte, John. *Julia Kristeva.* Critics of the Twentieth Century. London: Routledge, 1990.

Lizhi, Fang. "From 'Water Is the Origin of All Things' to 'Space-time Is the Form of the Existence of Matter.'" *Bringing Down the Great Wall: Writings on Science, Culture, and Democracy in China.* By Lizhi. Ed. and princ. trans. James H. Williams. New York: Knopf, 1991. 15-19.

Macherey, Pierre. Interview and article. "An Interview with Pierre Macherey." Trans. and ed. Colin Mercer and Jean Radford. *Red Letters: Communist Party Literature Journal* 5 (Summer 1977): 3-9.

Maurois, André. Preface. Trans. Sherry Mangan. Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* 9-14.

Moorhouse, Frank. Introduction. "The State of the Art of Living in Australia." *The State of the Art: The Mood of Contemporary Australia in Short Stories.* Ed. Moorhouse. Melbourne: Penguin, 1983. 1-5.

Popper, Karl R. *The Poverty of Historicism.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1960.

Sarlo, Beatriz. *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge.* Ed. John King. Critical Studies in Latin American Culture. London: Verso-New Left, 1993.

Slater, Peter. *A Field Guide to Australian Birds.* Adelaide: Rigby, 1974.

Soja, Edward. "History: Geography: Modernity." During 135-50.

Sontag, Susan. "Mind as Passion." *Under the Sign of Saturn.* 1980; London: Vintage-Random, 1996. 181-204.

Sturrock, John. *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1977.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society.* Rev. ed. London: Flamingo-Fontana Paperbacks, 1983.

Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Wendy B. Faris. "Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s." Zamora and Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* 1-11.

——. eds. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community.* Durham: Duke UP, 1995.